

THE ECCLESIOLOGICAL PRODUCT OF THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

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This paper is the culmination of a much larger study of the Church's nature in representative literature of the Ecumenical Movement. The reasons for undertaking this study of the Church's nature in an ecumenical context may seem obscure to some evangelical readers. Evangelicals have, on the whole, been trained not to expect much of value from ecumenical sources. Disillusioned by the current social and political involvement of the World Council of Churches, many have overlooked the fine work done in the past by the Ecumenical Movement in the crucial area of the Church's nature.

As an evangelical who hopes to be involved in the missionary task of the Church (from which the Ecumenical Movement grew), the writer believes he should understand the nature of the Church which Christ is seeking to build through him and others involved in the work. Since evangelicals have published very little in the twentieth century on the nature of the Church, the writer has turned to the Ecumenical Movement, which *has* undertaken such a study. He has found help in this doctrine of the Church, but at the same time that help has not been, he trusts, uncritically received.

The Ecumenical Movement, which has such auspicious possibilities, has frankly disappointed the writer in its recent trends. He feels disappointed that a movement of such positive value has been betrayed by the radical forces of subjective, non-normative theology. In response he has selected that which is good and tried fairly to show its relevance for the evangelical church.

With some nostalgic regrets, the writer must turn his back on the movement which could have claimed his own heart fifty years ago, as it does the hearts of so many today. In responding to the failure of the Ecumenical Movement truly to realize, or even now essay to realize, its original goals, this writer associates himself with what he believes to be the true continuation of nineteenth century ecumenism; the evangelical interdenominational missionary movement and its partners in evangelical denominations. In this context he hopes to experience the blessing of God, as, with an irenic but discerning spirit, he seeks to witness to the world of the riches in Christ Jesus.

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The often jaundiced eye of evangelical evaluators of the Ecumenical Movement, has largely overlooked the doctrinal fruit of ecumenical encounters. Many have so busily engaged themselves in pointing out the

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insidious dangers of a "Super-Church," with a move toward subservience to the Roman Pontiff,¹ that they have over-reacted. They have done this to the point where it is impossible for them to profit by the great work of ecumenical encounters.

There are at least five ecclesiologicaly beneficial results of the last fifty-eight years of ecumenical encounter. In this paper those five results will be listed and then enlarged upon.

1. There has been continued emphasis on the orthodox, biblical concept of the Church's essence.
2. There has been a rediscovery of unity as part of the Church's essence, and the need to express that unity of the *invisible* Church in the *visible* Church to a greater extent.
3. There has been a needed emphasis on the continuity of God's people in all ages.
4. The existence of the visible Church as a necessarily mixed-multitude has received needed emphasis.
5. There has been a de-emphasis on the role of *form* (polity) in the essence of the Church.

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1. The continued emphasis on the orthodox, biblical concept of the Church's essence.

In regard to the *essential* nature of the Church, representative literature of the Ecumenical Movement has always been on the side of the biblical formulation. Again and again it has been stressed that the Church is the Body of Christ, called out supernaturally and creatively by Him. In its invisible aspect it is known truly to Christ and is composed of believers only. In its visible state it may be recognized with considerable accuracy where men confess Christ as Lord, the Word is preached and the ordinances (sometimes called sacraments) are properly observed.²

One can rejoice that the Biblical position in regard to the above mentioned factors has been retained through the years.

2. The rediscovery of unity as part of the churches essence.

Whenever a body exists in a fashion contrary to its charter form, it is usual to de-emphasize the validity of the charter.³ The churches at the turn of the century were settling for that with which many evangelicals

1. C. Stanley Lowell, *The Ecumenical Mirage*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1967), p. 34. Here Lowell voices this unwarranted opinion shared by many evangelicals. Why should any Protestant move toward recognition of the Pope when huge numbers within his own communion are doubting the continued usefulness of his office?
2. Parts or all of this formulation are found in all official reports of ecumenical conferences except those specifically involved in the Life and Work tradition. The precise statements have been included successively in this thesis and would constitute far too long a list to include at this point.
3. This can be readily seen in American political life where steady departure from the *sense* of the Constitution has led to doubts regarding its validity, and suggestions that another Constitutional Convention be called.

today are satisfied; namely "spiritual" unity. Many have felt that as long as the spiritual unity of the *invisible* Church is asserted, little more is needed.⁴ The Ecumenical Movement, on the other hand, has maintained that if the invisible Church is an ideal, and happens also to be a unity, then the *visible* church should strive for the realization of that ideal.⁵ The Church remains something less than its essential ideal when it lacks visible unity. The World Council of Churches has always agreed that it *has* a unity given by the Spirit, but it feels an obligation to realize that unity in the plain view of the world.

Many participants in the Ecumenical Movement have, as Leslie Newbigin, asserted unity to be part of the *esse* of the Church.⁶ This has not been merely of the invisible Church but of the visible aspect also. One does not assert that division is *sin* if unity is not considered of the essence.

The concept of the Church as an *essential* unity which should have a visible manifestation, may be traced to the occasional strong assertions that the Church is a continuation of the Incarnation of Christ. This assertion can be first seen in the proceedings of the 1927 Faith and Order conference held at Lausanne. Edward S. Wood maintained that the incarnation is the key to understanding the Church as Christ's body. This kind of unity was held to be consistent with a non-organizational form of unity.⁸ The obligation would then remain to engage in Christological studies for a correct understanding of the Church. It is interesting to note that the W.C.C., which must have as fundamental a basis as possible for wide cooperation between the Churches, has a Christological basis.

The concept of the Church as a unity by virtue of its incarnational nature has been vigorously rejected by those who have (more accurately) taken the "Body of Christ" to mean that that body is *sourced in* Christ, and a possession of His. The other view tends, if logically extended, to identify the Church with Christ to the extent that it becomes Christ himself. Newbigin sees the Church as belonging to Christ, but made possible by the Holy Spirit who was given precisely because Christ was no longer present in the flesh.⁹ Newbigin's doctrine of the essentiality of unity comes not from an incarnational view of the Church, but from the need to repudiate a *duality* between the Church visible and the Church invisible. He regards those who settle for true unity only in the realm of the Spirit as unchristian dualists who are making an unwarranted bifurcation in what is properly speaking, one.

4. I. Marcellus Kik, "The Uniy of the Spirit," *Christianity Today*, I, 21. (July 22, 1957.) p. 22.
5. W. A. Visser 't Hooft, *The Evanston Report: The Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches*, 1954. (London: S. C. M. Press, Ltd., 1955) p. 84-85.
6. J. E. Leslie Newbigin, *The Reunion of the Church: A Defense of the South India Scheme*, (N.Y.: Harper and Brothers, 1948), p. 17.
7. Visser 't Hooft, *Evanston Report*, p. 87.
8. Edward S. Woods, *Lausanne, 1927: An Interpretation of the World Conference on Faith and Order Held at Lausanne, 1927*. (N.Y.: George H. Doran Co. Pub., 1927), p. 58.
9. Newbigin, *The Reunion of the Church*, p. 14.

The assertion of unity as an essential mark of both visible and invisible Church presents evangelicals with a healthy corrective to their fragmentation. It seems that to emphasize unity in both aspects of the Church identifies the two. This is contrary to Christ's expectation. He realized that the two would never be entirely congruent as his parable on the wheat and the tares illustrates.

3. The Needed Emphasis on the Continuity of God's People in all Ages.

It is possible that the stress seen in ecumenical circles on the continuity of God's people in all ages reflects the strong covenant background of many of its leaders. It is quite usual to observe in those of a Reformed background the position that the Church is the continuation in true perspective of Old Israel. The eschatology which results from such a position tends to be "amillennial." The Amsterdam Assembly of the W.C.C. held to this kind of continuity with the same amillennial-type result. They may have set the pace ecclesialogically for ensuing discussions about the relation of the Church to Israel.

This writer feels that there is definitely a continuity between the Old Testament people of God and the New, but for other reasons than many covenant theologians advance. The covenant theologian whose presuppositions usually lead him to amillennialism (though not inherently necessary), interprets the host of material benefits promised to Israel as now belonging to the Church (New Israel). The premillennialist holds that it is impossible to treat those same promises of the latter half of Isaiah and Jeremiah in the symbolic manner required by the amillennial approach. To do so requires a violation of the literary-historical-grammatical hermeneutic, with a resultant delivery into the wretched hands of subjectivism. The premillennialist holds to some distinction between Israel and the Church but it is only the premillennial dispensationalist who holds to a separation which in the end may do violence to the unity of God's people.

The point remains that there needs to be a proper emphasis on the continuity of Old and New Testaments peoples of God. Such recognition would promote the Old Testament to a position of greater enormity in the Church, which especially in Dispensational circles it lacks. Such an emphasis at the same time must not seek to negate the facts of God's future, particularized dealing with Israel, his chosen people of old.

The continuity of God's people in all ages has to do with the continuity which we see in the ministry. The continuity of the ministry is the bone of contention which divides episcopally oriented bodies from those which are non-episcopal. The difference is basically over the issue of whether the continuity of the ministry is maintained in a horizontal or vertical manner. That this is an important issue is clear from the definition given of the unity sought by the W.C.C. at its New Delhi Assembly in 1961. There it was said that unity must involve mutual recognition of

all ministers of Christ's Church.¹⁰ Such can only occur when the issue of continuity has been resolved.

It seems clear from Paul's description of the true people of God that they have a vertical continuity. That is, all are not Israelites who are fleshly in continuity with Abraham, but the spiritual and faithful alone are (Romans 9:6-8). This is a repudiation of the validity of horizontal continuity by itself, without vertical relationship with God. It appears futile to maintain rigidly a horizontal (episcopal) continuity in the face of division from Rome and the presence of some unfaithful men in the ministry since apostolic times. Apparently, even those who hold to horizontal continuity have to rely on vertical help to bridge certain gaps, and explain the validity of their own ministry.

Will episcopalians and non-episcopalians ever resolve this issue? The fact is that within the ecumenical context they have already done so to a certain extent. The Church of South India represents one such merger on a trial basis. The union plans of churches in Ceylon and North India recognize diverse ministries without resolving the question. They appear to have opted for unity regardless of the participant's view of ministerial continuity.¹¹ Apparently this is a move toward a de-emphasis of such factors in unity and the relative unimportance of the issue in union plans.

In relation to the problem of continuity in the ministry, then, the prospective solution to the problem lies in accepting a vertical continuity as primary.¹² In this concept, adherence to apostolic doctrine and the approval of God are the validating factors. Geoffrey W. Bromily¹³ has clearly shown that the episcopalian type ministry cannot insist on a rigid three-fold form of ministry as usually understood, but that all biblically based ministries will have oversight, administration of word and sacrament and a diaconate which applies temporal resources to the Church's ministry. The *validity* of such form is not, in his mind, dependent upon a questionable doctrine of Apostolic succession as it is usually understood, but in conformity to apostolic teaching.

4. The Existence of the Visible Church as a Necessarily Mixed-Multitude.

Stephen Neill has indicated that most schisms in the Church can be traced to well meaning efforts to separate the wheat from the tares before the Day of Judgment.¹⁴ Neill's reference to the parable cited is a standard procedure of those who make clear the dual aspect of the

10. W. A. Visser 't Hooft, ed. *The New Delhi Report* (London: S. C. M. Press Ltd., 1962), p. 116.

11. J. Robert Nelson, *One Lord, One Church* (New York: Association Press, 1958), p. 90.

12. This in effect was recognized at Amsterdam.

13. _____, *Unity and Disunity of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1958), p. 94-95.

14. _____, *The Church and Christian Union* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 323.

Church as a redeemed yet sinful community. It has long perplexed faithful men as to how much impurity can be in a church without that body's ceasing to be a church. It is clear from Paul's treatment of sinning churches in the New Testament that he was very long-suffering in this regard. He addresses the Corinthians as a "church" despite their gross sin (1 Cor. 1:2). He refers to the Galatians as "churches" despite their soon removal from the faith he had preached to them (Galatians 1:2).

In the light of the New Testament, were the Reformers and other "schismatics" really in sin when they separated from the bishop of Rome? One can note the desire on the part of the Evanston Assembly of the W.C.C. to label such division as sin. They recoiled from that, at the same time admitting that God had blessed some divisions because certain biblical truth was recovered and people converted.¹⁵ They finally decided to do both; label division as sin but say that God blessed the Reformers division. As has been indicated before, such a conclusion is little short of blasphemy. They saw the Church as similar to a justified man who is yet a sinner.¹⁶ As such the Church should recognize that it is a unity and at the same time recognize that its divisions are sins of disunity when maintained for less than the best of reasons. It should strive to mortify divisions as a believer would strive to mortify sin in his members.

The emphasis made upon the existence of the Church as a justified sinner should be a helpful counteractive against those who divide over seemingly trivial issues. The Church may be badly crippled in many places today, but it is still the Church where it bears the essential marks.¹⁷

5. The De-Emphasis on the Role of Form (Polity) in the Essence of the Church.

In the early days of the I.M.C. and in recent days as well, the Ecumenical Movement has had little trouble in defining the essential nature of the Church, as long as polity or form have not been a part of the definition. Form is the costliest item for most denominations to give up, and consequently it is often the last to go. Obviously, if all the churches who are divided over form only were to be convinced that form is of little consequence, union efforts would be greatly facilitated.

Clarence Craig senses the need for de-emphasizing form in considerations of the essential nature of the Church. He set about to discover whether the New Testament contains a normative standard for the form of the Church.¹⁸ His conclusion was that no normative pattern is

15. Visser 't Hooft, *The Evanston Report*, p. 87.

16. Visser 't Hooft, *The Evanston Report*, p. 85.

17. Note that for Calvin this was a serious problem. It was resolved when he became convinced that the Roman Catholic communion was no longer the Church because it had ceased to hear the voice of its shepherd Christ. Listening to the voice of Christ was to Calvin a very real mark of all who are in the Church. (John 10:4-5) It was only after this realization had come to him that he severed his ties with Rome.

18. Clarence T. Craig, *The One Church in the Light of the New Testament*, p. 58-59.

given. For those who accept his findings, form becomes merely a matter of utility. No form is incorrect, only more or less useful.

As has already been indicated, Craig's views have signalized a new era in ecumenics. We are now witnessing bold plans of union wherein form plays little part in the proceedings. Craig, however is not the first to de-emphasize form. Luther too had little to say about it and considered it a matter of utility rather than Scriptural design.

Can Craig's findings be termed "beneficial"? Yes, with reservations. Most forms of polity may be justified in one situation or another, but there should never be a time when *form* is not at least in accordance with Scripture, if it is not dictated by Scripture. There is also a sense in which Craig's findings are only beneficial to those for whom form is an obstacle—but for them it is *very* significant.

These five areas indicate the practical value of the Ecumenical's contribution to our knowledge of the Church. We ask whether evangelicals have anything to offer during the period under consideration. The answer is a qualified "yes." Eugene L. Smith has observed aptly that evangelicals who stand outside the movement are really helping it by prophesying against its inadequacies.¹⁹ They have tried to show that doctrinal consensus is necessary for true unity, but the W.C.C. has not regarded that word. Evangelicals have tried to show that mere merger is not the answer for increased witness, but no one has heard that word. They have tried to show that no vast international bureaucracy can ever hope to speak for all the Church or for local congregations, but seemingly this voice too has not been heard. Most importantly, it must be asked whether the voice of Christ is being plainly heard in ecumenical circles. Because of the rejection up until now of these voices, the usefulness and validity of the Ecumenical Movement is in question. Evangelicals and non-evangelicals alike, with God, may eschew the lukewarmness of present day ecumenists. The result may well be that in the final analysis, no advance will be made toward true unity. The only hope for the Ecumenical Movement lies in a return to its foundational principles. Having its reason for being in the missionary spread of the Gospel of Christ, it can only hope for Christ's, and therefore for all true believer's, approval and blessing when it returns to the preachment of that Gospel. In that Gospel lies the cure for the heart-sickness of this world. In the *application* of that Gospel lies the remedy of social ills and all the human dilemmas which beset us today. The Christ of that Gospel calls ecumenists and evangelicals alike to a renewal of theology and action which would revivify the Church and change the world.

19. E. L. Smith, "The Conservative Evangelicals and the World Council of Churches," *The Ecumenical Review*, XV, 1 (Jan. 1963), p. 183.

SUGGESTED READINGS FOR FURTHER STUDY

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