

Becoming one church: a story from India

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Easter 7 C: *inaugurating the week of prayer for Christian unity.*

John 17 and the foundation of the Church of South India: a contemporary Wirkungsgeschichte

Today I want to tell you a story; a story of the way one verse from today's Gospel passage inspired one of the most wonderful events I can think of in all church history. This verse inspired competing church denominations to put aside their differences and lay down their treasures to work together – to become one church.

On September 27th 1947 the Church of South India (CSI) was inaugurated. This act achieved something that scandalised churches in Australia and the rest of the world. It united a church that has bishops with other churches that didn't have them, and they didn't re-ordain anyone. That's what would have to happen if I suddenly wanted to be a Catholic priest, or if a Uniting Church Minister wanted to be an Anglican Priest. We'd be re-ordained, because some churches won't recognise the ordinations of other ones. But not so in the Church of South India; they just did it.

This was their response to the call they heard in Jn 17.21 when Jesus prayed, ***'I ask ...²¹that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe ...'*** Lesslie Newbigin, a Church of Scotland missionary, called the union 'the great adventure in obedience.'²² *A South India Diary* Newbigin was consecrated a bishop in this inaugural service. You can't imagine what a change of

thinking that required in a Presbyterian.

How did this happen? The idea of this union of churches in South India came from a number of early 20th century missionaries who found themselves working in the one mission field, but competing with each other. One of them, a Congregationalist missionary called G.E. Phillips, described their experience:

'I have lived in a station where the Christian Church was represented by a feeble handful despised by the great mass of surrounding Hindus ... and that feeble handful broken into ... portions ... over the communion question. You can scarcely imagine how insane seem our ecclesiastical divisions in those circumstances.'[i]

To complicate matters even further, the different denominational missions found converts in different castes, so that the tiny Christian churches were divided both along denominational lines and caste lines, *Diary*, 49–50 further obscuring the church as a reconciled and reconciling body.

These missionaries used to head for the hills during times of extreme heat, so they found themselves close together quite regularly. At one of these retreat times, a group of Indian pastors and two of their European friends met in a mission hill-station called Tranquebar on May 1–2, 1919. In 1919, the historical and political context made a fresh reading of biblical passages concerning unity not only possible but imperative. Gandhi had inspired a unity between Hindus and Muslims, and this challenged Christians divided by western denominationalism. The *war to end all wars* was over; there was a League of Nations in the making. 'The established order of things was going and gone. No established order had any right to exist. Was that not also true of the Church?'[ii]

So up at the hill-station, it's no surprise that the leading theme for all their discussions was the text about the unity

of the church, Jn 17.21. The conference resulted in the *Tranquebar Manifesto*. Over the next 28 years, this document would evolve into what ultimately became the *Basis of Union* of the CSI.

The *Basis of Union* opens by invoking Jn 17.21 as Christ's prayer for the unity of his Church. It says that Jn 17.21 names what is the essential purpose and nature of Church – unity. This unity for which Christ prayed is enabled through the Holy Spirit and is therefore 'fundamentally a reality of the spiritual realm.'[iii] This is a reality that the CSI does not claim to create, but to have discovered through repentance; through turning from disunity to oneness. This raises the issue of relationship between spiritual unity and organic unity – organic unity simply means choosing to unite; to actually become one. As you'd guess, most interpreters focus on spiritual unity, but for the drafters of the Scheme, the one required the other:

'this unity of the Spirit must find expression in the faith and order of the Church in its worship, in its organization and in its whole life, so that, as the Body of Christ, it may be a fit instrument for carrying out His gracious purposes in the world.'[iv]

This connection between spiritual and organic union profoundly shaped the CSI's service of inauguration in 1947. Early in the service, John 17 was read by a member of the laity. It replaced the usual recitation of the commandments as an invitation to repentance, and so became the new context for the prayer of confession. The last of the five confessions in the litany which followed was explicit: *'We acknowledge, O Lord, our share in the sin and shame of divisions in Thy holy Church'* [v]

These prayers of confession were followed not by a declaration of forgiveness, but by a prayer for God's absolution, and then a decisive act of obedient repentance. The 4,000 people in the

congregation knelt while the documents of assent to union from the uniting churches were laid on the altar. This was followed by further prayer inspired by a text from Jn 10.16: 'Hasten the time, O God, when throughout the world there shall be one flock, one Shepherd...'. When the congregation stood, the president, again used words from John 17, declaring the inauguration of the Church of South India.

Dearly beloved brethren, in obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, Who on the night of His Passion prayed that His disciples might be one; and by authority of the governing bodies of the uniting Churches, whose resolutions have been read in your hearing and laid in prayer before Almighty God; I do hereby declare that these ... Churches ... are become one Church of South India.[vi]

The motto of the CSI, *That they all may be one*, is drawn from John 17:21. It is understood as the prayer of our Lord Jesus Christ who prayed not only for the Church but also for the whole world. This universality is expressed by placing these words on its logo (see your pewsheet) in a form of a circle. This understanding has been there from the beginning: the inauguration of the CSI was a beginning.

Newbigin's private prayer as the service concluded was "*and above all keeping before every Christian mind the purpose of our union – 'that the world may believe'.*"[vii]

The response from the western churches was tragic. The worldwide Anglican communion imposed a moratorium, banning any CSI clergy from being licensed to serve in churches outside south India for thirty years. And that charge was led by dioceses in Australia, I'm ashamed to say. We assumed that it would take that long for the bishops and priests whose ordination we didn't recognise to retire. Then purity would be restored – ordination by 'real' bishops would resume. Maybe we forgot that the CofE in Australia had been governed by the Diocese of Calcutta from 1824 to 1836!

The CSI has seen sustained growth. It's now just about four times the size it was in September 1947. Ironically, that's about the same amount by which we overseas churches who opposed its organic union have shrunk in the same time.

This story of the CSI union shows that Jn 17.21 has inspired unity when historical and political circumstances have made Christians bold enough to make this verse our own. A unique church was born out of the blending of the Episcopal and non-Episcopal traditions as a gift of God to the people of India and as a visible sign of ecclesiastical unity for the Universal Church.

The question this raises for me, and I hope for all of us, is what Jn 17.21 can achieve in this broken and divided world if we are willing to embark again on 'the great adventure in obedience.'

Amen.

[ii] Sundkler, *Church of South India*, 88

[iii] *Scheme of union: including the basis of union as adopted by the uniting churches, the constitution of the Church of South India, and other documents* (Madras: Christian Literature Society for India, 7th edn; 1949) 1.

[iv] *Scheme of union*, 1.

[v] *Order of service*, 2.

[vi] *Order of service*, 4.

[vii] B. Sundkler, *Church of South India: the movement towards Union 1900–1947* (London, Lutterworth Press 1954) 28