

## **EDINBURGH 1910 AND BEYOND: MISSION IN UNITY. HISTORICAL, THEOLOGICAL AND PRACTICAL REFLECTIONS**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

“Give us friends!” These have become some of the most famous words from the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh one hundred years ago. With these words the Indian representative V. S. Azariah closed his second speech at one of the evening meetings. Azariah was addressing the problem of missing friendships between foreign missionaries and Indian evangelists, challenging the missionaries’ captivity to their cultural views which hindered them to build friendships across ethnic and social borders. Hierarchies between employers and employees and colonial attitudes stood in the way. As Azariah pointed out, such friendships, however, would be necessary for the gospel to be believed in a context characterized by social borders and division. Stanley in his report on the conference summarizes the relevance of Azariah’s appeal:

Azariah’s second Edinburgh address was a plea for a visible demonstration to a society fragmented by caste and structural injustice that the Christian vision of the kingdom of God really is different ... India needed to see that the church was held together across the dividing lines of caste, ethnicity, culture, and empire by a unique quality of friendship ... By identifying failures in human relationships as the most fundamental of all missionary failures, [Azariah] had touched a raw nerve in the western Christian conscience.<sup>1</sup>

The significance of Azariah’s address for the most part was not grasped by his audience. Even a prolific missiologist like Robert E. Speer could write in retrospect that the representatives of the new churches had not contributed anything new to the understanding of the truth of God in Christ.<sup>2</sup> Stanley comments:

From the perspective of a century later, it is hard to identify what more the Asians could have done to convince western Protestant missionary strategists that the Asian interpretations of Christianity which they professed so much to desire were in fact already emerging before their eyes.<sup>3</sup>

Edinburgh 1910 was still very much part of the 19th century with its Eurocentric vision of the world and its cultural and religious optimism.<sup>4</sup> The slogan “the evangelization of the world in

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 129-130.

<sup>2</sup> quoted in Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910*, 130.

<sup>3</sup> Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910*, 131.

<sup>4</sup> The World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910 in many ways reflected the spirit of its time. It was characterized by great optimism with regard to the success of Christian missions around the world and the ideological and financial power of western Christendom. Yates comments: “The emphasis on a world-wide strategy, to be pursued in quasi-military terms, can be illustrated by the frequent use of the term ‘aggressive’ in the reports. ... [T]he reports and speeches use the term ‘aggressive’ ... in a commendatory sense, to express the world-wide advance

this generation” expresses this attitude very well. If only (Western) missions could coordinate its efforts and resources, the evangelization of the world would be well in reach. Azariah with his appeal was challenging this ethnocentric attitude. “Give us friends” was not merely a call for closer relationships between foreign missionaries and national evangelists; it was a call for overcoming dependencies and ethnocentrism. As such it was touching on the fundamental character of brotherly relationships within the church.

Azariah’s call reminds us that the unity of the church is not merely a strategic issue, in the sense “How can our witness to the world become more effective?” It is a question of the essence of the church as a community shaped and led by the Holy Spirit. It is this question of the relationship between the mission of the church and its unity which we need to consider in this paper.

I would like to proceed in three steps: First I will present a brief survey of the Edinburgh 1910 conference. Second I’ll outline a few essential theological principles on the topic of the mission and the unity of the church. In this second part I will refer to the writings of Lesslie Newbigin, who ministered as missionary and bishop in India. And third, I would like to sketch out a few steps for us to consider for our local and regional contexts.

## **THE WORLD MISSIONARY CONFERENCE IN EDINBURGH IN 1910**

The World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910 was not the first of its kind. The idea for a conference like this can be traced back to William Carey in the early 19th century. A number of regional gatherings in the course of the 19th century led up to two Ecumenical Missionary Conferences, the first one in London in 1888 and the second one in New York in 1900.<sup>5</sup> Both had a motivational purpose. They aimed primarily at inspiring Christians, propagating the idea of world mission, demonstrating the world-wide nature of Christian mission and its achievements and emphasizing the necessity of cooperation in missions.

The Edinburgh conference, however, was to become a study conference. In February 1909 elaborate questionnaires were sent out by a Joint Missionary Committee to missionaries and home officials around the world. The replies were carefully studied and summarized in reports by altogether eight commissions, each dealing with a specific topic. Each commission presented a report for discussion during the conference in Edinburgh.<sup>6</sup> So in 1910 from June 14th to June 23rd, 1215 delegates met in Edinburgh to study and discuss the current state of missions around the world. Of the 1215 delegates 82% came from Britain and North America.<sup>7</sup> Of the remaining 215 delegates 169 came from continental Europe, 27 from the white colonies of South

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which was needed” (Timothy E. Yates, “Edinburgh Revisited: Edinburgh 1910 to Melbourne 1980,” *Churchman* 94, no. 2 (1980), 146). In this atmosphere a confusion of “mission” and “colonization” and a confusion of the “kingdom of God” and “(Western) civilization” was hard to avoid (Wolfgang Günther and Guillermo Cook, “World Missionary Conferences,” in *Dictionary of Mission. Theology, History, Perspectives*, ed. Karl Müller et al., Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997, 503).

<sup>5</sup> For details on the series of conferences in other parts of the world see the article by Richard Pierard in this volume.

<sup>6</sup> The eight topics were: (1) Carrying the Gospel to all the World, (2) The Native Church and its Workers, (3) Education in Relation to the Christianization of National Life, (4) The Missionary Message in Relation to Non-Christian Religions, (5) The Preparation of Missionaries, (6) The Home Base of Missions, (7) Relations of Missions to Governments, and (8) Co-operation and the Promotion of Unity.

<sup>7</sup> There were 509 British delegates from 46 British missionary societies and 491 North American delegates from 60 American missionary societies.

Africa and Australasia, and only 19 (some earlier documents say 17) were from the non-Western world, 18 of them from Asia. This is less than 2% of all delegates.<sup>8</sup>

The organizing principle had been to invite representatives of mission organizations, not representatives of churches. This explains the small number of non-Western delegates. The number of delegates for each mission organization was determined by the size of its budget. Those delegates who attended from the non-Western world were sent by mission organizations which worked in the respective countries.

While the goal of the conference was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the current state of world missions, the Joint Committee had agreed to limit the scope of the deliberations to the so called non-Christian world. Early in the preparatory phase Anglican representatives had expressed great reservations against including mission work in areas where Catholic and Orthodox churches were traditionally present. In order to secure Anglican participation in the conference in Edinburgh, the Joint Committee agreed to this limitation of scope. While this compromise seems to have been based on rather practical considerations, it was in fact a declaration and attestation of a territorial understanding of Christendom and mission. Stanley comments:

The centuries-old gulf in western Christian thinking between territorial Christendom and the so-called 'non-Christian world' was now wider than ever. From the perspective of most present-day theologies of mission, the stance taken by the conference was indefensible in that it had restricted the mission of the Church (and by ultimate implication also the mission of God) to certain geographically demarcated portions of humanity. The deleterious consequences of that restriction are still being played out. The exclusion of Latin America from the conference agenda had the further effect of accentuating the existing Protestant tendency to identify the West with Christianity and the Orient with heathendom.<sup>9</sup>

It would take another 50 years to finally break free from this paradigm, when the World Mission Conference in Mexico would emphasize that the "home base of the world mission" is world-wide and the "mission field" is also world-wide, exemplified in the theme of the conference "Mission in six continents."

In addition to the missiological studies on the state of world mission, a spiritual emphasis was an integral part of the Edinburgh conference. Each day began with a 15 minute devotional. The time from 10 am to 12:30 p.m. was then set aside for the presentation and discussion of the commission report of the day. Before the assembly broke for lunch, 30 minutes were allocated each day for united intercessory prayer. The discussion of the report was continued in the afternoon from 2:30 to 4:30 p.m. The evening meetings were set aside for presentations on a variety of mission themes, intended for a wider audience.

The spirituality of the conference was shaped by the convictions of the Student Christian Movement with its emphasis on the importance of both private and corporate prayer. "The central act of each day's proceedings will be the mid-day half-hour devoted to intercession," said the Official Handbook of the conference. Those responsible for planning the conference were con-

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<sup>8</sup> Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910*, 12.

<sup>9</sup> Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910*, 72.

vinced “that through this meeting for united prayer the conference could render greater service to the cause of world mission ‘than in any other way.’”<sup>10</sup>

The most significant contribution of the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh 1910 was its impetus to further the unity of the church in its world-wide mission. This had already been expressed as an expectation before the conference began.<sup>11</sup> In a number of ways the Edinburgh conference would contribute to this goal. The most immediate result was the decision to form a continuation committee which would follow up on the issues which were raised during the conference. Even though the conference was designed as a study conference with no mandate to make any decisions, the formation of such a continuation committee was proposed during the conference to the delegates and - after some serious debate - the proposal was accepted unanimously.<sup>12</sup> It would take another eleven years until the International Missionary Council (IMC) was officially formed in 1921. Its goal was to stimulate thinking on missionary questions, and to help coordinate activities in missionary matters. The publication of “The International Review of Mission” and the calling of subsequent world missionary conferences contributed to that goal.<sup>13</sup>

Both, the Edinburgh conference and the IMC focused very much on practical cooperation in mission matters. This was, however, both a strength and a weakness at the same time. The self-imposed limitation not to discuss any differences of doctrine and church order at Edinburgh had allowed Anglicans to participate in the conference. It had helped to focus on immediate and practical matters of cooperation and to concentrate on the discussion of the reports of the eight commissions. However it would turn out later that the negligence to study theological premisses would haunt the missionary movement in the course of its developments in the 20th century. Theological differences finally led to the split between the ecumenical mission movement - exemplified in the World Council of Churches (WCC) - and the evangelical mission movement, represented in such networks as the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) and the Lausanne Movement (LM).

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<sup>10</sup> Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910*, 89. “As it turned out during the first three days of the conference that a number of delegates took the opportunity after the morning deliberations to slip away for an early lunch, the times for corporate intercessory prayer were interspersed in the course of the morning sessions. These times of prayer and silent meditation during in the conference made a great impact on the participants” (see Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910*, 90).

<sup>11</sup> “In a message to the conference King George V had expressed the hope that it would ‘promote unity among Christians’ and Theodore Roosevelt had added an influential American voice on the theme: ‘it is important to remember that a divided Christendom can only imperfectly bear witness to the essential unity of Christianity ... one of the lessons ... particularly impressed upon me by what I have seen of Christian work in Africa’” (Timothy Yates, *Christian Mission in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 29).

<sup>12</sup> The idea to create an international mission committee had already been suggested and debated long before Edinburgh 1910. Recommendations to create such a committee were included in the reports of commissions I, VI and VIII. However in light of differing ideas, the report of commission VIII in its final form, which was published only while the conference was already in progress, suggested the formation of a provisional continuation committee, not a formal international committee. This proposal was then brought up for decision-making and accepted in the course of the conference. It was the only decision taken by the World Missionary Conference, “one of the momentous decisions that make history,” claimed the Missionary Record of the United Free Church of Scotland, “the turning point in the history of the ecumenical movement” Oldham would say in retrospect. Patton underscores that “the significance of this action can hardly be overstated. It makes international the large measure of comity which has existed for years among the American societies, and is big with promise for a general movement looking to the reunion of Christendom” (see Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910*, 281-302; quotes are from p.300).

<sup>13</sup> Kenneth Scott Latourette, “Ecumenical Bearings of the Missionary Movement and the International Missionary Council,” in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517-1948*, ed. Ruth Rouse and Stephen Neill (London: SPCK, 1954), 367.

In addition to the IMC two more streams developed out of the Edinburgh conference. Bishop Charles H. Brent, convinced that the church could not permanently avoid questions of doctrine and church structures, was influential in forming the “Faith and Order” movement, focusing on questions of baptism, eucharist, ordained ministry, the church and concepts of its unity.<sup>14</sup> A third outcome was the formation of the movement “Life and Work,” a platform to discuss matters of the churches’ contributions to peace and justice between the nations.<sup>15</sup> These two movements were merged in 1948 with the formation of the WCC in Amsterdam. The IMC merged with the WCC at the third general assembly of the WCC in New Delhi in 1961.

While these three streams emerging from Edinburgh 1910 form the big picture, there was another prominent result which draws our attention especially here in India, namely the formation of the Church of South India (CSI) in the year 1947. Stanley calls it the “probably most significant aspect of the legacy of Edinburgh 1910.”<sup>16</sup> Deliberations among Indian representatives about the consequences of the Edinburgh conference for the churches in India began on their journey back home. These discussions resulted in the conviction that mere cooperation between churches would not suffice. Stanley reports:

It ... seems that Azariah had persuaded Bishop Whitehead before the end of 1910 that nothing less than organic union would serve the needs of Christian mission in India. The road which led eventually to the formation of the Church of South India in 1947, and of the Church of North India in 1970, began at Edinburgh.<sup>17</sup>

So while Edinburgh 1910 was a conference with a strong British and North-American accent, one of its most prominent outcomes was its effect on the churches in Asia.<sup>18</sup> One person to see the fruit of this almost 40 year long process towards church union in India, the formation of the CSI, was the British missionary Lesslie Newbigin. He was drawn into the deliberations as a young missionary in India and in 1942 was elected as convener of the Union Committee of the Council, called to bring to fruition a process of more than 20 years of deliberations for a scheme of church union which the Wesleyan Methodist Church, the Anglican Church, and the South Indian United Church (SIUC) had been working on.<sup>19</sup> Newbigin later was appointed one of the bishops of the newly formed CSI. In his autobiography he gives a moving account of the inauguration service in Madras.

What struck me over and over again in it was that the two notes which are so often opposed - Catholic and Evangelical - were constantly and completely blended throughout. It is something we have so often talked about as an ideal, and yet here it

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<sup>14</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the Faith and Order movement even though its theme relates directly to the topic of this paper. For an overview see Günther Gassmann, “Faith and Order,” in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, ed. Nicholas Lossky (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991); Ruth Rouse and Stephen Neill, eds., *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517-1948* (London: Published on behalf of the Ecumenical Institute by S.P.C.K., 1954); Harold Edward Fey, ed. *The Ecumenical Advance; a History of the Ecumenical Movement, Volume 2: 1948-1968* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970).

<sup>15</sup> Paul Albrecht, “Life and Work,” in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, ed. Nicholas Lossky (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910*, 310.

<sup>17</sup> Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910*, 310ff.

<sup>18</sup> Churches in China and Japan received a similar stimulus towards greater unity.

<sup>19</sup> The SIUC was itself the result of a union between the Presbyterian and Congregational churches in South India; see J. Russell Chandran, “Church of South India,” in *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity*, ed. Scott Sunquist, John Hiang Chea Chew, and David Chusing Wu (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2001).

was really happening, and they fitted as if they had always been made for each other - as indeed they had. ... [T]he thought uppermost in my mind was: Never again will I say that a thing which I believe is God's will is impossible. Here we were at last, not a scheme of union, or a committee, but one Church really in being, and accepting one another as fellow-members.<sup>20</sup>

Newbigin's emphasis on the importance of the unity of the church in his later writings must be understood against the backdrop of this experience in September 1947 in Madras. He was theologically convinced that unity is of the essence of the church and that it is indispensable for the church in mission. And he had first-hand experience that such unity was possible. We will take a closer look at the theological development of this theme in Newbigin's writings now.

### **THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH IN MISSION - THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS**

The events which led to the formation of the CSI caused Newbigin to occupy himself theologically with the topic of the church, and here especially with the question how the unity of the church correlates with its participation in God's mission. One of the key aspects Newbigin identified is the eschatological dimension of the church's existence, and the relevance of eschatology with regard to the church's unity as well as its mission. Both questions must be understood in light of the eschatological end of God's story with humankind. Newbigin says:

The Church is the pilgrim people of God. It is on the move – hastening to the ends of the earth to beseech all men to be reconciled to God, and hastening to the end of time to meet its Lord who will gather all into one. Therefore the nature of the Church is never to be finally defined in static terms, but only in terms of that to which it is going. It cannot be understood rightly except in a perspective which is at once missionary and eschatological, and only in that perspective can the deadlock of our present ecumenical debate be resolved.... The whole meaning of this present age between Christ's coming and His coming again is that in it the powers of the age to come are at work now to draw all men into one in Christ. When the Church ceases to be one, or ceases to be missionary, it contradicts its own nature. Yet the Church is not to be defined by what it is, but by that End to which it moves.... It is a perspective inseparable from action, and that action must be both in the direction of mission and in that of unity, for these are but two aspects of the one work of the Spirit.<sup>21</sup>

In other words, the Christian church needs to understand itself as a community which is in the middle of an ongoing story. The important question is: How does the eschatological outcome of that story bear on the mission and unity of the church? Let me first concentrate on the relationship between eschatology and mission.

For Newbigin the meaning of the present time is derived from the fact that the kingdom of God has been revealed in the first coming of Christ in the past. Yet at the same time the full revelation of God's reign is still a matter of the future, related to Christ's second coming on

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<sup>20</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda. An Updated Autobiography* (Edinburgh/London/Geneva: Saint Andrew Press/SPCK/WCC, 1993), 91.

<sup>21</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God. Lectures on the Nature of the Church*. (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1998), 22-23. See also Jürgen Schuster, *Christian Mission in Eschatological Perspective. Lesslie Newbigin's Contribution* (Nürnberg/Bonn: VTR/VKW, 2009), 62-79 & 102-154.

earth. The time between these two events is set aside for the proclamation of Christ's lordship. The very reason for the delay of the final outcome of God's story with humankind is that the lordship of Christ be made known to every people.<sup>22</sup> Mission is thus placed in the framework of the bigger context of God's story with humankind with its universal focus: God "wants all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1.Tim 2:4). The universal scope and the eschatological perspective give the church its place in the context of history. The church is called to be part of God's mission in this world. It cannot be understood apart from its participation in the mission of God.

However, the church is not merely an instrument in the mission of God. It is also a fore-taste of the intended outcome of mission. In Christ we are reconciled to God and to each other. Salvation is the restoration of the shalom. Thus the church becomes the first-fruits of the new humankind which God will bring about in the new creation. The eschatological goal of history is anticipated in the community of God's people in the present. Reconciliation takes place in and through the church today. Therefore the church can only bear witness to the gospel in the world if reconciliation is taking shape in its own community. A disunited church is a public contradiction of the gospel.<sup>23</sup>

Newbigin's theological argument is clear and convincing. However, how do we reconcile this theological conviction with the reality of the church in its denominational divisions and its historical splittings? We need to remember the eschatological dimension of the ongoing story. Unity is ultimately God's eschatological gift to the church and to humankind. It is part of Christ's bestowal of salvation: "one Spirit, one Lord, one God and Father, one faith, one hope, one body."<sup>24</sup> The church thus starts out from a unity which is already given to it. And yet this unity is something that will be given in its fullness only in the future consummation. In the present it is anticipated through the work of the Holy Spirit in the church. Unity is thus both, a gift and a challenge to the church. The provisional character of the present must be remembered. Newbigin speaks of the "provisional incorporation of humankind into Jesus Christ."

[T]he Church is the provisional incorporation of humankind into Christ. It is provisional in two senses: in the sense that not all humankind is so incorporated, and in the sense that those who are so incorporated are not yet fully conformed to the image of Christ. So the Church is a provisional body; it looks forward. It is its very nature to look forward, but it looks forward in two ways – and both must be equally stressed – one, to the full formation of Christ in all its members, to the growth of its

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<sup>22</sup> "The meaning of this 'overlap of the ages' in which we live, the time between the coming of Christ and His coming again, is that it is the time given for the witness of the apostolic Church to the ends of the earth. The end of all things, which has been revealed in Christ, is – so to say – held back until witness has been borne to the whole world concerning the judgment and salvation revealed in Christ. The implication of a true eschatological perspective will be missionary obedience, and the eschatology which does not issue in such obedience is a false eschatology" (Newbigin, *The Household of God. Lectures on the Nature of the Church*, 181-182).

<sup>23</sup> "The Church's unity is the sign and the instrument of the salvation which Christ has wrought and whose final fruition is the summing-up of all things in Christ. In so far as the Church is disunited her life is a direct and public contradiction of the Gospel, and she is convicted of substituting some partial or sectional message for the good news of the one final and sufficient atoning act wrought in Christ for the whole human race.... We cannot be Christ's ambassadors, beseeching all men to be reconciled to God, except we ourselves be willing to be reconciled one to another in Him" (Newbigin, *The Household of God. Lectures on the Nature of the Church*, 202-204).

<sup>24</sup> see Ephesians 4:3-6

members in holiness to the stature of Jesus Christ; and two, to the incorporation of all of humanity.<sup>25</sup>

In other words, the church in its present state in history is to grow in two areas. Focusing on the eschatological goal, the church needs to grow in its conformation to the image of Christ, that is in its unity. As the Father is in the Son and the Son is in the Father, the followers of Christ are called to grow into that unity with Father, Son, and Spirit (Jn. 17:20ff). That will become the convincing sign for the world to believe in Jesus Christ. At the same time the church is to carry forward the message of reconciliation into the world. Both, participation in God's mission and growth in unity are part of the church's calling. The eschatological goal continually reminds us that we are yet in the middle of God's ongoing story. It reminds us of the provisional character of the present state of the church in its unity and its mission.

In this eschatological framework Newbigin saw the need for the church to press on with its efforts, both in its participation in God's mission, and in its efforts regarding church unity. When the WCC was founded in 1948, mutual recognition and the affirmation that no church would be obliged to change its ecclesiology as a consequence of membership in the WCC formed the basis for unity and further dialogue.<sup>26</sup> Newbigin, however, saw the need to move beyond this paradigm of mutual recognition, dialogue and collaboration. This could only be a starting point.

The World Council of Churches cannot be permanently uncommitted about the form of unity which God wills for the Church, because it is itself a form of unity. Obviously it is not and does not claim to be more than a transitional form – a campsite on the road towards the real goal. But if those in charge of a campsite do not agree about the road, the campsite becomes a shantytown, and eventually a slum. The question of the nature of the unity we seek is not a timeless question which can be taken up or postponed at our pleasure. There is a time limit after which the options do not remain open. To remain permanently uncommitted about the goal of unity would have meant to accept the present conciliar form of collaboration as the permanent form of Christian unity. And it does not need to be repeated that – by the standard of any reputable ecclesiology – this is the wrong form.<sup>27</sup>

Newbigin was convinced that the church ultimately needs to derive its form and structure from the fact that it is sent into the world. The local church must become the true hermeneutic of the gospel for a specific community. It must model to the world a community of reconciliation. This requires the overcoming of structural and denominational divisions.

Such a unity implies the death of all our denominations as we know them. It implies the surrender of every name, every claim to identity, so that the name of Jesus alone may be on our lips, and so that we may find our identity only in the fact that we belong to him.<sup>28</sup>

Newbigin thus interprets the challenge of church unity consequently in light of the church's missionary calling and refuses to let historical and denominational divisions become a normative

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<sup>25</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *A Word in Season. Perspectives on Christian World Missions* (Edinburgh/Grand Rapids, Mich.: Saint Andrews Press/W.B. Eerdmans, 1994), 53.

<sup>26</sup> see Lesslie Newbigin, "A Fellowship of Churches," *Ecumenical Review* 37, no. (1985), 177.

<sup>27</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, "All in One Place or All of One Sort," *Mid-Stream* 15, (1976), 324.

<sup>28</sup> Newbigin, "All in One Place or All of One Sort," 341.

factor. He is not satisfied in the long run with mere collaboration between independent entities. The goal must be the unity of the church in a particular place, the church understanding itself as the representative of Christ for that community. We need to get our bearings from this goal and undertake specific steps towards that goal as we continue to bear witness to Christ's lordship in and to the world.

This leads me to my final question: What are the implications of the interrelatedness of mission and unity for us today?

## **STEPS FOR PRACTICAL CONSIDERATION**

In the final part of this paper I would like to sketch out a few steps which can guide us in the direction of greater church unity as we participate in God's mission. The goal is to sketch a few practical steps which can be applied to local and regional settings.<sup>29</sup> The underlying epistemological model is that of a hermeneutical community, a community of believers which is committed to one Lord, Jesus Christ, and which is committed to grow in its understanding and its obedience towards this Lord and his word. This shared commitment to Jesus Christ and to the metanarrative of the gospel is the unifying bond. It includes the willingness to have one's own worldview challenged and shaped by the metanarrative of the gospel.<sup>30</sup> The hermeneutical community is the church in both its historical and its global dimensions, which is on its way towards the eschatological goal of God's story. The underlying motif is that of a shared journey, a continuing conversation along the way. It is not a static picture. The challenge is to probe in the course of the journey where we are at the present, how strong the relationship has mutually grown along the way, and which step we are prepared to take next. The question to ask in this process is not how far it is to the eschatological goal of unity. The question to ask is whether we can mutually agree to move one step ahead and what that step would entail. The whole process builds on mutual respect and a willingness to participate in a conversation. What are some of the issues to remember in our conversation as a hermeneutical community on the way?

### **Finding Common Ground**

The epistemological debate brought about by postmodernity has made us aware of the complexity of hermeneutical questions. The traditional hermeneutical approach of positivistic thinking tends to direct our attention towards propositional statements of truth. We express what we believe in precise language in order to better grasp it ourselves and to make our standpoint clear to others. There is no question that we need to reflect upon ideas and concepts and attempt to define them as clearly as possible. However, it seems to me we need to move away from the static nature of this paradigm ("define our standpoint") and focus on the dynamic dimension of being a community which is on the way. The dynamic nature of the motif "community on a journey" will allow us to reflect on our history (where do we and others come from?), on our present standpoint (what do we profess?), as well on the future goal of our journey (where are we headed?). This approach will not blur the distinctions and differences of our theological convic-

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<sup>29</sup> The focus on a grassroots-level is deliberate. A lot is written on ecumenical dialogue on the level of church government. The focus here is on the implications of the theological findings for our immediate sphere of action.

<sup>30</sup> The hermeneutical conviction behind this emphasis on the metanarrative of the gospel is that the hermeneutical key to understanding the person and work of Christ is found in the gospel-story itself. Christ gives us an example when he explains the meaning of his death and resurrection to his disciples by referring to the Scriptures (Lk 24:44ff).

tions. It will better allow us to understand our differences and enable us to find common ground as one community following one Lord.

### **Defining Orthodoxy**

Missiologist Paul Hiebert has shown how critical realist hermeneutics can lead us beyond the dilemma of the conflict between a positivistic and an instrumentalist paradigm.<sup>31</sup> Vanhoozer follows a similar path. He addresses the question what the criteria are for the church to define orthodoxy. Vanhoozer names two principles for the evaluation of truth claims in the hermeneutical community, namely the canonic and the catholic principle. The canonic principle emphasizes the necessity “that our way of following must correspond to the way of Jesus, that our stories must correspond to *his* story.”<sup>32</sup> The “operative term [here] is direction.”<sup>33</sup> Vanhoozer can speak of the necessity of a “vernacular performance” of the gospel. Truth must not only be stated but also staged, lived in the various contexts of the church in the world. Vanhoozer thus combines a focus on the central role of the person of Christ with a dynamic focus on the story character of the gospel. That seems to me very important. The catholic principle on the other hand adds the dimension of the hermeneutical community. Understanding and living truth requires that we approach the task together. We need each other for mutual correction and for sharpening our understanding. On our way towards greater unity in the church we must not set aside the question of truth. However, we need to discover a holistic and communal approach to understanding, expressing, and living truth. Orthodoxy must not be reduced to cognitive understanding and a correct verbal profession of truth. It must include the performance of what we have understood. Christian truth can only be rightly professed in word and deed.

### **Embracing Diversity**

In this communal approach it will be both necessary and possible to embrace diversity in unity. Unity must not be understood as homogeneity. Any attempt of homogenization will rather lead to greater alienation and division.<sup>34</sup> It will also limit the opportunities of the church to connect with people from different ways of life. In light of the diversity and the fragmentary character of present day postmodern life-worlds this would rather be a hindrance for the mission of the church. “Visible unity does not presuppose the disappearance of differences. Our ability to respect each other with our differences and to deal with differences in a brotherly and sisterly way, will be an important contribution to the future of our continent and our world” says Bishop Huber.<sup>35</sup> A critical-realist hermeneutic will recognize the fragmentary character of our own un-

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<sup>31</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1994); and Paul G. Hiebert, *The Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts. Affirming Truth in a Modern/Postmodern World*, Christian Mission and Modern Culture (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1999).

<sup>32</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ““One Rule to Rule Them All?” Theological Method in an Era of World Christianity,” in *Globalizing Theology. Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*, ed. Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 112.

<sup>33</sup> Vanhoozer, “*One Rule to Rule Them All?*,” 124.

<sup>34</sup> “Well-meaning attempts to promote unity between Christians need to be vigilant that the search for reconciliation does not promote homogenization, for it is precisely homogenized religion that, as Sacks correctly diagnoses, carries with it tremendous potential for alienation and human conflict” (Brian Stanley, “Mission and Human Identity in the Light of Edinburgh 2010,” *Mission Studies* 26, no. 1 [2009], 84-85).

<sup>35</sup> “Sichtbare Einheit setzt nicht das Verschwinden von Unterschieden voraus. Unsere Fähigkeit, uns in unserer Unterschiedlichkeit zu respektieren und mit Verschiedenheiten geschwisterlich umzugehen, wird ein besonders wichtiger Beitrag für die Zukunft unseres Kontinents und unsrer Welt sein.” (Wolfgang Huber, “Ökumenische Auf-

derstanding. It will recognize that we depend on each other for correction and deeper understanding. And it will help us to better differentiate between central and peripheral questions, giving each other space, even enriching our own tradition by what we see and learn from others.

This is true not only in a monocultural context but even more so in a multi-ethnic one. The early church had to recognize and learn the meaning and implications of the fact that Christ had torn down the wall between Jews and Gentiles, allowing both of them access to God, making both Jews and Gentiles members in God's family. Andrew Walls speaks of the "Ephesian moment." In the course of church history, however, the church has often developed as a rather homogenous group, comprising people of similar cultural and social backgrounds. Walls alerts us:

But now the Ephesian moment has returned. [...] there are no longer two, but many cultures into which Christ has come by faith. The different converted lifestyles belong together; they are necessary building blocks in the New Temple designed for God's worship. They are all functioning organs in the Body of which Christ is the head. Some of the great tests of Christianity in the new age of the Church will be ecumenical. This is no longer a matter of how different confessions and denominational traditions relate to one another. It is rather how our Lord's prayer that all his disciples may be one can be realized in a Body composed of African and Indian and Chinese and Korean and Hispanic and Caribbean and European and North American Christians.<sup>36</sup>

Walls makes us aware that we today face a unique opportunity and danger at the same time: "It is a development which opens the possibility of realizing the Body of Christ in a truly multicultural Church; or the terrible indictment of failing to do so."<sup>37</sup> Reflecting together on spiritual unity in light of cultural differences can help us to better distinguish between theological and cultural issues and to distinguish between central and peripheral theological questions.

### **Exploring Opportunities for Networking, Shared Prayer, and Unified Witness**

In our considerations we need to remember that a movement towards greater unity among Christians was born out of evangelical awakenings long before the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference. In fact those awakenings in the 19th century gave birth to the Edinburgh conference in the first place.<sup>38</sup> The initiation in 1846 of what was to become the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) in 1951 had been one major step in this direction. Till today the WEA serves as a platform for shared prayer and for unified witness to the world. Since the 1950s "partnership" has become a buzzword among both ecumenical and evangelical mission practitioners.<sup>39</sup> With the formation of a global platform of evangelical missions in Lausanne in 1974 a growing trend of networking and sharing resources among evangelicals was initiated.<sup>40</sup> The focus is very much on collaboration, sharing resources, and strategic thinking towards greater achievements. Without

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gaben am Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts - Nikaen Club des Erzbischofs von Canterbury, Lambeth Palace, London", Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD) [http://www.ekd.de/ausland\\_oekumene/090910\\_huber\\_london.html](http://www.ekd.de/ausland_oekumene/090910_huber_london.html).)

<sup>36</sup> Andrew F. Walls, "The Great Commission 1910-2010," (2002).

<sup>37</sup> Walls, "The Great Commission 1910-2010."

<sup>38</sup> see Rose Dowsett, "Co-Operation and the Promotion of Unity. An Evangelical Perspective," (2007).

<sup>39</sup> see Samuel Kobia, "Co-Operation and the Promotion of Unity. A World Council of Churches Perspective," (2007).

<sup>40</sup> see Michael Pocock, Gailyn Van Rheenen, and Douglas McConnell, eds., *The Changing Face of World Missions. Engaging Contemporary Issues and Trends* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 247-278.

overly criticizing this pragmatic approach, we need to remember that the issue of the unity of the church in mission is based much deeper. It is not merely a question of sharing resources and working together. It is a question of presenting a unified witness to the world. Based on our shared profession of faith in Christ, we search for ways to bring together diverse gifts for a unified witness.

I'd like to illustrate this with a small example, an experience from our local church in a rural area in Germany. During Lent we had organized a short way of the cross. It was set up as a footpath, about 2.5 kilometers around our village with different stations of the cross at the roadside, reminding visitors of the experiences Jesus went through on his way to Calvary and to Easter morning. Each station presented the biblical narrative of the event and illustrated the biblical text with some creative work.<sup>41</sup> Initially this may sound rather like a Roman Catholic idea, however, it met with great response also among the Protestant population in our area. It correlated to a general interest in the idea of pilgrimage which is in vogue in Europe today. What was most important in this project, however, was that it gave our church an opportunity to put this together with two other churches/Christian organizations in our village as one shared project of all the local Protestant Christian communities. Here was not one church, acting on its own. It was a shared witness to the community by all local churches and their members. The project has greatly contributed to building trust between the churches and the local community. People could observe a shared, unified witness. That project did not dissolve theological differences among us as Christian communities. But it became a stepping stone for further conversation among us as churches and for future joint activities for the sake of the community as a whole.

## CONCLUSION

It has been the objective of this paper to look at the interrelatedness of the mission and unity of the church in both a historical and theological perspective. However, the theological impetus does make clear that we cannot be satisfied with being theologically informed. Our theological convictions must lead to practical considerations and obedience. In the final section I have tried to sketch out a few steps we can take in the direction towards exploring and practicing greater unity. The important question in the process is not how far we have come, but if we persist considering possible steps in the right direction. It will be most important that we understand ourselves as a hermeneutical community in which we continue to cultivate the conversation in light of the eschatological outcome of God's story. This ongoing conversation in the church will directly impact the world's perception of our missionary efforts. Only where we are committed to unity in Christ will the world perceive our invitation in mission and evangelism as an invitation to God's people rather than an attempt of proselytism and the expansion of a particular church body. Both, participation in God's mission and unity are of the essence of the church. They give us the direction for our shared journey as followers of one Lord towards the eschatological goal of God's story with his world.

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<sup>41</sup> See: [www.kreuzweg-maisenbach.de](http://www.kreuzweg-maisenbach.de)

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