

God's "Ecumenical Movement"

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Introduction

For perhaps hundreds of years, the masses of Christendom and its leaders have lauded religious diversity. Most of us have been present where prayers of thanksgiving were offered for the multiplicity of churches. This attitude has experienced a far-reaching decline in the decades since 1960.

During the 1960s several remarkable developments took place. Perhaps the keynote was the visit of the Archbishop of Canterbury with the Roman Pontiff for the first time since the Reformation period. In 1960, Dr. Eugene Carson Blake issued his now famous proposal of merger of the Episcopal, Presbyterian, Methodist, and United Church of Christ bodies. The latter group was a result of an earlier merger of the Evangelical Reformed and Congregational Christian Church groups. Other mergers accomplished in 1960 included that of the Danish, Norwegian, and German Lutherans into the American Lutheran Church, and Protestantism's most liberal bodies, the Unitarians, and Universalists. To climax that eventful year, the National Council of Churches echoed the theme of ecumenism in its assembly at San Francisco. In 1961 the 29 different Baptist groups, involving some 20 million members made an attempt to arrive at some basis of unity. During 1962 the attention of the entire world was focused upon the Ecumenical Council in Rome. It broke all precedent in inviting delegates from practically every segment of Protestantism. Finally, in February 1963, tentative plans were announced for a merger of the Anglican and Methodist churches. These major developments should be enough to support the thesis advanced earlier—ecumenism was in the air.

Why This Interest?

But why is it thus? Why the sudden shift to an apparently opposite position by so many preachers and churches? Several have stated their reasons. Dr. Blake, Stated Clerk, United Presbyterian Church of the USA, whose merger proposal was mentioned above, answered thus: "Americans more than ever see the churches of Jesus Christ as competing social groups pulling and hauling, propagandizing and pressuring for their own organizational advantages." The NCC declared in its assembly of 1960, "A divided church cannot proclaim convincingly a gospel of reconciling love." It called denominational barriers a sin. Further, its principal address

stated, "We cannot expect those outside the church to recognize his Lordship if the church in which obedience ought to be total and complete withholds such obedience with respect to unity."

Another answer was given in 1960 by Geoffery Bromiley, Professor of Church History and Historical Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary. He said, "There must be no antinomian acquiescence in divided or competitive Christian bodies. To this extent, it is right and necessary that there should be an active pursuit of practical unity..." These are all good answers, but we aver they have not yet given the essential reason. Oscar Cullman, Professor of New Testament at the Sorbonne, Paris, strikes at the heart of the matter as he says: "What does the New Testament say about the unity of the church? If we ask the question from this point of view, then it is clear that we cannot be satisfied with the radical division of the church in the present day." With this challenge before us, let us accept it and see what the New Testament says.

The Prayer of Jesus

Jesus said, "Every kingdom, divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand" (Mat. 12:25). The most complete teaching of the Lord on the subject of unity among His followers is in the emotion-charged words of His prayer in John 17. In verse 11, He first prayed for His apostles: "Holy Father, keep, them in thy name which thou hast given me, that they may be one, even, as we are." A few weeks later He sent them all out under the same commission and the book of Acts as well as the epistles bear out the fact that they were truly one in spirit and doctrine.

But this same plea for oneness inheres to all followers of the Lord. John 17:20-23 reads in part:

Neither for these only do I pray, but for them also that believe on me through their word; that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may, be in us: that the world may believe that thou didst send. Me...Even as we are one; I in them, and thou in me, that they may be perfected into one

This part of Jesus' prayer principally applied to those who – either in that day or subsequently – would hear, believe, and obey the Gospel through apostolic preaching, whether with tongue or pen. Thus it applies to the church Jesus built or the kingdom over which he reigns (Mat. 16:18-19).

However, we do no wrong to observe some general principles that apply to the current denominational circumstances:

1. Men who thank God for religious division are thanking God for not answering the prayer of His only Son.
2. Unity attracts; conversely, division repels. Many missionaries have confessed that the greatest obstacle to the heathen mind is the dissension in Christendom. The world cannot believe God sent Christ as long as division prevails.
3. There is great strength in unity; likewise, great weakness in division. Why did the first century church prevail so mightily? Answer what you will, but one reason is that "...the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and one soul" (Acts 4:32).
4. Christ prayed for a **true oneness**, not merely a superficial, imaginary one.

A loose federation or council that allows professed believers in Christ to remain divided does not meet the terms of Christ's will as here stated. Note: "...that they may all be one even as thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us," and "... that they may be perfected into one..." (John 17:21-22). There, can be no doubt about Jesus' will in this matter.

The Plea of Paul

Parallel to Jesus' prayer is Paul's inspired and emotional plea:

Now I beseech you, brethren, through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that ye all speak the same thing and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfected together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it hath been signified unto me concerning you, my brethren, by them that are of the household of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. Now this I mean, that each one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? was Paul, crucified for you? or were ye baptized into the name of Paul? (1 Corinthians 1:10-18).

Please observe:

1. The striking harmony with Jesus' prayer, especially the use of *perfected* by both to describe the degree of oneness desired.
2. This plea was issued upon the authority of Christ Himself, so Paul was truly echoing Christ's will.
3. They were to all speak the same thing. We understand this to mean that they were to be one doctrinally, possible only if they abode in the doctrine of Christ (2 John 9).
4. This was not a true case of denominationalism as it is known today, for they were apparently still meeting in one assembly. But if denominationalism "in embryo" were thus condemned by the Spirit, what must He think of the full-grown "man"?
5. The most obvious trait of the division at Corinth was the wearing of sectarian, human names, which is condemned unequivocally by the Spirit. Only four names are involved here; what must the Lord think of thousands of them?
6. Three rhetorical questions are inserted to clinch the point as the carpenter does the nail.

Christ is obviously not divided. How, then can those who truly follow Him be? Though Paul

suffered much for the Lord, he did not atone for the sins of man. And although Paul was endowed with great authority in the early church, it was a delegated authority by which he commanded baptism.

7. Religious division will always result when a religious leader is equated with or elevated above the Son of God.

One cannot possibly defend religious division without being ignorant of both the prayer of Christ and the plea of Paul. Having seen that unity in Christ is demanded by Scripture, it is time to consider some plans and proposals aimed at this end.

The Plans of Men

The various thrusts in the direction of unity have all demonstrated their problems and resulted in their plans. One of the most famous was the Lambeth-Quadrilateral issued in 1888 by the Anglicans. It demanded recognition of:

1. "The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as containing all things necessary to salvation, and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith."
2. "The Apostles Creed, as the Baptismal Symbol; and the Nicene Creed as the sufficient statement of the Christian Faith."
3. The two sacraments ordained by Christ Himself – Baptism and the Supper of the Lord..."
4. The Historic Episcopate...

The proposal of Dr, Blake, referred to earlier, likewise called for four main things:

1. Apostolic Succession of Bishops.
2. Confessional belief in the Trinity.
3. The two Sacraments.
4. Equal powers to ministers and laymen in church government.

On December 25, 1793, James O'Kelley withdrew with a group from the Methodist Episcopal Church at Manakintown, Virginia. The next August this group drew up the "Five Cardinal Principles of the Christian Church."

1. Christ is the only head of the church.
2. The name *Christian* is the only acceptable name.
3. Christian character is the only test of church fellowship.
4. The Bible is the only rule of faith.
5. The right of private judgment is the privilege of all.

Under the leadership of Barton W. Stone, a man who had earlier severed relations with the Kentucky Synod of the Presbyterian Church, the Springfield Presbytery was formed in 1804.

It died a “natural death” on June 28, 1804, with the publication of “The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery.” In summary, it calls for:

1. The end of the Springfield Presbytery.
2. No further use of the title *Reverend*.
3. No man-made laws for church government.
4. Preachers were to be licensed by God.
5. Internal government of the church.
6. Each church to choose its own preacher.
7. The Bible to be taken as the only sure guide to Heaven.

Finally, we consider “The Declaration and Address” issued by Thomas Campbell on September 7, 1809, near Washington, Pennsylvania. Its thirteen points are largely summarized in the twelfth which states:

That all that is necessary to the highest state of perfection and purity of the church upon the earth is first that none be received as members but such as having that due measure of Scriptural self-knowledge described above, do profess their faith in the Scriptures; nor secondly, that any be retained in her communion longer than they continue to manifest the reality of their profession by their temper and conduct. Thirdly, that her ministers, duly and scripturally qualified, inculcate none other things than those very articles of faith and holiness expressly revealed and enjoined in the word of God. Lastly, that in all their administrations, they keep close by the observance of all Divine ordinances, after the example of the primitive Church, exhibited in the New Testament, without any additions whatsoever of human opinions or inventions of men.

This is in no way an attempt to exhaust the list of such proposals but is merely an effort to mention some representative ones for contrast and comparison. These have all met with varying degrees of success and failure. We suggest that the simplest, most obvious plan of all has been overlooked or ignored by the bulk of Christendom.

God’s Platform for “Ecumenism”

God’s “platform” for Ecumenism is 2000 years old, yet is ever standing ready to be applied and accepted. We read it in Ephesians 4:3–6:

... giving diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as also ye were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all.

There are seven “planks” in God’s “platform” – four that are generally accepted and three around which most religious controversy revolves. Notice that Paul says these are the terms upon which we are to “keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

The first article of general agreement is that there is but one Holy Spirit. We know of no exceptions. Second, all have one common hope, that of Heaven. Next, with but few exceptions, all segments of Christendom believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ. And finally, all professed believers in Christ claim one spiritual, heavenly Father. At this point, it appears remarkable that there can be so much agreement, but at the same time, such radical disagreement regarding the seven terms of this text. Have we ever considered that if agreement can be reached universally on four of these points, then it is equally possible to reach amity on the remaining three?

May we question upon what basis unity has generally prevailed on the four things considered above? The only answer is that there is agreement with the written Word on them. Do we conclude falsely when we suggest that if all agree with the Word on the remaining three that the same oneness will exist? We see no alternative to this conclusion. Simple, yet sublime.

A brief notice of the three subjects of dissension is now in order. "**There is one body**," is the first. The Scripture student knows that the body is the church (Eph. 1:23; Col. 1:18, et al.). Every student of Scripture also knows that only one church existed in the first century. Until men discard the worn out, absurd, and erroneous cliché, "one church is as good as another," and seriously seek to be the church of Christ found in Scripture, no unity, acceptable to God can prevail.

The second statement calls for "**one faith**." Paul is not referring here to our intellectual acceptance of certain facts. Rather, he is using the term in the broad, objective sense to encompass all of the Gospel system. Jude 3 uses the term this way, as does Acts 6:7, where the priests were obedient to "the faith." Until the mass of preachers and people grow tired of preaching and hearing so much opinion and again become concerned with preaching and hearing the Gospel, God's "ecumenical movement" is unattainable. Until that time, religious people who hear a cacophony of different "gospels" preached in their respective churches cannot be of "one faith."

The third, "**one baptism**," is surely among the greatest points of religious controversy. However, the New Testament leaves no room as to either the element, the purpose, or the action of this command of the Lord. Such Scriptures as Mark 16:15, Acts 2:38, 22:16, 1 Corinthians 12:13, Galatians 3:27, and 1 Peter 3:21 show beyond doubt to those truly interested in and devoted to the teaching of Scripture that baptism is the final act of obedience between the sinner and salvation and membership in the New Testament church. The so called "mode of

baptism," itself a contradictory statement, is established in two ways.

1. The Spirit chose the word "*baptidzo*" (instead of "*rantidzo*" or "*cheo*") in its several forms. Those who believe in the verbal inspiration of the New Testament cannot think that the Holy Spirit did nonchalantly or without purpose. If "*baptidzo*" were translated, would it be *sprinkling, pouring, or immersion*? One may as well speak of the "mode of immersion" as the "mode of baptism."
2. The Spirit described the action and the element in such places as Acts 8:38-39, Romans 6:3-4, and Colossians 2:12, so there could be no doubt.

Men fail to abide by the declaration that there is "one baptism" when they teach a diversity of elements, purposes, or actions. Why will not all preachers tell dying men and women what the New Testament says on this subject? Why must it be explained away? If all would abide by the teaching of the Scriptures on baptism, there would be unity on this point. It is surely possible to reach unity on this point or the Spirit would not have enjoined such upon us.

Conclusion

There will never be a lasting unity effected as long as men owe more allegiance to a human being, a human doctrine, or a document written by men than they do to the inspired Word. Every day men continue to make void the Word of God by their traditions (Mat. 15:6). When men and women involved with the ecumenical ideal are willing to believe in the all-sufficiency of the Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:3) apart from any creedal statement or rule of man, then the road to true ecumenism/unity lies clearly ahead. This indeed will be **God's "Ecumenical Movement."**

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