

Jesus Christ Frees and Unites *

Domingo J. Diel, Jr.

The theme of the Seventh General Convention of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines is "Jesus Christ Frees and Unites," the same theme under which the Fifth General Assembly of the World Council of Churches is meeting this month in Nairobi, in East Africa.

Many of you of course know, that National Councils of Churches and different Christian groups in various parts of the world have been meeting during the past few weeks, preparing for this theme, which will be taken up in Nairobi under six subthemes or sections. Our meeting here, therefore, under the same theme is a participation in a world-wide endeavor among Chris-

tians to understand and define more clearly and concretely the affirmation that "Jesus Christ Frees and Unites".

This theme, which some of us would like to call a Christian affirmation of faith, is significant for situations we have today, where socio-economic and political interests of the different countries tend to divide the world into three or four, and where world views, whether religious or secular tend to enslave man for life. Moreover, this affirmation is significant because the World Council of Churches is affirming it in the midst of a world situation, where each country, region or continent tries to develop its own theology or theological

* Delivered by Dr. Domingo J. Diel, Jr., Acting Dean of the College of Theology, CPU, during the Seventh General Convention of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines, Manila, November 6, 1975.

affirmation. Thus by so doing, the WCC has provided a common foundation for theological discussion on the ecumenical level.

Our theme then can be taken both as an exclusive and inclusive one. It is exclusive in so far as Jesus Christ is the Source or Author of freedom and unity. That from Him and through Him alone one can truly understand and experience what it means to be free and what it means to live reconciled and in unity with God and men. In other words, to affirm that Jesus Christ frees and unites, does not only exclude other claimants from the same role, it also sets the limit of the nature of freedom and unity in the person of Jesus Christ. However, the theme, can also be inclusive in that it does not indicate any particular interpretation of who Jesus Christ is and neither does it define more fully the kind of freedom and unity available in and through him. The reason, it seems, is not because of a limited space on the page, where the theme appears; the reason rather is to provide the different member churches, in national, regional or even continental level, room to interpret and discuss the theme in their own context, so that the delegates of these churches going to Nairobi may have something meaningful to share with and confront each other in the spirit of Christian love. This is one emphasis

of the Nairobi Assembly underlined clearly by the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches. On the other hand, the various working papers and the outline of the Bible studies of the WCC are there not simply to be echoed — I hope not — in the course of this convention, because we are also called upon in this part of the world to confess this “Jesus Christ, who frees and unites,” at a particular moment of our history. And this would probably mean a different confession, not only in form, but also in the extent of the content from that of our African fellow-Christians or of the Christian brethren in Latin America.

There seems to be a hesitance for many of us to describe or explain fully who Jesus Christ is in this particular theme. The reason for this seems to lie on three grounds; 1) The modern biblical criticism on the historical Jesus has led many to ask no longer the question: Who is Jesus? but can we still speak intelligently of Him without being dubbed a narrow biblicist? 2) the member churches of the WCC and perhaps of the NCCP have different views about Jesus Christ that any attempt towards one Christology would mean probably disaster to ecumenism; and 3) Jesus has already a number of biblical titles assigned to Him, yet there are many more names given Him by different interest groups, that to enter into

the whole discussion would simply add to the confusion.

In one or two of the working papers given out in this Convention there are a couple of short paragraphs about Jesus Christ. And because of the nature of these papers, they are formal statements that need still to be discussed and clarified. For example, the claim that Jesus Christ is "supreme and central" — and one wants to ask immediately, in what and for what is He supreme and central? — is a tremendous claim. Or again, in the Bible study series, Jesus Christ has been designated as a liberator; indeed a modern and loaded term that is hardly applied to Him before the sixties. The point is that, the kind of affirmation we make as Christians about Jesus Christ and the way we call or assign Him names, do not only define our theological posture, it also determines more or less the nature of relationship we want with other people, who may have different religious convictions or ideological views. This is important, because, then our affirmation will also determine to what extent one can speak of a wider unity as for example, between Christians and those who do not profess the Christian faith or whether one can speak only of unity within the Christian community. And finally, one should try to understand the concept,

"freedom in Christ" in either one of these contexts.

Let me now pursue a more detailed discussion of the theme under a traditional three-point framework, namely: the Jesus Christ we confess; the freedom he offers and the unity he brings. Or to express it another way: The Christ, we ought to confess, the freedom we need and the unity we hope for.

The Christ we confess or the Christ we ought to confess.

What do we claim or what do we affirm about Jesus Christ in this theme for our particular time in history? Without being unmindful of the references of the Bible study series let me cite two short passages from the fourth Gospel:

"So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (Jn. 8:36).

"and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself" (Jn. 12:32).

1. In both of these lines, whether referred to in the third or first person, Jesus Christ is the Subject, which confirms our previous statement that He is the Source and Author of freedom and unity. It means also that He is the norm of these freedom and unity. The implication would mean that our ideas, plans and programs of action should not only draw inspiration from Him,

but must have a basis on Him. And, they must allow correction and stand always ready for the final reckoning before the Judge of all men, because they will always be found inadequate.

This assertion, namely: that Jesus is the Subject and hence, the Author of freedom and unity, in principle has not been ignored by us Christians, who are concerned for peace and order, justice, brotherhood and unity. However, depending upon one's "spiritual vested interest" — I do not mean this necessarily negative — we come out with different designations of Jesus which seem to have a two-fold purpose: first, to invoke Him as the authority and basis of our plans and actions; and second, to make Him more meaningful to the people of today. Because of this, for the last 15 years or so, there came out various designations of Jesus, like: the "man for others," a "social catalyst," "revolutionary activist," and more recently, "the liberator." In fact, last week it was reported that a book "Christ, the Subversive," by a Spanish priest has been written. Needless to say, the proponents of each of these concepts have their reasons — biblical or otherwise — which cannot be dealt with here. One observation, however, must be made about these different designations: as far as they are being pursued by their exponents, they lack one thing — in-

adequacy. And so because of it, one is made to believe that any one, is the answer to the ills and problems of man and his society. Therefore, programs of action deriving from or connected with it must be undertaken with zeal and by any possible means, so that change characterized by justice and brotherhood can be attained. Corrections, dialogue or even a compromise do not have any place in such a movement. And the concept that has become in the meanwhile an ideology becomes the Gospel and all are enjoined to carry it out in life and in death in the name of Jesus Christ. I must admit I find this type of enthusiasm difficult to accept.

There is an incident in the life of Jesus recorded in St. John's Gospel, Chapter 8:1-11, which may illustrate what has just been said above. One day at the Temple in Jerusalem a group of Scribes and Pharisees brought to Jesus a woman caught in the act of adultery. According to the law of Moses, this woman must be stoned to death. Her accusers brought her to Jesus, not in order to give her a chance to live, but to test the attitude of Jesus towards the Law of Moses. Should Jesus deliver the woman from the grasp of the law, he would be guilty of breaking the law. Should he, however, deliver the woman into the hands of her accusers to be stoned to death as the law says, he

would be sharing the responsibility for the death of the woman. Jesus knew the provision of the law against adultery and he also knew the prohibition in it to shed blood. The outcome is now common knowledge: Jesus challenged the accusers of the woman, who among them did not have any sin; and for the woman, he sent her away, forgiving and telling her not to sin anymore.

Three observations about this incident are in order: firstly, Jesus showed himself as somebody who cannot be subjected to the rigidity of the law, rather, one who remained the Lord not only of the law, but of life; secondly, He showed that sin does not merely manifest itself as an isolated act of a particular person, like the adulterous act of the woman. It has a social dimension to the extent that it affected the religious decency of the accusers, but also to the extent, that these accusers had a share in making a society that produces the sin; and thirdly, Jesus has shown that to be free is not only to be free from the rigidity of the law and from sin, but to be free to live.

2. He is the Author and Subject of freedom and unity. Or as one of the working papers expressed it: He is "supreme and central" in relation to freedom and unity. And yet He was not far above the human categories to the extent that He could

not be understood. In fact, while He went about doing good, i.e., healing, exorcising, teaching and preaching, He was subject to human limitations. It was in His words and deeds when He went about doing good that He had revealed the divine difference.

Consider, for example, how He contrasted the law in some of His sayings; how He demanded from His disciples the "second mile," the "other cheek," the "cloak also," bread in return for a stone, forgiveness without limit, and so forth; and how He argued with the religious leaders of His time against the strict observance of the law at the expense of saving life. These are not merely a collection of superior teachings, neither are they a manifestation of an ideal morality for one to aim at in this world. Rather, they are an expression of the will of God, which Jesus came to reveal in word and deed, even through death on the cross.

This "difference," this "something more," that which is still beyond the best of man and that which is "indisposable" to man, that was shown by Jesus Christ in His words and deeds — it is this, that enables and challenges Christians to live creatively in their own particular time and circumstances, whatever that might be. It is this also that reminds Christians not to be enslaved again by the

machinations of man. St. Paul had reminded the Galatian Christians so: "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1). This leads us to the second point.

The Freedom He offers or the Freedom We Need

It has been pointed out a few times that freedom can be discussed meaningfully only in concrete terms and in relation to specific situations. This is true not only in the secular sphere, but also in theological circles. The implication of this for the latter is, of course, far-reaching if not sometimes too one-sided. This can be illustrated.

The classical analysis of the concept of freedom in the New Testament is usually stated as freedom from the law, from Sin, from the Wrath of God and from Death. Or, if one takes St. John's emphasis: it is freedom from deception, from darkness and from death. It would be doing too much to deal with each one of these here. However, the question being raised today about this matter is: how is sin to be concretized so that one has the concrete enemy before him, whom he can fight and from whom man and society may be freed? This may be a blunt way of putting it, but the intention is clear.

The outcome of this tendency is a positive re-emphasis of the social

dimension of sin. It has pointed out that sin is not only in the individual person, but also in a system, in a structure. In fact, it has gone so far as to identify sin with an "exploitive system" or an "oppressive structure" (see p. 9) and the rich, who are more or less held responsible for all of these are the object of attack. And, as if, to back this up with divine authority, Jesus Christ is drawn to the side of the poor. He is identified with them for He is their Advocate, while consciously or unconsciously, He is made a judge over the rich.

Probably one positive result of all this involvement for and identification with the poor is that something is being done for them and with them. And this is being done never before with determination and zeal. Yet after all has been said and done, it appears that the poor have been made virtuous and the rich anathemized. Moreover, it is not just sin that is to be concretized and made contemporary — if that would make it more meaningful — there are still the enslaving law, deceit, the wrath of God and death itself. From all of these, Jesus Christ has effected and continues to effect man's freedom; and that means, not only for the poor but also for the rich, also for the government and the whole of society.

It is, however, a serious question to consider how and whether such a freedom for all is feasible in the present. It seems not; and because it is not possible to fully realize freedom in Christ in the present, the mission and the program of action of Christians and the Church must be judged regularly by the work and words of Jesus Himself. In the incident about the adulterous woman, Jesus had revealed the solidarity of men with the sin of society, of which adultery was just one manifestation. The Good News is that Christians have been freed from the power of sin, death and the law; and in Christ they live in freedom. The bad news, however, is that they are still in the world, in society and therefore, in unfreedom, whether under an institution or structure and system or group interests or ideologies. This will remain so, for as St. Paul reasons out, "because the creation itself will be set free from bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. . . and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved" (Rom. 8:21, 23).

The Unity He Brings or The Unity We Hope For

When one speaks of unity in the biblical sense, one refers right away

to the unity of all Christians in Christ. This may, however, mean two things to different Christian groups. On the one hand, it means a spiritual unity of all believers under the Lordship of Christ. It is a unity already established by Christ and whose visible manifestation may not really be necessary. On the other hand, there is a unity for which Jesus Christ prayed, for all his disciples so that the world may know their oneness in Him. This is being interpreted as a unity that does not remain on the spiritual realm, but manifests itself visibly in organizational or structural Church union. Of course the non-Christian world knew since long that the Christians claim about what unity is and ought to be as recorded in the Scriptures, is far from what it is as seen being practiced by the Churches. And therefore this unity may be a poor starting point to use for both Christians and non-Christians in their search together for a wider human community. Besides, there is still a more fundamental question whether the non-Christians will accept Jesus Christ as the ground or basis of this unity.

Yet there is a close connection between freedom and unity, between being freed and being united. Whomsoever Jesus Christ has freed, he is reconciled and he, whom He has reconciled, He also has united. The act does not happen in a vacuum but on a personal as well as

social level, so that a person who is freed from the power of sin, is no longer alienated from God but united with Him and his fellowmen. A new kind of relationship has been established between God and man, and between men and men and the rest of creation. The concept, however, is practically associated only with the Christian community, so that any talk of unity must be within this context and any attempt at establishing a community of peace, understanding and common concern should necessarily start from here.

Today this kind of approach is questioned by many Christians. The reason is not because they have denied the validity of the claims of Jesus Christ. It is rather because, the Christians claim to biblical unity does not correspond to their ecclesiastical practice, that it becomes highly unbelievable. But there seems to be a more serious reason, namely: the resurgence of non-Christian religions and the end of a colonial era that undeniably favored and oftentimes supported missionary undertakings, all these laid bare Christianity as a minority religion. This is the naked reality in Asia; and in Western Europe and America, they have been speaking since long of a Post-Christian era. But what has that to do with the Philippines, where Christianity is in the majority? This, that here the

example of a well divided Christianity is magnified and clearly seen. Of course, one is aware of the functional unity among the member-churches of the NCCP and the working cooperation between the major Protestant Churches and the Catholic Church in the country, but that is certainly only a part of the total picture of Christianity here. Therefore, to continue claiming that Christian community or Christianity should be the model or the starting point of building a wider human community or a nation, is to exclude already those who would like the idea but cannot accept Jesus Christ as the basis and those who in fact do not believe on Him. If that happens, then one misses the chance of dialogue and working together with those who may think differently.

Since the question then of unity has some implications for building of a wider community — and not just for the Christians — it seems fair enough to suggest that Christians allow themselves first of all to be addressed by Jesus like He addressed the accusers of the woman caught in adultery. This is not merely a technique to show solidarity with the world, but an affirmation that one is still a part of the problem of society — that would probably minimize if not entirely stop one, acting so often as an accuser or critic of problems of which he is also a

part. From this vantage, Christians can live more creatively, since it is living in freedom and unfreedom, in inadequacy and "something more," in the present and yet in Hope.

The affirmation that Jesus Christ frees and unites gains importance if we indeed confess Him as the Source and Author of freedom and unity which men are seeking for. That would be a witness for which the Church and the individual Christians have been commissioned to carry out in the midst of unfreedom and divisive strifes. We shall be witnesses to this Good News of freedom and reconciliation in so far as we have the initial foretaste of it in the Spirit. And at this particular time of our history, we are called to confess more boldly that only in Jesus Christ can freedom and unity be found.

More significantly, is to declare this "Good News" in the context of our unfreedom and divisions in the society, where we are. This is not a suggestion for solidarity sim-

ply for the sake of it, but to affirm a realization that the Christians can be a part to the solution, after having been a part of the problem itself. But not by claiming that they alone can do it; or they alone of all people in Asia or in the Philippines have the answer to all human bondage and destructive forces. History denies that rightly.

Rather, our contribution towards the solution of unfreedom and disintegration in our society is to preserve and re-affirm that which is "indisposable" to man, that "something more," that "divine difference" which was shown to us by Jesus Christ. This will give our country a proper perspective and a direction for the present and a hope for the future. It may be that in the process of a search for a wider community of peace and justice for Christians, Muslims, Chinese and other minorities, the Lord, will show mercy upon us and heal our own ecclesiastical unfreedom and disunity.

Amen!

□