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A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

The Church of South India— The Decision to be Made

BY THE REV. C. S. MILFORD, M.A.

IT is now just seven years since the Church of South India was inaugurated. It has been in existence long enough for some sort of assessment to be made of its progress ; moreover the Convocations of Canterbury and York are once again to consider their relations with the C.S.I. in May 1955, and it is important that members of the Church of England should have the fullest possible opportunities of learning about it.

The C.S.I. and the Purpose of God

Many people have a growing sense of the overruling hand of Providence in South India, and not without reason. Dr. Sundkler, in his comprehensive history of the movement, has brought out with a vivid freshness how the urge to unity was born of evangelism. The Ecumenical Movement has been rediscovering recently the intimate nexus between Mission and Unity ; but long ago those who obeyed God's call to evangelism in India felt the urge to come together, and nearly a century ago missionaries foresaw that the growing Younger Churches would not for ever consent to be tied to our divisions. The historic statement by the thirty-three ministers, all but two of them Indians, at Tranqubar in 1919 which started the actual negotiations, said, " We face together the titanic task of the winning of India for Christ—one-fifth of the human race. Yet, confronted by such an overwhelming responsibility, we find ourselves rendered weak and relatively impotent by our unhappy divisions—divisions for which we were not responsible, and which have been, as it were, imposed upon us from without ; divisions which we did not create, and which we do not desire to perpetuate ". Bishop Azariah added to this his well-known statement that Church Unity may be a luxury for the West, but for India it is a matter of life or death.

No-one, however, could have foreseen in 1919 how timely would be the conclusion of the long years of negotiation in 1947. The union was inaugurated within six weeks of the independence and partition of India in August 1947. Humanly speaking this was entirely fortuitous. But can any Christian believe that it was really an accident that the Churches should have come together just at the moment when India was politically torn in two, and just when the withdrawal of the British Government, with all that it had stood for of Christian standards, threw such a greatly added burden of responsibility for witness onto the Indian Church ?

Yet again, even in 1947 no one expected that South India would be the scene of the chief Communist successes in the sub-continent. But as it turned out the Communists failed for the time being to make their expected impact on the great industrial cities, specially in north and

west India, but won a startling measure of success in the rural south, and specially in Hyderabad, Andhra and Travancore where Christians are most numerous. Surely God's hand can be seen in the fact that against this day a million Christians in this area had already come together in one body, with all the added assurance and zeal which this brought them.

It is sometimes said that evangelistic urgency should not be used as an argument for Church union. This, it is said, is to put expediency before theological truth. A welcome corrective to this is found in *The Historic Episcopate*, another of the important books recently published with a bearing on South India. In the first essay, *Kingdom, Church and Ministry*, Dr. J. A. T. Robinson reminds us that ultimately the Church exists to proclaim the Gospel and for no other purpose. This "should make us hesitant of dismissing as mere expediency arguments of evangelism or even of politics. In the Last Day, it is conceivable that the capturing of the new Asia for Christ may be that to which episcopal pedigree is a mere matter of expediency rather than the other way round. But if we are to be true to the New Testament, it would be better not to use the category of expediency at all. For nothing can be 'mere' expediency to those whose whole function is defined as 'speeding the coming day of God'".

A National, not a Confessional Church

Faced with a choice between local and confessional unity, South India has decisively chosen the former. No doubt the ideal course would be for all the world-wide denominations to unite simultaneously. This would mean that in a particular country the Anglicans, Methodists, Lutherans and so on would unite with each other while still maintaining intact their confessional unity across the world, since in all countries their denominations would have entered the same union. In fact, however, this would clearly have postponed union indefinitely. In South India the Churches were quite clear that they were being guided by the Holy Spirit in going ahead without waiting for simultaneous action all over the world. This means, e.g., that the C.S.I. is not a member of the World Presbyterian Alliance, though it is invited to send fraternal delegates to its meetings.

An interesting practical illustration may be given of the fact that the C.S.I. is not a denomination. They now have missionaries (Indians, of course) working outside their own territory; but they have no intention of establishing congregations of their own Church in those areas. Some are working alongside the L.M.S. in Papua; their converts will as a matter of course become Congregationalists. Others are in the diocese of Nagpur, of the Church of India; they will build their people into the Anglican Church. One of the C.S.I. delegates to Evanston has reported that on the afternoon set apart for denominational meetings they had a welcome holiday!

Two most important consequences flow from this fact.

(1) There is an obvious danger that a national Church may be tempted to become a nationalist Church. It has in fact been said that union in South India was helped by nationalist sentiment among Indian

Christians, and there may be some truth in this. The C.S.I. are, however, deeply aware of the dangers of such a development. They have always before their eyes the tragedy of the Lesser Eastern Churches, divided from one another largely along national lines, and living in spiritual isolation. In the Syrian Churches of Travancore, as in the Coptic and other Churches, this has led to an introversion and a total lack of any evangelistic urge which has persisted for many centuries.

This is one important reason why the leaders of C.S.I. are so anxious to maintain the closest possible links of fellowship with their parent Churches. Their ideal is to be a local province of the "Coming Great Church", truly catholic through being in full fellowship with other territorial Churches similarly united. It is significant that the other parent Churches have already offered to the C.S.I. the privilege of full fellowship; only the Anglican Church still hesitates.

(2) It follows, of course, from the above that the C.S.I. cannot be now or in the future part of the Anglican Communion. This was recognized by the Lambeth Conference as long ago as 1930, but there is still much confused thinking about this point. It is not indeed unnatural that when the full consequences of the above proposition began to be understood, many Anglicans should take fright. As other union schemes took effect, beginning with North India and Ceylon, they saw that the result would be the gradual dissolution of the Anglican Communion as such and its absorption into a number of regional united Churches. The Bishop of Derby was one of the first to grasp this clearly; and he boldly proclaimed, in his book *Problems of Reunion* and elsewhere, that we ought to accept this process as being in accordance with the logic of history, and to welcome it.

Other Anglicans have not been so imaginative, or so bold. Some have gone so far as to say bluntly that there is no defect at all in the Anglican Church, and that it ought without modification to be accepted as the ideal pattern for the "Coming Great Church"; and therefore all that is required is for the non-episcopal Churches to rejoin the Anglican Church. Others have not put the matter so bluntly but have made suggestions which almost amount to the same thing. The Colombo Diocesan Council suggested as an amendment to the Ceylon scheme that the united Church should from its inauguration cease to be in fellowship with its non-episcopal parents. Another suggestion was made in Ceylon that the non-Anglican Church should form an episcopal Church of their own, parallel to the Anglican, with which full communion would eventually be established. The expressed intention was to avoid any severance of the Anglican Church in Ceylon from the rest of the Anglican Communion. The religious communities in North India have insisted that no union in North India be accepted if it will involve any breach of communion with Canterbury. What exactly this would mean has not yet been defined. But it is clear that the chief difficulty would be the declared intention in the North Indian no less than the South Indian scheme, that the united Church shall maintain relations of fellowship with any Churches with which any of the uniting bodies are at present in fellowship. If this right were denied, then the united Church would in this case also become virtually Anglican.

Relations with Parent Churches

Some of the further implications of this in its practical bearing on immediate relations between C.S.I. and the Church of England will be discussed below. At this point we may notice two important reasons why such a provision for continued fellowship with *all* the parent bodies has been included in the South India and other similar schemes.

(1) The first reason is a practical one. The non-episcopal Churches are simply not prepared to deny the value of their past traditions and heritages, or to admit that real grace was not mediated through their sacramental life. The one condition on which they will accept union on an episcopal basis is the recognition of their existing ministries as real ministries of the Word and Sacraments. Some theologians may be inclined to say that to defend the schemes on this ground is to put expediency before truth. But it is well to remember the argument of Dr. Robinson quoted above. Already by this recognition half a million members of non-episcopal Churches in S. India have been united with their Anglican brethren on one body.

(2) But there is also a deep theological reason. Mr. William Nicholls in his book *Ecumenism and Catholicity* has convincingly argued that whatever may be true of episcopacy, unity is most certainly of the *esse* of the Church. The claim of certain Anglicans that because we have maintained the historic episcopacy therefore our Church is a flawless branch of the catholic Church though divided from other branches has worn very thin to-day. If therefore we are to make any real progress towards union we must be prepared to start with a confession of our own share in the sin of schism and to admit that our Church must for this reason alone be an imperfect Church. Any scheme which even by implication denies this and suggests that, after all, Anglicanism has the true and perfect pattern to which others only have to conform, stands theologically self-condemned.

Progress in South India

Throughout the twenty-eight years of negotiation, it was always recognized that the movement was a dynamic one, under the control of the Holy Spirit, and must not be bound too closely by any formula or confessional statement. Again and again an apparent deadlock was overcome by recognizing this, and by leaving certain divergencies unbridged and problems unsolved for the time being in the faith that the Spirit would in time shew the way through. The uniting Churches did not therefore attempt to achieve complete uniformity of belief or practice before adventuring on the act of union. God has honoured this faith, and in the experience of actually living together as one Body the members of the Church find that they have been steadily led forward into deeper understanding and unity.

A good instance of this is episcopal Confirmation. Many Anglicans would have liked to insist that its universal practice should be insisted on as a precondition of unity. But the Joint Committee would not agree to this, for it was not one of the points of the Lambeth Quadrilateral. It was therefore commended, but not insisted upon. In fact, within seven years it has become almost universal, even in areas which were most strongly Congregational before union. The

very moving climax of the film *South India Journey*, recently produced by the C.M.S., is a scene shewing the administration of Confirmation by Bishop Newbigin, a former Presbyterian, to a group of recent converts in a formerly Congregational area. The treasures of all the uniting traditions are being assimilated in this way, and a former Anglican lecturer in a college in South India has recently asked for copies of a Methodist service book to be sent to him because he wishes to instruct his students in the use of the Covenant Service, which is being increasingly used. In the theological colleges the ordinands are being trained in the traditional worship of each of the uniting bodies; but the use of the Church's own Holy Communion Service is steadily increasing.

It is true that in the majority of village congregations there has been so far little change, and union has made little difference to them and has no very vital reality in their minds. But it is much that the leaders have in so short a time grown into so real a unity. This was strikingly demonstrated when in the spring of 1954 the C.S.I. Theological Commission held a conference with the Lutherans. The Lutheran delegation represented several different Churches, founded by missionaries from Scandinavia, Germany and America; and it was found in practice that there was greater unanimity among the C.S.I. delegates than among the Lutheran.

A Pilgrim Church

This conference with the Lutherans illustrates the further important point. It was expressed by the Rev. Russell Chandran, recently appointed the first Indian Principal of the United Theological College at Bangalore, when he said that the C.S.I. is a movement rather than a denomination. The inauguration of union in 1947 was very far from marking the end of the dynamic period. As the Church itself grows together, so it is seeking all the time to widen its scope, so that it may become more truly *the* Church of South India. Encouraging progress has been made with the Lutherans, and the two theological committees have issued a statement that they have reached a degree of identity in doctrine which would justify closer relations than at present exist; and it is hoped that action will soon be taken on this. With the Baptists no official discussions are being held at present. The Baptists of South India, being all the result of American and Canadian missions, insist very strongly on the complete independence of the congregation. The Mar Thoma Church on the other hand (the reformed section of the ancient Syrian Church of Travancore) is shewing great interest in the C.S.I. A Mar Thoma committee specially appointed to examine the doctrine and practice of the C.S.I. recently recommended that there is no obstacle to immediate intercommunion between the two Churches. This is of special significance since the Mar Thoma is the only reformed Eastern Church, and occupies potentially a bridge position in the east very similar to that of the Anglican Church in the west.

This consciousness of being a pilgrim Church, part of a dynamic movement being led forward by the Spirit, is the reason why the C.S.I. was unable to give a cut and dried answer on the last two points raised by the Bishop of Derby's committee: "Will they after the end of the

thirty year period allow any further exception to the rule that only episcopally ordained ministers may officiate? (b) What will be their ultimate relation with other Churches not episcopally ordered? The C.S.I. have replied that they cannot anticipate the future guidance of the Holy Spirit by giving a final answer to these questions now. They hold fast to the two principles; that their own ministry should be episcopal, and that they should maintain the closest fellowship with all their parent Churches. These two aims cannot be logically reconciled as long as the parents remain divided. But the C.S.I. believes that the Holy Spirit can move mountains in other places besides South India, and in the last resort they stand by this hope.

It is of course undeniable that this attitude must result in certain irregularities from the Anglican point of view. This is the chief difficulty that will have to be faced by the Convocations next May when they reconsider the relations between the C.S.I. and the Church of England.

Convocations and C.S.I.

It is often said that the Church of England and the C.S.I. are at present "not in communion", and that the Convocations of Canterbury and York when they review the situation next May will have to decide whether the two Churches shall be in communion, or "in full communion". These phrases are vague and over simplified and are liable to cause confusion. The Lund Conference suggested that such questions of relations between Churches should be broken down and several points considered separately, and this is what in fact was done by Convocations in 1950. There will be three main questions to be decided.

1. *Recognition of Orders.* In 1950 Convocations ruled that any bishops or presbyters of C.S.I. who were ordained as Anglicans may resume their status as Anglican priests if they wish to take up permanent work in England. In this case they would, as is only reasonable, be expected to conform to the rules and canons of the Church of England. But Convocations suspended judgment regarding those who were consecrated or ordained in South India at or after union. While it was generally recognized that the forms used were entirely satisfactory, it was said (very truly) that the value of a Church's Orders depends not simply on this or on the historic succession, but on the whole life and ethos of the Church.

During the last four years Anglicans who were previously doubtful on this score have been greatly reassured, and it seems likely that recognition may now be agreed to. This has been brought about partly by study of the Liturgy and Ordinal of the C.S.I., and partly by visits to South India of theologians such as the Bishop of Malmesbury and the Superior of the S.S.J.E. (the Cowley Fathers). They have been impressed particularly with the truly apostolic character of the episcopacy. It is worth while noting here one further point about the C.S.I. as a "pilgrim Church". In seeking the guidance of the Spirit they have not tried simply to conflate or reconcile the different emphases of the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries, but have sought to go back far behind them to the days of the primitive Church and to be led, as

it was, by the Spirit in interpreting the Scriptures. There are indeed many striking parallels between the C.S.I. to-day, drawn chiefly from the poor and under-privileged and confronted by an ancient, powerful and all embracing non-Christian civilization, and the early Church in the Roman Empire.

2. *Intercommunion.* At present any communicant members of C.S.I. "may be welcomed as visitors from a Christian Communion overseas to Holy Communion in the Church of England at the discretion of the Bishop". This is the formula devised by Lambeth 1930 and it applies equally to members of Lutheran or other non-episcopal Churches who as visitors to England are cut off from their own services. Convocations have now to decide whether they can go further and admit members of C.S.I. to Communion as of right, as has been done with the Old Catholics. Probably few Anglicans would now doubt that there is at least as close an identity in doctrine and practice between the C. of E. and the C.S.I. as there is between us and the Old Catholics. But there remains the difficulty mentioned above, of continuing fellowship between the C.S.I. and its parent Churches. This comes out more clearly in considering the third question.

3. *Intercelebration.* Convocations in 1950 ruled that when bishops or episcopally ordained presbyters from South India visit England any diocesan bishop will be free to permit or not to permit them to celebrate in our churches. On the understanding that any visitor who accepts such an invitation will not perform sacramental acts in any non-Anglican church during the same visit. The C.S.I. have made a definite request that this condition be dropped. They argue that they can only share to the full with their parent bodies what God has done for them in South India if they are allowed to enter into the fullest fellowship with *all* of them; and they are not prepared to accept fellowship with one parent at the cost of cutting themselves off from the rest.

It is significant that the Anglican Church of India, Pakistan, Burma and Ceylon has already granted this privilege to ministers of the C.S.I. Originally they imposed the same condition as that made by Convocations in 1950; but in 1954 they deliberately waived this, and ruled that on special occasions, such as conferences for the promotion of unity, or in cases of grave pastoral urgency, episcopally ordained ministers of C.S.I. might celebrate in their churches without any restriction of their relations with non-Anglicans. The C.S.I. for their part would willingly accept this limitation to special occasions—when a C.S.I. bishop visits England most of their activities would in fact come under this head—provided the other condition is not demanded.

A Plea for "Economy"

Clearly therefore the difficulty about further progress in intercommunion and intercelebration is the reluctance of some Anglicans to allow such relations with members of a Church which is itself in fellowship with non-episcopal Churches. They argue that at least we must wait till the end of the thirty years' interim period, by which time the regular ministry in South India will be wholly episcopal. But for those who take the rigid view that without episcopal ordination there can

never be real sacraments this will not really solve the problem. For the C.S.I. have already said that they claim the freedom to make certain exceptions to the rule of episcopal ordination even after the thirty years. For instance, if the Moderator of the Church of Scotland were to visit India after that period they would wish to be free to invite him to celebrate. And it has been already pointed out above that if such a rigid view had been imposed from the beginning, the union could never have taken place.

But is it reasonable, without encouraging indiscriminate "open communion", or losing our faith in the value of episcopacy as an essential part of the fullness of the Church, to allow certain exceptions to the episcopal rule of order? Surely it is, if we realize as they have from the beginning in South India, that we are taking part in a dynamic movement, and will fetter the Holy Spirit at our peril. Through the readiness of the Anglicans in South India to recognize the orders of the other uniting Churches, half a million people have already been brought within an episcopal Church who were previously outside. The C.S.I. now believe that if they shew the like charity towards their non-episcopal parents, they too may in due course be led to follow their example and to unite on an episcopal basis. Should we for this reason deny full fellowship ourselves to the C.S.I.? The verdict of history may well be that it is not we who have the right to set ourselves up as judges of the C.S.I., but rather that we shall ourselves be judged by our readiness to respond to the work of the Spirit as we have seen it in them.

The Biblical Doctrine of the Church

BY THE REV. R. E. HIGGINSON, M.A., B.D.

I

IN building a church THE SITE is all important. Unless there is a rock foundation, the edifice will move during the long years of its existence. A crowning illustration of this truth is seen in Durham. The massive Norman Cathedral, erected in the eleventh century, stands secure against the ravages of time. The Castle, built in the seventeenth century, is constantly in need of attention because of a shifting foundation.

"Upon this rock I will build My Church," said the Lord to Peter. What did He mean? He did not say, "upon *thee*, Peter, I will build My Church," but upon "*this rock*". What is the rock? There is a play on words here in the manner of the Hebrew prophets—*petra*=*petros*. In this form of humour they made their point sharp to pierce the dull minds of their listeners. Such a pronouncement lines up with the new name given to Simon, bar Jonah, "thou shalt be called Cephas=a stone" (John i. 42). Yet Peter himself never claims to be the rock foundation of the Church of Christ. His recorded preaching in the Acts is silent about any such position or prerogative. His recorded letters to the churches contain no mention of such a promise. Rather he speaks of himself, in company with other believers, as