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MATTHIAS SCHULZ

Toward an Understanding of Our
New Sister Synod in India

M. H. GRUMM

The Unity of the Church and the
Message of Christ

CARL FR. WISLÖF

Preaching in Lent

RICHARD R. CAEMMERER

Homiletics

Brief Studies

Theological Observer

Book Review

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Toward an Understanding of Our New Sister Synod in India

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At the San Francisco convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod the India Evangelical Lutheran Church was accepted in fellowship as a sister synod. Though this young church is still heavily dependent on our American church for support in money and missionary personnel, it has been accepted as a church in its own right, and it is following a phased plan working toward its own support. The American church may feel a justified sense of satisfaction in seeing a small but living church established in this faraway country through the work of its Mission, and it can also justly rejoice in seeing its fellowship widened by close bonds with a new sister synod.

Here, for the first time in its history, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is declaring its fellowship with a church body whose culture and roots and environment are not of the familiar Western pattern. It has the same Word and the same confessions as its basis, one Lord, one faith, one Baptism; it has strongly developed ties of gratitude with what is still often called the mother church; and yet as God's church in India, the roots of its Gospel are growing in quite different soil. This is the first church with which The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is in fellowship in a country that is not "Christian," whose culture is not Western, and whose environment and problems are consequently different in many ways.

That this new venture in fellowship may issue in mutual enrichment, in a widening of horizons, and a deepened appreciation of the universal relevance and power of the Gospel, it is well for us to understand better something of the different setting and the peculiar problems and opportunities of this new church with which we are in fellowship. At this point of development it is, no doubt, a missionary who can best describe this new church to the church in America.

TRANSMITTING THE GOSPEL

On our way back to India across the Pacific in 1940 we met on shipboard an unusually talented young Japanese woman. She had been abroad for a number of years. During this time she had spent more than a year in a TB sanatorium. While she was recuperating she learned Greek, not merely to read the New Testament but to be better able to understand how far Hellenistic categories of thought had shaped the later formulations of Christian doctrine. She wanted to know how to present Christ in the milieu of an Oriental culture without subsequent Occidental thought forms and accidental dressing.

It is a problem which confronts every missionary who has gone out to preach the Gospel in a foreign country. Some may not even recognize the problem, and if they have any success in their work the result is a carbon copy of an American or European church organization, which has no indigenous roots and no contact with the surrounding culture. Some have gone to the other extreme. In an effort to be all things to all men they have cut themselves off from the mainstream of the Christian heritage and have landed in sterile syncretism.

Obviously the church in India is not to be isolated from the rest of historical Christendom. We want to transmit not merely the teaching of the Holy Scriptures but also the common heritage of the Christian Church and the insights into God's truth that came through the Reformation. It must be our purpose to plant the church of God in India, and not merely to export carbon copies of an American church organization. In the formulation of its doctrinal position and in its traditional practices, every church, including our own, reflects reactions to various situations in its historical development. Because controversies arose over specific issues, it became necessary to emphasize certain aspects of Biblical teaching in order to clarify and defend them against error. But some of these emphases may not be necessary or relevant in every environment and at all times.

When a church is founded in a new environment, where some of these concerns are not at issue, it becomes necessary to distinguish between what is essential and what is not relevant. To attain a correct perspective and maintain a proper balance in this matter is often difficult. The new church must be grounded on the full

Gospel of Jesus Christ. It must teach its members to observe all things whatsoever He has commanded and refuse to tolerate any doctrine of men. At the same time the young church will face its peculiar problems and unique opportunities in the confidence that the Word of God—and it alone—can and will supply the answers to the many questions which it faces.

To separate these points of view inherited from our particular history from the essentials is a very difficult thing. To get outside ourselves for a sense of perspective is something not all are well able to do. And to do so in a way that there is not a reaction which endangers the Gospel and falls into religious liberalism is not a simple process. But for the sake of grounding a new church in the Gospel, so that it stands firm in that Gospel alone, there must be a constant effort to do so, to refer everything to the Word. We must become so well grounded in that living, contemporary Word and take the church with us that we can with the confidence of Christ's freemen face all the problems and all the opportunities that confront us. And problems and opportunities there are aplenty by reason of the peculiar situation in which the young church finds itself.

THE DOMINANT ANTITHESIS

The Christian Church of all denominations is very much of a minority community in India, surrounded by a sea of Hinduism and Islam. It represents only about 2 per cent of the population. When Christian meets Christian here, they feel they have something in common in the enveloping sea of non-Christian religions.

What practical issues this involves can be demonstrated by one or two examples. In a village far off the beaten track we have a small group of Christians, about 25, who hold their services in a small mud-thatch hut in the middle of the outcaste section. In the caste section is the government village school. To this school was posted a young teacher who belonged to the church connected with the Danish Lutheran Mission. It was only after several months that our catechist who served that village church found out about the presence of this Christian teacher and his family. He looked him up and upbraided him for hiding his Christianity, because he was ashamed to identify himself with the outcaste Christians. The man and his wife came to the next service and accepted our ministrations.

A similar situation arose not long afterward in another village, this time involving a lone midwife and a teacher and his wife from faraway churches connected with the Reformed Mission. When they sought Communion and were asked what they were looking for, they gave the right "Lutheran" answer and were taken into membership although they might soon be transferred elsewhere.

There is no other church for many miles from this village. For though mission maps may show solid sections or all of South India "covered," the fact is that in general the geographical sections of India are fairly well divided among various churches, and except in larger cities and towns there is little overlapping of the work of recognized missions and churches, which observe comity in this matter. While the Roman Catholic Church does not do so, yet there are individual priests like Father A., who once told me: "I followed up a prospect in N. Village, but when I found out you had some work there, I stopped. It won't serve the interests of the kingdom of God if the Hindus see us competing." This would happen only in a place like India.

When isolated Christians are thrown together with small flocks of other Christians, it is quite natural that their basic fellowship in Christ draws them together for mutual growth and for the task of witnessing to their Lord in the non-Christian environment in which they live. It is here that the Western Christian, living in a "Christian" country, in an environment of long-standing inherited denominational differences, must make an effort to project himself into the Roman Empire of the first or second century to understand something of the joy of mutual recognition when two people meet who acknowledge the one same Lord.

THE DENOMINATIONAL SITUATION

This brings us to a second consideration wherein the situation in India differs from that in the West: the matter of the relative significance of denominational labels. It was in the nature of the historical situation that Christianity was exported to unevangelized areas under denominational labels and that thus the divisions that arose in Western Christianity were perpetuated. But in the process, partly because of the need to emphasize the essentials, partly because here the basic issue is between Christian and non-Christian,

the emphasis upon denominational differences was relatively less than in the West. Differences in doctrine and traditions there were, and are, of course. But the *labels* of denominations, which for us historically conditioned Westerners help to perpetuate difference in doctrine and traditions and theological outlook, naturally do not assume the same relevance and importance here. This does not at all mean doctrinal indifference, especially among Lutherans. It merely means that we are a little more fortunate here in having a situation in which the Holy Spirit has fewer human obstacles to overcome to bring His people into closer unity.

It is only natural that some of the things that divide us in America have little relevance here. When I was giving a series of talks on "What is Lutheran?" at a retreat of the pastors of the large ULC-connected Andhra Evangelical Lutheran Church, the question was asked, "What is it that keeps Missouri and the ULC apart?" When I made mention of the lodge question, one of the men asked, "What is a lodge?" And then came the question, "What does that have to do with our relationship here in India?" There are other such things, thank God, that have no relevance in this different environment 10,000 miles away.

The fact that the first major church union involving both Anglican and Free Churches took place in India is thus not altogether accidental. The Church of South India, which includes all Protestants in South India with the exception of Lutherans, Baptists, and the Holiness sects, is now 12 years old, and negotiations leading to the union began many years before that. The union was frankly just that, for divergent interpretations as to the meaning of the historic episcopate were allowed, and the doctrinal basis, though very good as far as it went, was purposely kept to the barest essentials, with the expressed hope that by coming together and working and worshiping together the various groups would be led by the Spirit into a deeper unity. Not long after the union took place the CSI issued invitations to the Baptists and Lutherans to meet for doctrinal discussions. The invitation was accepted, and though the Baptists soon dropped out, the Lutherans, including our own Mission (later the IELC), kept up yearly discussions.

THE CHALLENGE

This is not the place to give a report on the progress of these discussions, except to note that after an agreement, even on the

vexed question of "Church and Ministry," was reached by the joint commission at its last meeting, such a degree of unanimity has been achieved that the study commission is disbanding and turning over the agreed statements for consideration and action by the churches concerned. For our purposes it should be noted:

1. This is one of the few places in the world where serious and extended doctrinal discussions have been taking place between Lutherans and non-Lutherans.

2. We are confronted here with a unique situation. A major church, which in its history had no direct conflict with our church, has demonstrated an openness to the leading of the Holy Spirit in His Word to do just that thing which The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has been advocating: to seek for the basis of fellowship in a God-pleasing doctrinal unity.

3. The extensive doctrinal discussions by the representatives of various Lutheran church bodies that have gone on in connection with these negotiations with the CSI have brought the Lutherans much closer together, and the Interchurch Relations Committee of the IELC is working in several ways to try to follow up this gain.

In short, the young church here is faced with a situation which is quite unique; it is challenged with present opportunities to a wider sharing of its heritage for which its sister churches in other parts of the world can only hope.

THE ANSWER

The big question immediately arises: Is the young church up to it? Are they firm enough in their Lutheran heritage not to be overwhelmed, not to compromise with the truth? The answer of course is in the hands of the Lord of the church. It should be stated that as a matter of fact much of the responsible leadership in this matter is still with the missionaries. A large burden is still on them for guidance. Those who are especially responsible have been prayerfully seeking, and are continuing to seek, God's will in His Word in concerted study with their Indian colleagues and other missionaries. Almost the whole program for the next meeting of missionaries is concerned with this matter. Help is needed: the prayers that all can raise to God; the advice of those who can contribute to the solution of practical problems; the encouragement

of brotherly confidence; an understanding of the problems in sympathy and in perspective.

Paul speaks of the fellowship of giving and receiving. The traffic between America and India has heretofore been pretty much one way. The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod in "losing its life" in India through the recognition of a new independent sister church, may have given the Lord of the church an opportunity to prepare the way for a fruitful mutual enrichment. For the gifts of the Spirit are not dependent on natural endowment or conditioned by size, "but to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."

Pernambut, India