

An Evangelical Approach to Ecumenicity

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Divisions and sects in Protestantism have given way in the twentieth century to ecumenicalism—a drive for confederate union of denominations. This drive for reunion challenges Christians to dialogue. The problem of what is to be the basis of dialogue is important. The evangelical knows by Scripture and experience that spiritual unity in the organism of Christ's body, the Church, is a present reality for him. He is sure that organizational union is useless unless it is based upon the rock of Scripture and a vital experience of the new birth. The call for him to engage in dialogue with liberals and neo-orthodox Christians raises several questions which must be considered carefully and answered fully in any dialogue.

MESSAGE AND ECUMENICITY

Because creed and conduct, belief and action, and faith and work cannot be separated, the evangelical raises the question as to the nature of the message of any organization that might be created. Service and doctrine must be associated.

The question of the foundation of the message of the church is paramount. Some Christians feel that the church is to be the foundation and the interpreter of the Bible and tradition. We must bear in mind that the order is from absolute doctrine in the Bible to a relative interpretation in the light of history and grammar. Individuals may derive systematic theology from Bible doctrine, and groups may then make theology into dogma. Paschasius Radbertus asserted the physical presence of Christ in the communion, and Innocent III in the Lateran Council of 1215 raised it to the level of dogma that must be accepted by the faithful.

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However, this writer believes that neither the church nor inner light must be the foundation. Mystics, many Quakers, and, to some extent, the neo-orthodox have made immediate knowledge of God normative—but as a foundation it is just as inadequate as reason is. If reason is the foundation, one might ask whose reason is to be the final authority.

Only the Bible, an objective historical revelation of the will of God, can be the foundation of our message. Because the Early Church, before the writing of the New Testament, desired to relate its foundation of authority to God, it emphasized apostolic succession to guarantee the order of the message from God to Christ, to the Apostles, bishops, and elders. This led to the rise of bishops as emphasized in the letters of Ignatius. After the books and canons of Scripture were completed, ordered succession was not so important, because the believer, guided by the Holy Spirit and using grammar and history, could interpret the Bible for himself. This principle was asserted by Wycliffe in the fourteenth century and to effect it he gave the English people the Bible in their own language.

Luther made the Bible rather than the church the foundation of his message. *Sola Scriptura* was the battle cry of the Reformation. Reference to the Scripture as foundational in I Corinthians 15:4-5, Acts 17:2-3, and II Timothy 3:15-17 would indicate that Luther was of the same opinion as Paul. The Bible *is*, and does not merely contain or become, the Word of God. Upon this foundation alone can the evangelical even consider serious ecumenical dialogue.

If the Bible is the foundation of the message, then the question of the faith or creed that contains the message is worthy of consideration. Creeds have been important all through the history of the church. Irenaeus drew up a rule of faith based upon the Bible to meet the challenge of the Gnostics. Between A.D. 325 and 451, universal creeds such as the Nicæan and Athanasian creeds were formulated to express the faith of the church so far as content was concerned. These creeds cleared up the questions of the relation of the prehistoric Christ to the Father and the relation between His divine and human natures in His personality. It seems strange that the ecumenical drive has in so many instances ignored these creeds as a fundamental basis for union because Roman Catholics, Protestants and the Orthodox all accept them!

During the Reformation the second creedal era of the church occurred as several Protestant creeds such as the Thirty-Nine Articles, the Westminster Confession and the Augsburg Confession appeared. Protestants were even willing to talk about cooperation with the Roman Catholic Church on the basis of such creeds, but instead were driven out.

During the nineteenth century, the Evangelical Alliance of 1846 in England and 1867 in the United States brought Christians

into association on the basis of a creed or statement of faith. Both in this country and England, evangelicals of various groups united in social reform based upon the faith and the experience of salvation, both of which came from the Scriptures as foundation.

During the present century, many leaders have abandoned creedal formulations based upon the Scriptures in favor of an organization for service. It should be borne in mind that the liberal Christians broke with an ecumenicalism based upon the Bible and a creed, and not the evangelical Christians. The evangelical must not forget that the Early Church "continued in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship" (Acts 2:42) and held "truth in love" and thus upheld "the unity of the faith" (Eph. 4:15, 13). The faith of the Bible must be the message and the only basis for discussion.

MISSION AND ECUMENICITY

The evangelical insists upon a clear-cut understanding of the message of a united church when it becomes clear that union in mission does not always lead to effective work. Witness to Christ as Savior and Lord is the most basic element in the message of the church. This is evident from Jesus' command in Matthew 28:18-20, from John's statement in I John 3:23-24, and Luke's summary of Paul's message in Acts 17:2-3. This witness has been the emphasis through the history of the church in the work of such men as Patrick, Columba, Boniface, Carey and evangelical missionaries during the great nineteenth century of missions. *Sola fide* or justification by faith only was a key part of the message of Zwingli, Calvin, Knox and Menno Simons, as well as Luther.

Christ's primary command to His church was to witness to Him as Savior. The preaching of Christ as Savior from sin, by virtue of His work on the cross, which men accept by faith, must be an integral and primary part of the mission of the church.

Service to others which grows out of love to Christ is also a part of the mission of the church. Paul tells us that we are "created in Christ Jesus unto good works" (Eph. 2:10) and urges Titus (3:8) to tell believers to "maintain good works." Faith in Christ will always lead to love for others, which in turn will be expressed in loving service. The Gentile church at Antioch willingly gave to help the famine stricken church in Jerusalem.

Both in this country and England, evangelicals working with each other and with other interested citizens were the ones who engaged in successful social reform, ending slavery in British possessions and bringing a better life for common laborers, the insane and the needy. The Social Gospel movement failed because, with its Pelagian bent, it thought of sin primarily as a matter of a bad

environment which could be changed by social action. Its proponents failed fully to realize that a bad environment is as much a result of sin as a cause of sin. The evangelical insists that service flows from a regenerate life which will have an impact upon the surrounding social order. Paul in Galatians 6:10 suggests that the order of service is to those in need in the church and then to all men.

Fellowship is another part of the mission of the church as Luke suggests in Acts 2:42, but it must be related to Christ and to true doctrine. Paul even urges separation from those with false doctrine (Rom. 16:17) which might destroy the true unity of the church. All through the history of the church, fidelity to the message of the Bible has brought unwilling separation because the loveless, indifferent majority neglected some important part of the message and mission of the church.

It is interesting to note that 7,000 young people of many denominations had no trouble joining in a great communion service at Urbana, Illinois, in December, 1964, because of their common faith in Christ as Savior. Fellowship among those linked by a faith in Christ as Savior has always transcended race, rank and sex.

Love is another part of the mission of the church (I John 3:23). According to the historian Gibbon, one of the important reasons for the triumph of the church in the Roman empire was the mutual love of Christians. To the evangelical the only acceptable ecumenical position will be that truth must be held in a dynamic tension with love.

Unity, held for final consideration, will be useless if the previous parts of the mission of the church are ignored. It is another result of faith in Christ, who is the message of the Bible. We are to hold the "unity of the faith," but such a unity is the result of allegiance to a common Savior and His message as developed in the Scriptures. The church enjoys unity in the organismic body of Christ but should make this unity practical in visible organization insofar as organization does not become an end in itself or obscure the message and mission of the church. The elements of mission as set forth above are essential in any "dialogue."

MOTIVATION AND ECUMENICITY

What is to motivate unity and union? Is it action by sit-ins, or recognition of Red China, or the building of an institutional bureaucracy? Is it a vague universalism that holds that all men are saved in Christ and need only be told that they are saved? Will this ever be an effective ecclesiastical cement? Hardly!

With Luther and Paul we must insist that *sola fide*, or the principle that one is justified by faith only, is an effective motivation

to cooperation with one's fellows. Life does not come via a corporate body but only by a personal relationship to Christ as the Savior. This is the emphasis in John 17:2-3, 11, 20-22. Unity is based upon the new birth. Paul claims in I Corinthians 3:11 that Christ is the only foundation upon which good works and unity can be built. Ecumenicalism must come to grips with the question of a vital relationship with Christ if it is to be more than a mere organizational expression.

The Holy Spirit, as suggested by Paul in I Corinthians 12:13, is the dynamic of unity in the body of Christ. One notices that the work of the Holy Spirit in the Great Awakening linked Christians of different denominations in cooperative endeavor. The second Awakening led Congregationalists and Presbyterians to the Plan of Union which advanced the cause of Christ on the American frontier. The American Bible Society, the Tract Society and the American Sunday School Union were all a result of the activity of the Holy Spirit in revival. We do not create union; it can only be an expression of the unity which already exists by a common faith in Christ and by the work of the Holy Spirit. Such motivation is a fundamental prerequisite to union that is effective.

Even though unity is spiritual, man needs organization to realize spiritual unity in visible union. What possible types of organizational machinery might be used to achieve this objective?

MACHINERY AND ECUMENICITY

During the nineteenth century interdenominational cooperation in such organizations as the Student Volunteer Movement, Christian Endeavor, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, the Temperance Society, and the American Bible Society were visible expressions of spiritual unity. In the twentieth century much cooperation has continued in the American Bible Society, Youth for Christ International, Campus Crusade and Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, to name only a few groups. This type of expression of spiritual unity might be explored more fully as a way station on the road to union of Christians.

Organic reunion of denominations has been another avenue to union. The separate groups, after union, cease to exist and become a part of a constituent union. A large number of organic reunions have occurred in the present century. Such reunions can be acceptable if they do not involve reunion on a least common theological denominator.

Thus far the broadest expression of spiritual unity in organizational union has been the formation of confederate organizations in which the cooperating groups remain sovereign entities working

together in a council or association for common ends. Many evangelicals, realizing the value of confederate union, joined in the National Association of Evangelicals in 1943. Unlike the Federal Council, now the National Council, they adopted a creedal basis for such association.

Confederate fellowship seems to be the most promising way to cooperation of Christians and the visible expression of unity, but evangelicals must be alert to dangers in such a movement, one of the primary dangers being its degeneracy into institutionalism and bureaucracy, as in the medieval church. Organization must always be a means and not an end. Union even in association in the United States should not endanger separation of church and state and freedom of conscience.

The church as an organization should proclaim basic scriptural principles in various issues and nourish a strong spiritual life, but the members as citizens act apart from the church to effect social change that is desirable. Organization may tempt leaders to use economic or other pressures to gain desired ends. This has already happened in some mission fields. There is also the temptation to make the organization into a super-church. If this occurs, then we may tend to have a Protestant dictatorship or oligarchy.

Thus we have seen that any "dialogue" must come to terms with the message, mission, motivation and machinery to express spiritual unity in organizational union. Evangelicals, if they remain true to the basic principles which they have developed as outlined above, can have a strategic role in Christendom, and under God may spark revival that is sorely needed. They will cooperate in areas of common interest, such as separation of church and state, but will remain true to their basic principles. For them Christ is the only foundation.