

## **“Concerted Action”**

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The speech given by Bishop Charles Brent on the 3rd August 1927 at the opening of the World Conference on Faith and Order was visionary in more ways than one. One sentence in particular which comes up in the first paragraphs has always impressed me by its pertinence as well as its simplicity: "If unity has slipped away from our grasp, it is the common fault of the whole Christian world. If it is to be regained it must be by the concerted action of all Christians. Every section has shared in shattering unity. Every section must share in the effort to restore it." (p. 4) By the concerted action of all Christians! I think that then as now this statement is of fundamental importance. For today as then we are confronted with the same question; how can we succeed, in helping the broken parts of Christendom grow together as a cohesive whole to witness together to God's great acts? As then, the Faith and Order movement has the same task: to hold persistently the goal of unity desired by God before the eyes of Christianity as a whole, and at the same time help each individual part make its contribution in fulfilling this great objective.

Brent could also have used the biblical image of living stones. In the first letter of Peter we read: "So come to him, to the living stone, which was rejected by men but chosen by God and of great worth to him. You also like living stones, must be built up into a spiritual temple, and form a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." (1 Pe 2.4-5)

For the house to stand every stone has to be in its correct place. Every house - even the spiritual house which is talked about here - depends upon an overall design. Stones are the material, each one is indispensable in the place it has been assigned to, no individual stone can build the house on its own. They will be built up, or more precisely they must allow themselves to be used for the building up of the whole. It is by finding their place that each of the individual living stones contributes to the overall construction.

Much has changed since the World Conference in Lausanne. The ecumenical movement, which in those days was an effort of pioneers, has in the meantime come into common ownership of the whole of Christendom. The doors that separated confessional traditions have been opened wide. Ecumenical initiatives have become a matter of course, both at grass roots and between church leaders. Developments have taken place which Charles Brent could not have dreamed of. The Roman Catholic Church, which in 1927 was an impenetrable fortress, has entered the ecumenical movement and as a result of that Christian World Communions have woven a whole network of bilateral dialogues. And yet it is clear to all of us that the goal outlined in Lausanne is far from being attained. On the contrary, the movement that was so promising appears to have hit the rocks. Why? The reason, in my opinion, is to be found in the fact that the churches are not able to agree to co-ordinate ("concert") their ecumenical initiatives. There has been a surprising level of agreement in recent years. Ecumenical dialogue both at grass roots and at official level has led to the very threshold of communion. The results which have been achieved call out to share God's gift of the Church with one another. Or to put it in the words of 1 Peter, to allow ourselves to "be built up into a spiritual temple". But it is exactly this that seems to pose the biggest problem for the churches. They are in favour of dialogue and discussions, but they cannot make the decision to come together in a construction that is larger than they are. They do not see themselves as stones but rather as architects of the house, who have to decide how the stones are to be used. In other words: different concepts of the ecumenical movement oppose each other and hinder that concerted action which Brent called for. The churches today are therefore in danger of simply staring at each other across the ecumenical table.

The ecumenical movement is often compared to a spiritual competition, in which each church should try to be ever more faithful to its own tradition. The deeper each reaches down into the foundations of its own tradition the nearer each comes to the common foundation of all churches. Abbé Paul Couturier often liked to speak of the ecumenical movement as an "émulation spirituelle". Much of this, of course, is true, but the image also has its weaknesses. For in whatever spiritual terms this competition may be described, it nevertheless remains a competition. As the apostle Paul himself admits in 1 Corinthians 9.24, there can only be one winner, the others are the losers. What lies behind this image is the unspoken expectation or even hope that one's own vision of the ecumenical movement will win through in the end if only one waits long enough. The idea of competition is basically the same in sports and in economy; it is rivalry. Thus the image takes on the opposite meaning to the idea of "concerted action" presented to the conference in Lausanne.

But do we really need unity? Do we have to live in one spiritual house? Do we need one church, so that a holy priesthood can offer spiritual sacrifices to God and the world? The question is often asked. Does it not suffice to recognise each other in our differences? Today the notion of unity does not have a good press. We pay much more attention to diversity. It is often stated that unity comes about as churches learn to deal with a greater spectrum of diversity. True, the idea, taken for granted at the time of the Lausanne World Conference, that the original unity of the Church had been lost and needed to be recreated, has shown itself to be naïve. The movement which started with Jesus had diverse facets from the very beginning. There can also be no doubt that throughout history, communion between churches often reached breaking point for the single reason that Churches were not willing to take into account the diversity of contexts or to put up with the differences of others. But it is not enough for churches to come closer together, they need to succeed in establishing communion and genuine communication. Let us listen to what Charles Brent says on the subject: "Unity is not only a thing of beauty but a matter of practical necessity. There are patches of unity already, it is true, in an underlying loyalty to Christ. But not enough to make Christianity effective as a peacemaker, a liberator, a universal power, or to satisfy the mind of God." (p 8)

With this in mind, I wish to make two observations:

1. To build up the spiritual house we need something like a common plan or rather a plan recognised by all. How can churches know how to fit their contribution into the whole if they are not led by a common goal? Is it therefore not the responsibility of the Christian World Communions to negotiate together the framework in which the "communio" of the churches can grow? The current state of bilateral dialogues is strangely contradictory. There is a wealth of results at hand. They do not however flow together through "concerted action" into a whole. Discussions about the overall shape of the ecumenical movement rarely take place. Just as for today's free market economy so also the Christian World Communions seem have a superstitious belief in an "invisible hand" which will finally turn all of their ecumenical initiatives into a blessing for all. Ultimately, God's Spirit is such a hand. But God's Spirit calls us to give a common expression to the "communio" that God gives us by aligning ourselves with it. We still have differences to clear up. The road ahead is not yet free from obstacles. Different perspectives stand in the way. However, results we have already achieved are sufficient to set up the framework within which concerted action could freely develop. Time and again, the Faith and Order Movement has attempted to describe "That unity which we seek". With the founding of the WCC a fellowship came into being that not only allows for regular meeting between divided churches but also provided a framework within which to live in fellowship. Surely today it is our common task to create that framework within which the maximum number of partners can participate and grow together in unity? To follow Charles Brent's famous words: "By practising unity, we shall gain unity." (p 10)
2. Charles Brent had an awareness of the problems of his time. He hoped that Christendom would to a much greater extent become a force for peace. It was precisely this that lay

behind his commitment to the cause of the unity of the Church. Can the fellowship of the Church make visible to the world something of God's will and intention? Of course the Church cannot heal the world of all evils, but does it really have to remain simply the mirror image of the world? Can it not at least offer, through its existence, an alternative to the powers of injustice and destruction? Much has also changed regarding the world situation since the early days of the ecumenical movement. Let me illustrate with just one example of what the Church through its existence may bear witness to today. The fate of human beings is decided today by a system in which the laws of competition have the upper hand. The results of this are clearer than ever: Injustice, destruction of nature, the lack of consideration for future generations. The laws of competition endanger life because they are based on the idea of victory and domination. But can Churches denounce this in God's name when they themselves are not free from the same defects? The capacity to join in "concerted action" is the prerequisite for the counter witness which is demanded of them today.

In the conference's concluding statement we read: "Some of us, pioneers in this undertaking, have grown old in our search for unity. It is to youth that we look to lift the torch high. We men have carried it too much alone through many years. The women should henceforth be accorded their share of responsibility. And so the whole church will be enabled to do that which no section can hope to perform." (p 461)

Some of these hopes have been fulfilled. But the basic call is still as valid as ever – that the divided parts allow their ecumenical initiatives, through concerted action, to become one movement.

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