

CAN THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT SUCCEED?

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on June 7, 1964 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

In our day we are hearing the word "ecumenical" more and more often. We hear it used in conversation and see it in print more than ever before. What does it mean? Literally, it means "general; or world-wide in extent, influence, etc. Religiously, it means "the expanding movement to foster Christian unity by agreement on common religious faith and practice." It is an effort to achieve Christian unity.

The need for unity is obvious when we pause to realize that the religious world of our day is divided into 256 different churches in the United States alone. Beyond our American borders there are 430 million Mohammedans, 332 million Hindus, 300 million Confucianists, 151 million Buddhists, and millions of others who fall into countless smaller groups. There are still hundreds of millions more who, partly at least because of the divided state of Christendom, must be classified as Atheists.

Two of the world's most noted historians, Arnold Toynbee, in his book, *The World and the West*, and Hendrik Kramer, in his book, *World Culture and World Religions*, point out that the international outlook is also critical, and that unity of universal scope is the social and political hope and need of our age. They speak of religion's crucial place in achieving this unity.

The Protestant Ecumenical Movement

I should like to trace briefly the history of the ecumenical movement. Let us begin with the history of the Protestant ecumenical movement. According to the best sources, this history begins in London in 1795, slightly more than 150 years ago. Because of a serious problem--religious division on the mission fields of the world, which led the pagans to discount the Christian gospel--the London Missionary Society was established. Embracing several churches, it was established to achieve uniformity of action on the mission fields. Next in importance came the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference of 1910 which issued a "Call to Unity" and established the "Faith and Order Movement." Then came the Stockholm Conference of 1925 which was attended by 91 churches from 33 countries. Its motto was "Doctrine divides; service unites".

The next step was the establishment of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam in 1948. Its stated aim was to offer a forum for discussion of ecumenical problems, and also to act as a center of information and coordination. The second meeting of the World Council of Churches was in Evanston, Illinois, in 1954, where one of the prominent sub-topics for discussion was: "Our oneness in Christ and our disunity as churches." The third meeting of this organization was in New Delhi, India, in 1961.

In our age Protestantism no longer glories in division, but "denounces disunity as shameful, scandalous and sinful." There is far less talk today than in previous years about the advantages of denominationalism, which enables every one to "join the church of his choice." There is a growing realization that denominationalism--a multiplicity of churches--is antithetical to Christian unity.

Samuel McCrea Cavert puts it this way, "The great weakness of a denomination is that it does exactly this (divide). It does not mean to do so. It may not realize that it is doing so. Yet it is for such secondary reasons that the denomination, as such, comes into being ... Each denomination, in its separate existence as a denomination, testifies to the insight of some vigorous founder, to a form of polity, to a mode of worship, to a certain view of baptism or the Eucharist, to the effect of cultural differences, or to some special historical circumstance. Each of these testimonies may have its own value, but not as the ground existence of a Christian Church." (*On the Road to Christian Unity*, Harper & brothers, 1961, P. 153).

Protestantism today is more likely to emphasize "a large body of shared convictions" and to express the desire of working from these convictions toward further agreement. Sometimes Protestantism, in its desire for unity, has made the mistake of saying, "It doesn't matter what a man believes, just so long he is sincere." Or, "We're just going to heaven by different roads." Realization, however, is gradually dawning that such statements necessarily imply that a man's convictions, the religious principles which he believes, are not important. If it is possible for different people to believe the opposite sides of the same question--the necessity of baptism, for example, or the divinity of Christ--it is obvious that one's convictions are not very important. The fact is that such a view is clearly untrue. Jesus said, "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." (John 8:22). While there are some areas in which the Lord has not given instructions, areas where he has left decisions to the judgment of devout Christians, there are other areas, such as how to become a Christian, how to worship God, how to live the Christian life, and how the church should be governed, on which the Lord has given explicit instructions. On these matters, God's truths must be learned and accepted, for these are not matters in which divergent opinions are equally acceptable.

In addition to the other evidences of a growing desire for Christian unity, certain mergers have taken place among some of the Protestant churches during recent years. For example, the Congregational-Christian Church is a result of such a merger, as is also the

Evangelical and Reformed Church. The United Church of Canada is a merger of several groups, as is the United Church of Southern India. Still other mergers are being discussed and may come to fruition in the next few months or years.

The Roman Catholic Ecumenical Movement

For centuries the slogan “Rome never changes” was widespread in its use. The ecumenical movement was considered a “non-Catholic intellectual movement.” but pope John XXIII changed this emphasis. In Convening the Vatican Council II on October 11, 1962, he ushered in a new spirit more favorable to Christian unity. More than 2800 Roman Catholic prelates were present on this occasion from all over the world. They represented half a billion members. The Pope spoke for 37 minutes and charged the conference to “work actively for Christian unity.” His emphasis was not the usual one of encouraging “separated brethren to return to the Roman Catholic fold,” but one of joining hands in a search for the road to unity. Many protestant groups were represented at the Council with unofficial observers.

Paul Coutourier, a priest of Lyons, France, prayed that “all God’s people might become one when He wills and by the means which He wills.” (Edna McDonogh, *Roman Catholicism and Unity*, A. R. Mowbray & Co, London, 1962, p. iii). The Roman Catholic Bishop of Bristol, England, wrote, “God never commands the impossible. We believe that unity is His command, and that in our time He is giving to us the encouragement of seeing things happen which our fathers would have considered impossible.” (Ibid, p. v)

Viewing the matter objectively, it must be said that with the death of Pope John XXIII, the movement toward Christian unity was slowed. Numerous reports from Rome indicate that there is a reactionary group within the Roman Catholic Church which opposes all changes in attitude toward non-Catholics. Whether his reactionary group or the more liberal group led by Pope John XXIII will eventually determine the policy of the Catholic church is yet to be determined. Perhaps it should be added in the interest of objectivity, that the first two sessions of the Vatican Council II have not produced much in the way of hard results along the line of our study.

Appraisal of the Ecumenical Movement

The first strong emphasis that I should like to make is that the worldwide movement toward unity is in the direction of God’s will. Throughout the scriptures we find strong declarations of the importance of the unity of all Christ’s disciples. For example in John 10:16, we read “Other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and they shall become one flock, one shepherd.” In John 12:32, we find “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto myself.” However, it is in John 17, the Lord’s intercessory prayer, that we find the strongest emphasis upon oneness. Jesus prayed, “Holy Father, keep them in thy name which thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are ... 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 is 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.” (John 17:11, 20-21).

The apostle Paul gave this striking warning to the Corinthians, “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?” (I Corinthians 1:10-13). In sending out the apostles, Jesus gave the great commission in these words, “Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father, and of the Son and the Holy Spirit.” (Matthew 28:19)

An Objective appraisal of several generations of effort in this ecumenical movement is that the attitudes of brotherhood and cooperation are wonderful indeed. Likewise, the motive behind the movement--the desire to be united in Christ--is wonderful indeed. However, a major problem still remains. No effective method of achieving the goal of unity has yet been found.

The motto of the Stockholm Conference, “Doctrines divide; service unites”, sounds good, but it does not bring real unity. The hard fact is that the basis of all religious division is primarily doctrinal, hence the erasure of division and the achievement of unity must necessarily deal with doctrines.

John A. Hardon, in his book, *Christianity in Conflict*, says, “The churches of the World Council may continue to cooperate in solving their social and economic problems with tangible benefits to everyone concerned; but real unitive progress will never be made where radical differences in faith and worship are conceded, on principle, to be irremediable.” (The Newman Press, Westminster, Maryland, p. 237). Samuel McCrea, in his book, *On the Road to Christian Unity*, adds, “In the informal and unofficial dialogue in which Protestants and Roman Catholics need to engage for the sake of growth in mutual understanding, it will be necessary to include fundamental issues of doctrine. The dialogue can best begin at the point of social-ethical concerns, where common ground is more likely to be found, but in the end these issues are rooted in theological convictions that cannot be ignored.” (Harper & Bros, 1961, p. 132).

Need For a Common Ground of Authority

In bringing about Christian unity, the fundamental issue is the achieving of a common basis of authority. Just as it is inevitable that from the simplest sand-lot baseball game on up to the most sophisticated Major League contest, there will be sharp differences of opinion which must be settled by a recognized authority, an umpire, so there are differences in the religious world that must be settled by some common basis of authority. What possibilities of securing such a religious arbiter are there? Three sources have been proposed: Some would suggest the church as the final authority. Others would suggest individual conscience, or private judgment, as the ultimate authority. Still others would suggest the Holy Scriptures as the decisive authority.

Just here I should like to quote from John Locke, the famous English philosopher, who lived from 1632 to 1704. I am quoting from his work, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*. "But since men are so solicitous about the true church, I would only ask them here, by the way, if it be not more agreeable to the Church of Christ to make the conditions of her communion consistent in such things, and such things only, as the Holy Spirit has in the Holy Scriptures declared, in express words, to be necessary to salvation: I ask, I say, whether this be not more agreeable to the Church of Christ than for men to impose their own inventions and interpretations upon others as if they were of Divine authority, and to establish by ecclesiastical laws, as absolutely necessary to the profession of Christianity, such things as the Holy Scriptures do either not mention, or at least not expressly command? ... Whosoever requires those things in order to receive ecclesiastical communion, which Christ does not require in order to receive life eternal, he may, perhaps, indeed constitute a society accommodated to his own opinion and his own advantages; but how that can be called a Church of Christ which is established upon laws that are not His, and which exclude such persons from its communion as we will one day receive into the Kingdom of Heaven, I understand not." (Quoted by John P. Fogarty, *Countdown for Unit*, 1963, pp. 152-153)

The apostle John began his gospel with the words, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... and the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father), full of grace and truth." (John 1:1, 14). Jesus Christ was the Word of God in the flesh. He lived and taught the gospel, God's "good news" for the salvation of man. Christ is the center and the circumference of Christian unity. He is God's Word in the flesh for mankind. The Word then went out through the apostles, as they were guided by the Holy Spirit, and this Word brought the church into being and brought salvation to the lost. The gospel, the Word of God, preceded the church. The Word was the seed of the kingdom. The Word of God which we have in written form in our Bible is our only source of information about Christ, his church, and God's will for man.

It is this that leads us to believe that if men are ever to be united in Christ it will be when they recognize Christ's Word as authoritative in all matters that pertain to religion. It is in God's Word that we read, "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." (Ephesians 4:4-6).

Let us speak, therefore, where the scriptures speak; let us remain silent where the scriptures are silent. Let us have a "Thus saith the Lord" for all that we do in faith and practice. Our objective is unity of all believers in Christ; the basis for our efforts is the inspired scriptures; the method is the restoration of Christ's kingdom.

Conclusion

Almost 190 years ago our founding fathers combined the thirteen weak, ineffective colonies into one solid federal union. They chose as its motto "E Pluribus Unum" which means "Out of many into one." What they did in the political world we need to do in the religious world. Our forefathers drafted a Constitution, which has bound the states of the federal union together in an ever-stronger unit. Similarly, by taking the inspired word of God as our constitution in all matters pertaining to religion, we can establish again the original New Testament church and secure its continuance as a single unit. Let each of us work and pray that Christ's fervent prayer may yet be true--"that they may all be one".