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Should Ecumenism Matter for Evangelicals?

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Ecumenism has been the greatest ecclesiastical time-waster of the century. Since the first World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910, which one ecumenical historian describes as 'in a real sense, the line between one ecumenical era and another,'¹ millions of pounds have been spent on conferences at home and abroad that have achieved apparently nothing. Endless hours have been apparently whittled away on the laudable pursuit for visible church unity, but all to little avail.

The anti-ecumenical constituency has fared little better. For this branch of the Church ecumenism has been the 'bogeyman' - the 'red-under-the bed' conspiracy - against which countless books have been written, over which relationships have been broken and denominations damaged; but for what? A cursory overview of material written from this anti-ecumenical perspective reveals dire warnings that now seem empty. The arguments, though plausible at the time, now appear lame. Of course they were right to address the need to defend the purity of the gospel, yet a gospel of which the world is largely ignorant. Constantly they warned that ecumenism would cause theological confusion in the local community when, if there was confusion at all it was why these irrelevant Christians could not get on with each other. Geoffrey Thomas, one of the anti-ecumenical constituency's most articulate spokesmen, is right when writing of tragic events in a past generation he says, 'Perhaps that was one weakness of evangelical beliefs in 1966 - they gave more credence to the power of the Ecumenical Movement than it merited.'²

Structured ecumenism is as dead as the dodo and has achieved - at least in Britain - hardly any tangible results. Meanwhile Evangelicalism is also divided, and in its more structured forms, is seeing, as with other parts of the Church, a continuing declension. Yet despite the apparent lack of success, it is to evangelical Unity that I am deeply committed and into which I have invested most of my time apart from that spent as the minister of a local church. Added to this, I would hesitatingly suggest, that convinced Evangelicals have something to say to the wider Church on the matter of unity. Why is this?

The Nature of the Church

Firstly, because of the nature of the Church. The New Testament teaching concerning the Church and its metaphors for the Church clearly indicate its basic unity. The Church is one. From this foundational premise it follows that a fractured Church is a denial of what is both taught and implied in scripture. The credal confessions of the Church confirm this. 'I believe in ... the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints...', says the Apostles' Creed. Yet this 'statement of *faith*' is little more than that if it is not demonstrably true.

Despite the language that the Bible uses in describing the Church, it is not visibly one, even to the most casual observer. The Apostle Paul, whilst mainly referring to the Church as the gath-

ered community of believers in a particular locality (e.g. 1 Cor.1:2, Gal.1:2), also speaks of its universal dimension under the headship of Christ (Eph.1:22, Col.1:18). Amongst many metaphors for the Church in the New Testament are the 'body of Christ', the 'New Israel', a 'building' and the 'vine'. The body has many members. A nation is composed of diverse people. The building is constructed of several stones. The vine has a complex branch system. Yet, in each case, the parts together form a whole and speak of a diverse unity.

From the descriptions we have of the Church in the New Testament, these metaphors were strained even then (e.g. 1 Cor.1:10-17). Certainly they are hardly adequate for the Church of today. In fact these metaphors do little more than highlight and compound the problem of a divided Church. Apparently the Church is many but not one. It is demonstrably multifaceted, but hardly a unity when tested by outward observation.

An evangelical solution to this problem has been to postulate that the Church is 'transcendent', 'spiritual' and 'mystical'. For example Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones argues that 'As Christians we are parts of His spiritual, mystical body'.³ Whilst this is undoubtedly true, from such a statement it could be argued that the church might *appear* to be divided, even splintered; yet its inherent 'spiritual' reality is unbroken, making the ecumenical task a pointless one, certainly counter productive and fraught with great dangers for the theologically sensitive.

Whilst I am still impressed by such an argument, there is a problem with which all sections of the Church must grapple. As most would agree, the Church was never intended to be *only* 'secret', 'spiritual' or 'mystical', other than in an eschatological sense (Eph.3:10). The concept of the 'invisible Church'⁴ would seem to be a direct contradiction of the teaching of Christ that his disciples are as a 'light set on a hill.' (Mat.5:14). It is clear that the Church is put in the world for a purpose, not the least to be a real presence. It is for this reason that all the New Testament metaphors quoted to describe the Church are tangible and real.

Oliver Tompkins, a Bishop of Bristol and an eminent ecumenist of his generation, argues that 'there are only two uses of Church in the New Testament: (1) The organically one Body of Christ And (2) The local manifestation of this one body (Rom.16:5, 1 Cor.1:2, Rev.2-3).'⁵ Therefore, Christians should not seek to hide behind some esoteric definition of the Church which eliminates any ecumenical

responsibility, but rather seek to address the problem of the divided church and the offence it gives to God and the whole of mankind. This is a task for Evangelicals as much as anyone else, in fact more so because of their professed allegiance to the authority of Scripture.

The Importance of the Debate

Secondly, the problem of a divided Church is a pressing one. Not only is the Church manifestly not what it was intended to be, but by being divided, lacking even the appearance of unity, it is grievously handicapped in one of its primary functions, that is in preaching the gospel.

For many years this problem has been obscured by the existence of para-church missionary societies, that mitigated something of the scandal of evangelism by a divided Church. The churches devolved the problem of their divisions by sending it abroad. In the words of Lesslie Newbigin, 'The New Testament knows of only one missionary society – the Church. The eighteenth century knew churches that had totally ceased to be missionary societies and saw the birth of missionary societies that made no claim to be churches.'⁶

Yet paradoxically it was in the formation of the modern missionary movement that the problem of a divided church was highlighted. The strong denominational demarcations that characterised the home churches were soon seen to be unacceptable abroad and a crippling hindrance to their task. William Carey wrote, 'As the shadow of bigotry never falls upon us here, we take council and go together to God's house as friends.'⁷ Again, in a letter home to Dr. Ryland he wrote, 'The utmost harmony prevails and a union of hearts unknown between persons of different denominations in England.'⁸ From Calcutta William Carey proposed a Great Missionary Conference at the Cape of Good Hope in 1810. But at the time the conference was shrugged off as 'Carey's pleasing dream',⁹ and it was to be another hundred years before such a conference was held in Edinburgh. From this historic conference came much of the impetus for the unfolding story of the Ecumenical Movement, with all its apparent strengths and weaknesses.

No longer can the Church hide behind the missionary societies abroad, nor the occasional inter-church evangelistic campaigns which endeavour to bring churches together at home. It has to be accepted that a divided Church is a crippling hindrance to its gospel ministry and this has to be addressed by Evangelicals as much as anyone else.

If the Church is as the incarnate body of Christ tangible and real (John 1:14), then we cannot escape the truth that it is the churches down the road and across the street with which we have to do; churches which often have different denominational allegiances, radically different liturgies and perhaps even different foundational truths.

If this is a real problem for Evangelicals, it has rarely been understood that this is where the historical Ecumenical Movement has also run into difficulties. It has not always been on the issue of compromise as is usually alleged, but often the very opposite. Conservative Evangelicals have accused the Ecumenical Movement of being 'all things to all men', and of 'sweeping fundamental doctrinal differences under the carpet.' If that were always true then ecumenism would have had complete success. The New World church would be in place. The great amalgam would already have occurred. That this has not happened indicates that it is not only Evangelicals who have convictions.

The Evangelical Contribution

Yet one of the unexpected discoveries that the wider Church has made of Evangelicals in recent years is that they can handle differences more effectively than almost any other section of the Church. Even on cardinal issues such as the doctrine of the Church, church government, baptism, eschatology and charismata Evangelicals have assimilated divergent views. Not for them the agonies of structured ecumenism as to when joint communion can take place and who is empowered to conduct it. 'To all those who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity and truth' is the invitation to the Table given in most evangelical churches.

So it is hardly a surprise that Evangelicals were the first to take a structured ecumenical initiative in the formation of the Evangelical Alliance (EA) in 1846. And they still have much to offer as to the way forward for the Ecumenical Movement. It is not so much that the Evangelical Alliance or the British Evangelical Council has a 'Statement of Faith'. The Church has always had its 'Creeds' and 'Confessions'. It has been when such have been held sincerely that they have proved to be a meeting place where apparently widely divergent churches have come together. But that is only part of the reason why Christians stretching from the Established Church to the New Churches, from the Reformed to the Holiness traditions have been

able stand together, it also indicates the way Evangelicals can make a contribution to the wider ecumenical arena. For Evangelicals ask not only is there an agreed theological basis among the participants, but 'is it being adhered to?'

There will be fears expressed by many as to where any policy of evangelical participation in the Ecumenical Movement will lead, for it would certainly involve contact, sharing and listening. Yet without contact, misunderstanding and misreporting can ensue. These are the very things that have bedevilled evangelical/ecumenical relationships in the past. But churches that adhere to historic 'Articles' or 'Confessions' can hardly criticise Evangelicals for asking that these be the honest bases for dialogue.

Of course, this is the very root of the ecumenical problem for Evangelicals. So many seem to have few, if any, non-negotiables. But the journey can only begin at the point of agreement and not move from there until there is a meeting of minds. This will be a two-way exercise. Past isolation from the wider church has meant that there are emphases and insights that are little understood by Evangelicalism and which have left it the poorer, especially in areas of spirituality.

The initial goal for Evangelicals must be to build an evangelical ecumenicity amongst themselves and there are significant initiatives being made. Having done that they must go further.

There are strong precedents for building bridges to others. Richard Baxter (1615 -1691) had an ecumenical mind. He crossed denominational boundaries in ministerial contact and fraternity at a time far more sensitive than our own. So today, at a time when so much is spoken of revival, let there be a revival of Evangelical concern for unity. When John Lawrence spoke of just such a 'revival', he was not limiting the word to its conventional sense but to an ecumenical dimension. He states, 'without thorough-going revival, in the fullest sense of the word, none of the churches can grow together in perception of truth about the things of God.'¹¹ Surely even the most partisan Evangelical prays for a revival of truth and unity. It is not only what the Church must pray for, but must *work* for and Evangelicals can do no less.

Because some evangelical thinking is so fundamentally opposed to ecumenism, there is a danger that these sorts of arguments will not only be ignored or dismissed, but may further alienate already damaged relationships. Evangelicals are already divided between charismatic and non-

charismatic, reformed and non-reformed, those within the denominations and without, and what is argued here could exacerbate tensions even more. But as G.K.A. Bell said, 'We who believe in Christ can be united in Christ'.¹¹

Evangelicals were the first exponents of a true ecumenicity and Evangelicals were the first to build, through the EA, an ecumenical organisation to express their unity. Evangelicals have either been robbed, or have robbed themselves, of an ecumenical contribution through the way that ecumenism has evolved in this century. But it does not always have to be like that. An evangelical ecumenical contribution is essential, stemming from the precedents of its history and theological distinctives.

Lesslie Newbigin, one of the architects of the Church of South India, records in a diary written during its early days, 'It is extraordinarily interesting and rewarding, this process of coming to grips with traditions quite different from one's own, and seeking to test everything by fundamental Scriptural principles.'¹² Unless Evangelicals' participation in the Ecumenical Movement is also on scriptural principles, they will have abrogated their name of 'evangelical'. Yet if it fails to take place altogether, then Evangelicals will be robbed of the emotional and spiritual 'reward' that Newbigin describes.

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