

ARTICLES

The Evangelical and COCU

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Not all Christians in the “Evangelical Wing” of Christendom are agreed concerning the ecumenical movement. Some evangelical Christians regard the movement generally as a cage of unclean birds, and they feel that any attempt at “dialogue” with more liberal Christians is a basic compromise. They regard denominationalism as the will of God and are not greatly bothered by the divided state of the Church.

However, there are other Evangelical Christians who seek to relate positively to the ecumenical movement. They understand the Bible to teach that the Church is not a human organization, but a divine organism. Therefore, one cannot choose his Christian brother. All persons “in Christ” are united into a single body. These Evangelicals feel that the divided state of the Church does not reflect its true nature, and the failure of Christians to demonstrate visible unity is inimical to mission and witness. They take seriously what they feel to be their ecumenical responsibility, and they do not pretend to have easy answers to all the issues.

Evangelical Christians who are seeking to be constructive in their relationship to the ecumenical movement face the particularly knotty problem of COCU. Indeed, the Consultation of Church Union (COCU) is perhaps the most perplexing ecumenical problem facing the conciliar movement generally, and evangelical ecumenists particularly.

There are two reasons why COCU is an especially perplexing problem for ecumenically-minded Evangelicals. (1) They are basically committed to the “ecumenical ideal,” and they want to approach other Christians in an irenic manner. However, they have mixed emotions because their understanding of the ecumenical ideal and the form being taken by COCU cannot be equated in their minds. (2) The hasty preparations which COCU has made for itself cause most Evangelicals to wish for a more lengthy and well-built runway before liftoff is attempted.

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Many evangelical Christians, therefore, feel frustrated as they seek to relate to COCU. This is of course especially true of those who find themselves within denominations which are actively engaged in COCU talks. They see many excellent ecumenical insights woven into the structures of COCU, and they rejoice that serious discussions in COCU have been fruitful in several areas.

This is as it should be. More than a half century of ecumenical experience has been available for COCU to draw upon. And valuable lessons learned in this history have informed some concerning the developments in COCU. Especially encouraging to Evangelicals are the COCU “intentions” for the continuing life of the united church. Some of the important ones follow.

First, it is gratifying to evangelicals to note that COCU seeks to respect and enhance the deeply personal character of the Christian faith. COCU insists that only by costly individual choice can persons yield full loyalty to Christ. Personal commitment is emphasized at least in the documents.

Second, an attempt is being made by COCU to restore and renew the full scriptural sense of the terms “membership” and “member.” The pledge of commitment to Christ is not seen as an easy or minimal step. Church membership involves total self-surrender and unconditional commitment to the vocation of the church in the world. Conceptions of membership which derive from secular organizations are resisted in the interest of discipleship and renewal. Again, this is “theory,” but it is very good theory. Evangelicals concur in this emphasis.

Third, COCU recognizes that the church is a steward and trustee of the truth of the gospel. Each member of the United Church is to be taught the meaning of Christian faith and helped to put that faith to work. These and a number of other commendable features of COCU planning are welcomed with appreciation by Evangelicals.

Yet there are some fundamental issues which Evangelicals feel need to be raised and resolved before they would want to give an endorsement to the total package. They want to be able to raise these issues from the posture of “loyal opposition.” They would hope that their concerns would be taken seriously, and not written off as “reactionary” by COCU zealots.

At the time of this writing most Evangelicals, if faced with a “yes” or “no” decision with respect to COCU consummation, probably would vote “no.” There are several reasons for this position. I can be most authentic if I list these reasons from my own perspective of one who happens to find his home in the United Methodist tradition. There are others, whose communions are involved in COCU discussion, whose perspective is from the Reformed—Congregational tradition. But from my own vantage point I see the principal objections to COCU to be the following.

THE MINISTRY

There is no satisfactory reconciliation of the problem of the ordained ministry. Essentially COCU (in deference to the Protestant Episcopal Church) embraces the "historic episcopacy" and its concomitant, "apostolic succession." In the proposed service of union there would be a corporate act of laying on of hands in which and through which all would ask God "to complete and perfect what is amiss or incomplete in our ministries and to give us whatever of his authority and grace we need" In ordination of new ministers this "orderly transfer of ministerial authority and function helps guard the continuity of the Church's faith expressed in word and sacrament." This is essentially the doctrine of apostolic succession, which has no foundation in the New Testament. It is mechanical, and it regards other ministries as either incomplete or invalid. In a day of the growing awareness of the laity as having a "ministry" this is a movement backwards toward an unfortunate development in the medieval church. I am not arguing that there should be no ordained ministry—I think there is definite warrant for this! But, like all other gifts, the ministry is *sola gratia*, and grace may not be restricted to institutions.

Moreover, the place of the bishop seems unclear. An episcopacy should be functional if it is to be practical. This does not seem to be the case in the present COCU plan. COCU would leave us with some 1,800 bishops and make that office about equal to what United Methodists call a District Superintendent. This would be expensive and serve only to confuse the nature of the episcopal office. This proliferation of bishops is not consistent with COCU's rejection of a "sent" ministry in favor of a "called" ministry. This is almost a complete movement to congregationalism. One can fairly ask whether this would not discourage "prophetic preaching." Moreover, in this scheme the collective wisdom of the total church structure is easily short-circuited by any wealthy congregation.

SOURCES OF AUTHORITY

COCU documents reflect a weakness, or at least an ambiguity, at the point of the relationship of the Bible and tradition. The recognition that various communions have their fair share of insights to contribute to the Church catholic is a good point. Failure to apprehend this basic insight is at the root of much of institutional sectarianism, theological smugness, lack of charity, and actual doctrinal mutations which border on heresy. Many Evangelicals welcome the presense of an openness to truth from other traditions.

However, COCU at times seems to blur the distinction between men's traditions and the gospel tradition. There is a tendency in COCU to fail to see that frequently the Bible is at odds with tradition. Indeed, often the Bible pronounces judgment upon the traditions of men. Evangelicals

are not sure what interpretation is put on such statements as, "Certainly it is the case that in the Church, Scripture and Tradition are bound together."

Evangelicals are committed to the "Protestant principle" of *ecclesia semper reformanda* (the Church always reforming). And the basis for continual reformation within the Church must be the Bible. From time to time all traditions of men need testing by the Scripture. This is a crucial emphasis for Evangelicals. They wish for clarification at this point. The fundamental source of authority must be Christ alone as revealed in the Canonical Scriptures. *Sola Scripture, Solus Christus!*

GRASS ROOTS AGREEMENT

The collective witness of all the constituent parts of the participating denominations does not seem to be adequately considered. Time has been too short and the delegations have been too small for a satisfying blending of traditions. If COCU were to be consummated at this time, my fear is that it might create more disunity, schism, and division than it would heal. There is a moving of the wind to be sure. But there is no common agreement at this time as to just what direction the wind is taking. Certainly we cannot direct how the Spirit may move—He moves where He wills. More grass roots participation and agreement is needed before we are ready for a united church. A living and vital blend is not yet an achievement of COCU.

COCU is top heavy, savoring of bureaucracy. It seems to have come down from the top rather than grown up organically from the churches and the people. United Methodists, for example, are still working out many adjustments regarding the recent merger of The Methodist Church and The Evangelical United Brethren Church. They have not yet had time adequately to think about further mergers.

Christians today are more open to trans-denominational cooperation than ever before in history. It would be a tragedy to frustrate this movement of the Spirit. If a flower is opening to the sunlight, one ought not to rush in with a tool to aid the process of nature. It is not yet clear to many Evangelicals just where the Holy Spirit is leading in matters ecumenical. In times like these we need midwives, not engineers.

Many Evangelicals feel frustrated that their ecumenical integrity is rated on the basis of lack of hesitation to move ahead as fast as possible. History may yet prove that the cautious ecumenist is the best ecumenist. One simply cannot become preoccupied with structural union in the face of a gigantic need for renewal. Renewal is more likely to bring union than is union likely to bring renewal. Renewal of the Church must take priority.

At this stage some participating churches would likely be victimized. As a United Methodist, I feel that my tradition of theology, church polity, and ethical ethos has not been satisfactorily represented. Certainly no one

truly committed to ecumenicity at its best wants a lowest common denominator. One leader in COCU has admitted: “Some theologian-participants have expressed private fears that COCU might become an umbrella organization for an interlocking directorate of various power figures within the denominational—conciliar establishment.”

These observations are not intended to reflect upon any one’s motives or sincerity. But they do indicate the opinions of one who is committed to the healing of the divisions in Christ’s body, but who wants the healing to take place in a manner which would most perfectly reflect the will of the head of the body, Jesus Christ.