

WCC, Critique - Tension betw. Mission and Unity?

1. The tension:

I must confess that the slogan, "The Calling of the Church to Mission and to Unity" irritated me at first. I couldn't quite put my finger on what seemed wrong, then I realized that it was the historically awkward coupling of "mission" and "unity". It sounded like an historical contradiction. A call to mission, yes-- out mission and unity? By and large, in ~~the~~ Protestantism, at least, mission has come out of disunity; and, to a lesser degree, union has meant an end to mission.

When the Prot. world mission was born, for example, in the 18th c., it came not from the great united churches that had developed out of the center of the Reformation. It came from the disunited sects--the Pietists, the Moravians, the Particular Baptists. It is a curious thing that the Reformers took over their theology from St. Paul, lock, stock and barrel, but very adroitly side-stepped his mission, which alone gives life and meaning to his theology. The work of the Reformers was with Israel (in the N.T. sense)--with the Church--but Paul's mission was to the Gentiles, to the heathen.

So when, in 1706, Frederick IV of Denmark, who was a devout Lutheran, looked about for his first missionaries, he went not to the Church, but to the Pietists, and organized Lutheranism thundered against the folly of this mission, which sought, against the will of God, to convert savages who, as one prominent Lutheran penetratingly observed, "have nothing human about them but the shape of their bodies". In that first Danish mission to Tranquebar which marks the beginning of a protestant world mission, there was only one regular Lutheran churchman. The rest were fringe Lutherans, Pietist enthusiasts. And it was the one churchman, I am ashamed to say, who soon gave up the mission and returned discouraged to Europe, while the Pietists held the field.

Or take William Carey, the father of English world missions. It was not until he had left the comforting communion of the Anglican church, that authorized and apostolic medium of reunion,--not until he had joined the small separatist sect of the Particular Baptists (not even General Bapt.) that his eyes were opened and he began to preach a world mission for the church. As a matter of fact, when he volunteered as a missionary to India, the first reaction of his solidly Anglican father was, "Is William mad?" (Oussoren, p. 38) Not even all the Particular Baptists were in the mission. That first world missionary society was called, "A Society founded among the Particular Baptists", not A Society of the Particular Baptists (Ibid, p. 144)

1851: the Schism
How do we get there?

And what happened when our own Presbyterian Church, right here, tried to organize a Board of Foreign Missions? They split the Church wide open, cut it in half, the most serious schism we have ever had. Missions and unity? It is an historical contradiction.

It is not out of unity, that missions have been born. It is conceived, astonishingly enough, in disunion. To dig a good deal deeper, to dig clear back to the apostolic beginnings, was it not at the precise moment when the apostolic church discovered its world mission, that it almost lost its vaunted unity. What happened when St. Paul's mission to the Gentiles broke Christianity out of its Jewish boundaries into a world mission? He split the church. And he almost split the Apostles. Unity does not seem to be the happy bed-fellow of mission that our slogan might imply. One of the thorniest problems now facing the World

Council of Churches is that for this very reason--the apparent contradiction between unity and mission--considerable bodies of churches refuse to join the ecumenical movement. How can we justify our missions to Orthodox areas, they ask, if we are linked, Prot. and Orth. bodies together, in the World Council.

Finally, it is almost a death-blow to the slogan to observe that these churches, the ones with the most urgent sense of mission and the least desire for union, that are the fastest ~~growing~~ growing churches in the world. What are we calling for--suicide?--when we call for mission and unity. It is the splintering sects that are growing, both here and abroad.

In the last 25 years the 60% of the foreign missions enterprise which has connections with the ecumenical movement has actually suffered ~~and~~ a sharp decline in personnel, and it is the unconnected 40% which has shown such a phenomenal increase.

Do you remember the embarrassment of the Honolulu churches when the first much-heralded shipload of missionaries, over 300 of them, sailed for the Orient after the war? Arrangements were made carefully by the Honolulu Council of Churches: Episcopalians would take care of Episcopal missionaries on their one-day stop-over in the ~~island~~. Presbyterians would take care of Presbyterians and so forth. So the ship docked, and the good church people gathered under signs proclaiming themselves Episcopalians, Congregationalists, Methodists, etc. so that the missionaries would recognize their hosts. But the best-laid plans of mice and men gang aft agley--The denominational missionaries trooped decorously to their signs, all right, but behind them, milling uncertainly about in great numbers, were the hosts of the unwashed: the Pentecostals, the Adventists, the sects, the faith groups--advancing to their mission in far greater numbers at least, if not with greater unity and judgment, than we. It took the Honolulu Council of Churches some time to recover from that shock.

It is a symbol of the times that the largest Prot mission in Japan today is a mission you may never have heard of: the TEAM, ~~and another sign~~ quite non-oop, but aggressively missionary. And another sign of the times is that the largest Prot. group in Lat America, is neither Anglic. Luthe, Method. or Presb. It is not even Baptist. It is Pentecostal. They don't cooperate. They don't unite. But they are doing better with their mission than we are.

All of which ought well make us wonder, while we talk so glibly of mission and unity, just how well the two do go together, and if perhaps in the church, as in Toynbee's analysis of civilization, unity and consolidation are a sign, not of vigor, and mission, but of decline.

What is the connection between the two.

And yet, in spite of all that I have been saying by way of an initial questioning reaction against the current ecumenical challenge to mission and unity, I am completely convinced that Christ does call his Church to both.

The problem is in our understanding and our practice of mission and unity: the uncertainty is not in ~~our~~ clear challenge that comes from Jesus Christ:

"that all may be one...
that the world may believe"

See Vorhies, Contemporary Missions. "Hockmair... came to realize that mission + ecumenism can no longer be studied separately... Both... are directed toward the whole church of the whole world. The church addresses its gospel proclamation to the world, and the mutual relationships the various churches maintain with each other must be geared to the work... - p. 14.

Let me stress again that ecumenics and mission are separable only at the church's peril. Ecumenics needs mission. The word "~~ecumenical~~" itself should remind us of that. For οἰκουμένη derives its meaning from the world, not the united chch - it points to the world responsibility of the Christian chch. As Newby in one wamed ~~a meeting of the~~ the Third Assembly of the WCC, meeting at New Delhi in 1961, "The health of the ecumenical movement depends upon the vigor and freshness of the missionary passion from which it came." ("Unity and Mission", article in the New Delhi theme: Jesus Christ the Light of the World.") The word "ecumenical" should remind every one who hears it a picture not primarily of interchurch ~~and~~ discussions, but of the going out of the Gospel to the ends of the earth, and the gathering together in Christ of all tribes and nations...

But the Bible puts it best - the essential relationships between ecumenics and mission, unity and proclamation. It has been pointed out that "in every one of the theologically relevant passages in which the word 'gathering' occurs ~~together~~ in the NT, it carries not only the connotation of unity but at the same time of mission." (W. D. Van der Hoff, in E. Junji, Ecumenical Era ^{p. 29}, on Matt. 12:30)

So also in the Lord's great prayer in John's gospel, God Himself wills our unity (~~ecumenics~~); "That they may be one, even as we are one, I in them, and thou in me; that they may be perfectly one..." that is ecumenics.. But it is not complete until the final phrase is added, "so that the world may know that thou hast sent me." That is mission.

So ecumenics needs mission, & mission needs ecumenics.

Ultimately, we must say, that the church's mission is reconciliation - to God first, & to our neighbor - and here is where ~~ecumenics~~ unity (ecumenics) becomes not a pious and contradictory addition to the slogan "Christ calls to Mission & to Unity" - but an absolute imperative. If the gospel must be more than the preaching, the proclaiming - and if the gospel is reconciliation - how can an unreconciled and warring world be expected to believe ~~in~~ unreconciled and warring Christian churches that God really did send his only Son to reconcile the world unto Himself.