

Mission and Unity: The Theological Dynamic of Comity

Michael W. Goheen

A Fresh Impulse for Unity?

The early twentieth century saw the development of a fresh impetus for ecclesiastical unity. Growing in the soil of comity agreements and global confessional alliances in the late nineteenth century and continuing in the international student movements and international missionary conferences, this new ecumenical paradigm was a unity born of a missionary concern for the world. By the latter part of the century, Lesslie Newbigin, one of the key figures in the ecumenical movement, believed the enthusiasm of the early twentieth century was running out of steam. In 1984 he cites four reasons: the inertia of denominational traditions with the inbuilt commitment of large organizations to preserve themselves; the growth of a fundamentalism that is uninterested in old ecclesiastical structures but instead proliferates new institutional forms; action for justice and peace that appears to be more urgent than unity; and a wider ecumenism that displaces ecclesiastical ecumenism (Newbigin 1984, 2-3). Shortly before his death he was even more discouraged. For someone who had given the majority of his life to ecumenical endeavours the situation was worrisome. In an unpublished address given to the European Area World Alliance of Reformed Churches he is critical of all the ecclesial traditions: the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches remained intransigent; the Anglican and Protestant mainline churches were losing confidence in the gospel, which was the only true centre for ecclesial unity; and Evangelicals, Pentecostals, and parachurch organisations were hostile to institutional and visible unity (Newbigin 1995, 8-9).

Perhaps Newbigin is too pessimistic, perhaps not. In any case the problems he identifies remain real today; for the past 13 years I have encountered many of these attitudes among my 150-200 mission students from numerous ecclesial traditions. Whence will come a fresh impulse for unity? Discussions of ecclesial unity are common among students in my mission classes. In these discussions I have found two things to be effective in developing a passion for unity. The first is to instil a deep sense that mission is central to the church's very nature and identity: "There is no participation in Christ without participation in his mission to the world" (Goodall 1953, 190). The second is to develop the close connection between mission and unity, especially by an historical return to the origins of the ecumenical movement in the missionary initiatives of

the church in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

It was in a doctoral seminar over a decade and a half ago on ecumenical ecclesiology with George Vandervelde that I first caught a vision of the nature of the church as missionary and as one. It was under George's supervision that I studied Newbigin's understanding of missionary ecclesiology (Goheen 2000), and in that project was able to understand a little more fully the importance of mission and unity as essential to the true nature of the church. And so at a personal level on this occasion of honouring George at his retirement, I want to express my appreciation for George's work in the area of mission, ecumenism, and ecclesiology. And it is my goal that the passion and biblical wisdom regarding mission and unity that George handed on to me, in turn, will be handed on to the next generation of students in my classes. In this regard, I have found effective a discussion of the ecumenical impulse of comity.

Henry Van Dusen has rightly said that "the Christian world mission has been both the precursor and progenitor of the effort after Christian unity" (Van Dusen 1961, 17). There is much literature that traces this original impulse in history from a documentary or conciliar angle (e.g., Hogg 1952; Saayman 1984). Included in that history is the importance of the principle of comity in forwarding ecumenical efforts, especially as it played an important role in the early missionary councils (e.g., Hogg 1952, 15-81; Neill 1986, 400-2). Not so common is attention to the *theological dynamic* that the principle of comity produced. The theological impetus toward unity among the indigenous churches as a result of comity agreements is not often mentioned. Yet it is here that the intrinsic connection between unity and mission stands out in bold relief, and it is here I have observed students catch a vision for the close connection of mission and unity. In this essay I want to return to this one aspect of that original impetus, namely the theological dynamic of the principle of comity. Specifically I want to attend to the ecumenical impulse of comity as Newbigin movingly describes it in his South India experience.

Comity, Mission, and Unity

At the middle of the century Archbishop Temple issued this famous statement:

As though in preparation for a time like this, God has been building up a Christian fellowship which now extends into every nation, and binds citizens of them all together in true unity and mutual love. No human agency has planned this. It is

the result of the great missionary enterprise of the last hundred and fifty years. . . .
Almost incidentally, the great world fellowship has arisen; it is the great new fact
of our era. (Temple 1944, 2-4)

R. Pierce Beaver comments that one who knows the history and literature of the missionary movement at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century is aware that this development was not so “incidental.” It was the fruit of much planning, effort, and struggle on the part of many devoted to the missionary enterprise (Beaver 1962, 41). As one traces the origins of mission and unity, attending to the struggles in the trenches, it becomes increasingly evident that the principle of comity played an important role in the rise of the ecumenical movement.

The term ‘comity’ became fixed in the vocabulary of the Protestant missionary movement following its deployment in papers and conversations surrounding the Centenary Conference on Protestant Mission of the World in London in 1888. However, the practice of comity came much earlier; it was already part of the discussions and praxis of missions in the early nineteenth century (Beaver 1962, 15). A new concern for co-operation flowed from the growing fervour, among the Protestant churches, for foreign missions, during which time “foreign missions had become the new orthodoxy” (Hutchison 1987, 60). Passion to reach the whole world with the gospel led to fresh initiatives in co-operation and unity. This new-found concern was expressed at the Liverpool Conference on Missions (1860) held at Liverpool: “Though belonging to different sections of the Church of Christ, they rejoice in that close union to each other and that practical co-operation which have so largely prevailed among the agents of Missionary Societies, both at home and abroad” (Conference on Missions 1860, 12). This concern for mission and unity found expression in various missionary conferences throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Neill 1964, 400-2). “The establishment of the principle of comity in mission was one of the most outstanding results of these early conferences” (Corwin 2000, 212).

Comity sought to achieve among Protestant missions what the Roman Catholic Church accomplished through the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, their central and authoritative missionary organ. Since the areas to be evangelised were so great and the resources so few, it was generally agreed that competition and overlapping should be avoided. “Comity

between different missionary organizations, as well as economy, requires that the entire field should be so distributed as to prevent any waste of material through two or more societies occupying the same field or any portion of the same field” (Clark 1891, 3). In comity agreements mission organisations or churches were allocated different areas in which to work. Comity was the “mutual division of territory into spheres of occupation, on the one hand, and the non-interference in one another’s affairs, on the other. . . . its purpose was to prevent wasteful duplication, competition, and presentation of variant forms of worship and polity which might confuse non-Christians and hinder communication of the gospel” (Beaver 1971, 123).

The practice of comity was not only the result of the growing concern for unity during the nineteenth century; it also prompted new initiatives toward unity: “Comity can be understood only in the context of that unity [across national and denominational lines that characterised the Protestant missionary enterprise], of which it is one of the earliest fruits even as at the same time it was the creator of still greater unity and co-operation” (Beaver 1962, 18). Van Dusen discusses the growth in unity and mission under six headings: consultation, comity, co-operation in joint action, federation, union institutions, and organic church union (Van Dusen 1961). Beaver picks up this structure and shows how comity was the driving force behind each of these types of collaboration (Beaver 1962, 35-41). Consultation, first among leaders in missionary societies and later in local, regional, and national conferences, was motivated by matters that were made urgent by comity agreements. Various boards of co-operation were created to implement comity agreements on an ongoing basis. These boards were the first steps toward actual co-operation in mission among various societies and denominational boards. Efforts in co-operation led to various initiatives towards a united church at a national level. “Comity is the bedrock foundation on which there has been built throughout Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Pacific a Protestant community conscious of its unity . . .” (Beaver 1962, 40).

The advantages and disadvantages of comity have been much debated. Quite naturally the discussion usually surrounds the advantages spelled out in terms of the benefits for the Western missionary organizations: dialogue and mutual respect that result from the process of negotiating comity agreements; the distribution of resources over a wider area; the avoidance of competition and overlapping among missionary societies (Dyck and Martin 1990, 5:169). But what of the advantages of comity among the indigenous churches? Newbigin has articulated the theological dynamic of comity that benefited the church in South India. It is this dynamic that

brings insight into the original impulse toward unity propelled by mission.

The Theological Dynamic of Comity

In Newbigin's early years in India he experienced a dramatic difference between the attitudes toward unity in the "younger churches" outside the West and the "older churches" of Western culture. The Western churches showed an astounding complacency toward disunity that "so plainly and ostentatiously flouts the declared will of the Church's Lord" (Newbigin 1948, 9). The non-Western churches, on the other hand, found themselves drawn together emphasising more what they had in common than what divided them as they faced ancient and powerful religious systems that controlled the public doctrine of their countries. Why the difference?

The answer often given was the enthusiasm of these non-Western churches for a *pragmatic* unity that issued from a situation where the church was a minority movement facing enormous hostility and vast areas to be evangelised. Those who offer this explanation point to the principle of comity. Indeed comity was an important feature of the development of church life in nineteenth and early twentieth century India (Sundkler 1954, 23-30, 67-72). Even though comity arrangements often did not work well, Newbigin believes that comity did have a profound influence on the way the non-Western churches developed; to reduce that impact to a pragmatic and strategic unity would be to miss the profound missionary and ecumenical impulse that it provided.

The principle of comity shaped the Indian church in two ways according to Newbigin. In the first place it fostered a *sense of missionary responsibility*. Where comity was practised it meant that "there is *normally* but one Christian congregation, and upon this congregation rests the responsibility for the evangelisation of the area allotted . . ." (Newbigin 1948, 12). Being the only church in an area dictated an overriding concern for the evangelisation of the area in which the church was placed.

[T]he effect of the principle of comity was to keep the Church constantly aware of its evangelistic task. Where there is only one Christian congregation in a town or village or district, its members can never forget the fact that the responsibility for making known the Gospel in that area rests upon them alone. If they do not do it, no one else will. . . . where there is only one congregation it is impossible for its

members to escape from the solemn recollection that on the day of judgment it is they and they alone who can be questioned about their neighbours who had never heard the good news. (ibid, 15)

It is this sense of obligation and understanding of their missionary nature that was pressed on the younger churches from the beginning of their existence partially as a result of comity. It shaped the character, attitudes, and structures of those churches. They understood that “their life was dominated by the idea of mission” and that “evangelism was their lifeblood” (ibid, 10). Or as he puts it again: “The life of the younger Churches is, on the one hand, much more influenced by the missionary impulse which produced them and by the enormous evangelistic task that confronts them” (ibid, 11).

A missionary vision does not allow the church to remain content with disunity: “When Christians are engaged in the task of missionary obedience they are in the situation in which the Church is truly the Church. They are actual participators in Christ’s apostolate. . . . In that situation the disunity, which is easily taken for granted among Churches which are not in a missionary situation, becomes literally intolerable (Newbigin 1953, 173).

This is to be contrasted with the older churches of Christendom. Throughout most of the West, one finds a multitude of competing congregations of every denominational stripe. Within this kind of environment it becomes difficult to sense the full obligation for the evangelisation of one’s neighbours. It is inevitable that congregations who compete alongside of one another will finally be more concerned with the maintenance of their own distinctive traditions. They will define themselves over against other congregations rather than in the light of the responsibility they have toward their neighbour and their cultural context.

[The] ordinary congregation in a Western city or village does not regard itself as a mission. It would, in fact, repudiate the appellation as an insult. The Church carries on missions at home and abroad. But its ordinary congregational life is not oriented toward its pagan environment or dominated by the missionary aim. (Newbigin 1948, 11)

When ordinary congregational life is not dominated by mission then disunity can be tolerated,

even considered normal.

There was a second consequence of the principle of comity in the Indian church: it motivated the church to *distinguish between primary and secondary matters for the sake of unity*. There was not only a missionary impulse toward unity; the mere fact that there was only one church also prompted the church to live as one body. When there is only one church in a given area Christians from every caste, class, and even confessional tradition must find a home in that congregation. When the church must include within itself all varieties of people from different backgrounds determined by caste, education, wealth, class, and emotional types “then either it visibly disintegrates into warring factions, or else it stands before men as a society constituted by nothing else than its relation to God through Christ, facing fallen humanity not as a series of particular associations but simply as humanity restored to itself in Christ” (ibid, 17). If the church is to survive, it must be committed to the conviction that to have Christ in common is enough.

Newbigin refers to this as “the process of simplification.” The South Indian church has been forced to strip away anything that is not of the essence of the gospel itself in order to find the true source of its life, a source that will enable them to endure tremendous diversity. They must recognise that “to add anything to the Gospel is to corrupt the sources of the church’s life and to reduce it to the level of a human association based on some identity of belief or practice” (ibid, 18).

There is no suggestion here that theological reflection is unnecessary; in fact, Newbigin insists that theological reflection is crucial in the church’s task of articulating and protecting the gospel. Nor is he suggesting that matters dividing churches be ignored, for “when this is attempted among Christians it is apt to produce a kind of tasteless slush devoid of any power to salt the earth. Differences of belief have to be faced with the fullest seriousness and realism” (ibid, 17, 105-6). And finally, he is not saying that all Christian traditions are equally faithful to Scripture. Rather the basic question is whether or not Christ as presented in the gospel is the sufficient centre for ecclesial unity.

Again this is contrasted with the Western church that exists as numerous confessional bodies. While theological and confessional statements are important for the purpose of explicating and protecting the gospel, in the Western church, where many competing confessional bodies live together, confessions go beyond this legitimate task and become a series

of additions to the gospel. When there are rival congregations, each group will accent their distinctiveness to justify their continued existence. The force of the group egotism shapes the congregation to focus more on what they alone hold rather than on what they hold in common with others in the church of Christ.

Thus the “position of the church under the arrangement known as ‘mission comity’ has tended both to force the Church to face the question whether the common fact of redemption in Christ is by itself a sufficient basis for outward unity, and also to lay upon the Church a vivid sense of its evangelistic responsibility” (ibid, 16).

But the impulse of comity goes deeper than this. It is not simply a matter of recovering one aspect of the church ministry (mission) and distinguishing between primary and secondary matters for the sake of unity. It is nothing less, Newbigin believed, than *a return to the gospel that leads to a recovery of the true nature of the church itself*. In the missionary situation under comity agreements, it is much easier to recover the truth—so often eclipsed in the “Christendom” situation where there are many competing churches—that “the Church is not primarily an association constituted by the agreement of its members on a number of points of belief and practice, but simply humanity reconstituted by its redemption and regeneration in Christ” (ibid). The church is the new humankind that in its nature is founded on the gospel alone. Adding anything to the gospel corrupts the church’s life and its nature. The church that identifies itself on the basis of its own theological constructions and traditions of piety is a human association that is not spiritual but worldly (I Cor. 1:10-17, 3:1-9, New International Version). The situation of the church in India under the comity agreements has driven the church away from these theological constructions and ecclesiological traditions back to the gospel itself. As they have been forced to live out of the gospel it has resulted in making the church true to its nature as *one* body and as a *missionary* body. Thus the enthusiasm for the reunion of the church is not a pragmatic move in the face of imposing religious systems but rather is a return to the gospel, which has enabled them to recover the true nature of the church as missionary and as one.

When the church in a missionary situation is forced to return to the gospel alone as the source of its life and thereby is able to recognise the church in its true nature, the close connection between mission and unity is clear. Mission is dependent on unity. Unity is necessary so that the world may believe (John 17:20-23). The church’s unity is a sign of the salvation that Christ has accomplished. That salvation is the reconciliation of all things in Christ (Eph.1:9, 10;

Col. 1:20). If the church proclaims the good news of salvation but is disunited, its life publicly contradicts the message of the gospel and the sufficiency of the atonement to accomplish reconciliation. Unity is also dependent on mission. When the church is faithful to its nature as missionary, its disunity is recognized as the public scandal that it is. Newbigin explains his use of the word scandal with a vivid illustration (ibid, 23-4). The existence of two rival temperance societies in the same town is unfortunate but not scandalous. But a temperance society whose members are habitually drunk is scandalous. This is because the nature of their life contradicts their central message. A fragmented church contradicts the good news that God is reconciling the world under one head, Christ. For the church shaped by mission this disunity becomes unbearable. Thus unity and mission exist in inextricable union:

I do not think that a resolute dealing with our divisions will come except in the context of a quite new acceptance on the part of all the Churches of the obligation to bring the Gospel to every creature; nor do I think that the world will believe that Gospel until it sees more evidence of its power to make us one. These two tasks—mission and unity—must be prosecuted together and in indissoluble relation to one another (Newbigin 1953, 174).

Bibliography

- Beaver, R. Pierce. *Ecumenical Beginnings in Protestant World Mission: A History of Comity*. New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1962.
- . “Comity.” *Concise Dictionary of the Christian World Mission*. Edited by Stephen Neill, Gerald Anderson, and John Goodwin. 123. New York: Abingdon Press, 1971.
- Clark, N. G. *True and False Economy in Missions*. Boston: American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 1891.
- Conference on Missions Held in 1860 at Liverpool*. London: Nisbet Publishers, 1860.
- Corwin, Gary R. “Comity.” *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*. Edited by A. Scott Moreau. 212. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000.
- Dyck, Cornelius J. and Dennis D. Martin, eds. *Mennonite Encyclopaedia*, Volume 5. 169.

- Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1990.
- Goheen, Michael W. *“As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You”*: J. E. Lesslie Newbigin’s *Missionary Ecclesiology*. Zoetermeer, NL: Boekencentrum, 2000.
- Goodall, Norman E., ed. *Missions Under the Cross. Addresses Delivered at the Enlarged Meeting of the Committee of the International Missionary Council at Willingen, in Germany, 1952; with Statements Issued by the Meeting*. London: Edinburgh House Press, 1953.
- Hogg, William Richey. *Ecumenical Foundations: A History of the International Missionary Council and Its Nineteenth-Century Background*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1952.
- Hutchison, William R. *Errand to the World: American Protestant Thought and Foreign Missions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- Neill, Stephen. *A History of Christian Missions*. Revised edition. New York: Penguin Books, 1986.
- Newbigin, Lesslie. *The Reunion of the Church: A Defence of the South India Scheme*. London: SCM Press, 1948.
- . *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church*. New York: Friendship Press, 1953.
- . “The Basis and the Forms of Unity.” *Mid-Stream* 23 (1984): 1-12.
- . *New Birth Into a Living Hope*. Unpublished address given to European Area World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Edinburgh, August 1995.
- Saayman, Willem A. *Unity and Mission*. Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1984.
- Sundkler, Bengt. *Church of South India: The Movement Toward Union 1900-1947*. London: Lutterworth Press, 1954.
- Temple, William. *The Church Looks Forward*. London: Macmillan Press, 1944.
- Van Dusen, Henry P. *One Great Ground of Hope: Christians Missions and Christian Unity*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961.