The Teaching Of Missions In The Light Of The Ecumenical Movement

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“The future of missions lies in the sphere of ecumenics.” Thus spake Keith Bridston to the Professors of Ecumenics at Oberlin, September 2, 1957. If his assertion has any validity for the world mission of the Church, then it applies also to the teaching of missions. Revolutionary currents are lapping even at the foot of the ivory towers, and the most irresistible tide is that which surges toward manifest Christian unity. Pierce Beaver in his Carey Lecture at Serampore last year made some harsh references to professorial detachment, but he reached the optimistic conclusion that “the mission theorist is today winning recognition ... and theological encounter has become an exciting new frontier of missionary thinking.” If we are to merit this new status, we must re-examine and reformulate many of our out-worn concepts. Verily, the future of mission teaching lies in the sphere of ecumenics, however diversely we may interpret that charge.

Analysis of this bi-focal relationship encounters difficulties from the start. Very shortly after the president of this group requested a paper on “The Teaching of Missions in the Light of the Ecumenical Movement,” he sent the writer a two-page letter of suggestions, all of which dealt with the teaching of ecumenics, the understanding of the ecumenical movement, the interpretations of Christian unity, and so on. Apparently his thinking, like mine, had been stimulated by the Oberlin discussions last fall. But even those pundits (referred to on one page of their minutes as “Proffers of Ecumenics”) failed to clarify either the priority or the dependence of the “chicken and the egg.” They debated warmly whether ecumenics should be approached as a separate discipline or integrated with missions and the total curriculum. The great missionary statesman, John Mackay, even
inquired whether missions should be subsumed under ecumenics. Finally, in typical ecclesiastical fashion, these gentlemen (including some of you in another hat) suggested “a small committee to watch for the possibilities of meeting again, perhaps in association with professors of missions.” Selah!

It behooves us, therefore, to look briefly at some definitions of the ecumenical movement and its curricular status, before we turn to the assigned theme, the teaching of missions. Dr. Visser’t Hooft at Oberlin gave a comprehensive description in these terms:

Ecumenics is the theological discipline which seeks to provide an accurate, comprehensive description of the faith, life and work of the Churches and the ways in which they cooperate; which seeks to manifest the unity of the Churches of Christ, to fulfill their common mission, to express their dynamic; and which also deals critically with the issues that arise as a result of the encounter of the Churches, for the Churches themselves and within the life of the Ecumenical Movement itself.

Traditionally the Protestant missionary enterprise has been reluctant to reach so wide and to delve so deep. Its early leaders, until well after Edinburgh, expressly disavowed any willingness to “deal critically with the issues that arise” in theological and doctrinal areas. But on one hand, the missions have found themselves increasingly involved in faith and order, in the establishment of churches with creeds and polities, in the gradual disappearance of any uncontested frontiers. On the other hand, the churches (as distinct from independent and peripheral societies) have assumed a growing responsibility for, and identification with, the world mission, thus inevitably revealing their tragic disunity. The interdependence has become so clear that John Machay could offer this succinct definition at Oberlin: “Ecumenics is the science of the Church Universal; as such, it concerns the world missionary community, its nature, mission, function, relations, and strategy.”

Three years ago the National Council of Churches launched a “Survey and Study of the Needs and Resources for Ecumenical Education.” Their prospectus, with which many of you are familiar, listed six phases of Christian life denoted in this country by the term ecumenical: 1) conversations among Christians of diverse backgrounds; 2) interdenominational or cooperative action; 3) the structural character of the missionary movement (whatever they meant by that -- CL); 4) the work of the various councils of churches; 5) the spirit and effort toward
unity among the churches, extending beyond national frontiers to what is world-wide; 6) rediscovery that the Church lives its life “in the world,” i.e., in relation to all human pursuits which serve as Christian callings, and as involving the tasks of evangelism in the role of the Church in contemporary culture. One need not go that far afield, however, to see the inter-relation of unity and mission.

In many discussions today we are lifting up three traditional areas of the Church’s life: kerygma (message), koinonia (fellowship), and diaconia (service). (Let us note parenthetically, as pertinent to both ecumenical and missionary movements, that the first recorded ordination, or laying on of hands, was for the diaconate, not for preachers or administrators.) The personal letter from Dr. Beaver referred to earlier suggests this same trilogy in slightly different words to describe the functions of the ecumenical movement: expansion (mission), integration (unity), and permeation (social ethics). Then he wisely and simply defines the ecumenical movement, “not as a movement for interdenominational unity, but as a movement concerned with the recognition of the Lordship of Jesus Christ over the Church and the world.”

Today we take for granted, in one form or another, the inseparable character of the ecumenical movement and the world mission, “The Calling of the Church to Mission and Unity,” enunciated by the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches at Rolls in 1951, has become a truism in ecumenical circles. The challenge it now poses is to create vital meaning for the local church and meaningful vitality for the world missionary program.

Both of these challenges converge on the teaching of missions. It would be rash -- and irrelevant -- to attempt to mediate here between those who favor a separate academic discipline for ecumenics and those who urge “ecumenizing the total curriculum,” as Visser’t Hooft put it. Both Nils Ehrenstrom and Albert Outler apparently made convincing cases at Oberlin. Most of our theological institutions, however, have neither the money and personnel nor the missionary vision to “proffer” ecumenics as a distinct department. I myself question whether that status would really allow any greater opportunity for correlating “the whole school and the whole church” or for serving as a “bond of unity within the faculty” -- in the ideal fashion which Dr. Ehrenstrom suggested. Rather I repeat what I said to this group two years ago at Naperville: “Obviously, if there is no specialized and separate treatment of the ecumenical movement, it belongs to us, both in its genealogy and in its function.”
Having participated twice since then in my own denomination’s Theology of Missions Consultation, I would add a third point of contact. The mission of the Church and the ecumenical movement belong together historically, practically, and theologically. It is under those three headings that I should like to approach the main issues of this paper.

I. Historical Approach

Pierce Beaver’s aforementioned personal letter comments that “when ‘ecumenics’ is taught, the subject is usually confined to the history of the ecumenical movement, and more especially to the Faith and Order and Life and Work movements culminating in the World Council of Churches,” Certainly these twentieth century developments should be covered in any analysis of recent mission history, emerging as they did from the cooperative efforts of missionary societies and from the rapid growth of national councils among the younger churches.

But the teaching of missions, as I said two years ago, has too often been limited to the historical narrative, thrilling though that is. We are eternally indebted as missions professors to Kenneth Scott Latourette’s monumental works, and nobody possesses more ecumenical and irenic spirit than he. But the expansion of Christianity is presented by denominations and societies, even in his all-inclusive sweep. Personally I use Basil Mathew’s Forward Through the Ages (based largely on Latourette) for the text in my History of Missions course, partly because I like the biographical approach, but his supposedly ecumenical device of mentioning no denominational affiliations whatever is sometimes as frustrating to teacher and students as the reverse would be. In other words, ecumenical missions history usually means merely avoiding sectarian labels.

The vast majority of history books, of course, are written from a completely denominational standpoint: Christian Missions and Historical Sketches of Missionary Societies Among the Disciples of Christ, History of Southern Methodist Missions, The Foreign Missions of the Russian Orthodox Church, and now in process a seven-volume History of Methodist Missions. These are all valuable for the churches concerned, for historical knowledge, and for a background to ecumenical developments. But it is high time that our teaching and our research sought to analyze the inter-relationships of Christian expansion, instead of compartmentalized units.

We all know -- and I hope teach -- that the first Protestant missionaries to Asia were German Pietists sent to India by the King of Denmark at Anglican expense. Where do we go from there? We know that
William Carey proposed a world missionary conference at Cape Town for 1800. What happened then? We may recall that Alexander Duff left the Church of Scotland for the Free Church during the Disruption of 1843, but not that he persuaded the American Methodists to open work in India. What lessons could the contemporary ecumenical movement learn from the failure of the London Missionary Society and the American Board of Commissioners to remain truly interdenominational -- especially in relation to the non-denominational faith missions which operate with such zeal and such resources today? How successful were comity agreements in the nineteenth century, and why have so many of them recently broken down? What about the innumerable daily acts of fellowship and Christian unity which take place in mission stations throughout the world, far removed from any organized ecumenicity? The history of missions might well be re-examined through ecumenical lenses.

We professors of missions keep hoping that church history will deign to notice us, although thus far there seems to be very little awareness that the history of Christianity extends outside of Europe, eastward or westward. Such a study as Dr. Latourette’s is honored for its scholarship but hardly granted a place in the main stream of ecclesiastical history. We must continue to assault the bastions of academic tradition until the world Church is recognized as exactly that.

But there is another side to this, a side which more directly concerns our topic. The ecumenical movement requires that professors of missions be far more solidly grounded in church history than we have been. If we are to interpret the significance of the Church of South India, we must be familiar with the heritage of the participating confessions. If we are to evaluate the report of the Malayan Christian Council Faith and Order Commission, we need to know why the constitutional and historic episcopate, tactual transmission of Grace, immersion and affusion, and confirmation are such crucial and such controversial terms. If we are to examine, reverently and sympathetically, an indigenous creed, we must know for ourselves and others what elements in the traditional Western creeds are indispensable bulwarks against heresy and which phrases and concepts may be expendable social and cultural accretions.

The same things can be said about Biblical studies. Faith and order discussions have led all the churches to re-examine their understanding of Biblical purpose and of early Church practice. If the general consensus points to no set, exclusive pattern -- or to the use of a variety of forms in the first few centuries -- then we must not only allow but encourage a great deal more flexibility and freedom of experimentation among the
younger churches today. Whatever our respective conclusions about the ministry and sacraments, it seems clear that the only divisions in the early Church were those required by geographic location. Personal loyalties (to Paul or Apollos or Cephas) were condemned as vigorously by Paul as they would be by John Wesley or Alexander Campbell. Administrative polities or even such critical decisions as circumcision were rejected as barriers to any individual’s worship or fellowship in the Church of Jesus Christ.

The implications of Biblical scholarship for the ecumenical movement are presented in authoritative fashion by many recent writers. (See, for example, Albert Outler’s *The Christian Tradition and the Unity We Seek.*) These implications become imperative for missions at the local level, for the sin of separation and exclusion is seen on Main Street or Mei Cha Hutung more poignantly than at Geneva or Evanston. As a recent student paper put it: “The point of togetherness is the local congregation, not at the false level of organizational charts.” When a Hindu asks a missionary or a missions professor why those who profess to worship One God and represent the One Body of Christ cannot worship Him together, the answer had better be convincing! Thus, in the light of the ecumenical movement, the teaching of missions takes on new dimensions of Biblical interpretation and historical analysis.

**II. PRACTICAL APPROACH**

More immediately impelling, however, is the impact of ecumenical developments on the contemporary, practical mission scene. No longer is it possible, much less desirable, to present to our students a set of denominational statistics on budget and personnel, constituencies and institutions, embellished with biographical sketches of our own heroic pioneers. No mission station is an island anymore, even though it may be geographically remote. No group can preach the Gospel today without reference to others doing likewise -- whether the relationship be one of hostility and suspicion or of cooperation and Christian unity. The numerous aspects of this imperative can be only suggested in the time available. Let me list them under the general headings of organization and policies.

Mission boards and societies at every point on the ecumenical spectrum are confronting the problem of their relationship to ecumenical organizations. A vast majority of them had found their place, fairly comfortably, in the International Missionary Council and in its great conferences at Jerusalem and Madras, But the Second World War changed many things. Out of the urgency of humanitarian relief grew continuing
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agencies of inter-church aid: not only church world service, but lutheran world relief, brethren service committee, the methodist committee for overseas relief.

out of the war too came the achievement of merdeka for so much of asia and ultimately africa. the racial and regional self-consciousness which found political focus at bandung had its christian counterpart at prapat, with the move to establish an asian christian conference. the decision at ghana to unite the world council of churches and the international missionary council presents to many missionary groups an acute dilemma. a number of european societies are threatening to withdraw, and a split seems likely in the congo protestant council, which up to this point had preserved more comity and held together more diverse theological strains than most other cooperative mission bodies.

it is not the prerogative of this paper to weigh the arguments. suffice it to plead that the final decisions be made not on charges and counter-charges of liberal theology or radical social ethics, not on a doctrinaire anti-conciliar stand, not on fears of concentrated power (for the world council has no ecclesiastical sovereignty). if both councils are “concerned with the recognition of the lordship of jesus christ over the church and the world,” to repeat pierce beaver’s phrase, then the organizational decisions should be made solely and prayerfully from the standpoint of advancing the world mission. these developments are significant because much of the momentum has come from the so-called younger churches. a short time ago many of them preferred the international missionary council because it was more fully oriented to their areas and to their problems; today they are determined to demonstrate that they are, in every sense, a part of the church universal.

one other organizational aspect of the question is becoming more acute, the formation of world-wide denominational unions: the lutheran world federation, the baptist world alliance, the world methodist council, etc. it is argued that oikumene, the inhabited world, did not and does not mean interdenominational. historians (cf. hogg: ecumenical foundations) remind us that the nineteenth century ecumenical conferences took their titles to refer to the global scope of the missionary task, not to faith and order discussions. there are those who sincerely believe that unified denominations will be more effective components of an ultimate ecumenical union than national and regional churches would be. even some younger churches insist that they would rather feel a part of an international fellowship than be limited to a national, cultural, linguistic, or racial church. our own methodist theology of missions
group will consider late this month two papers, one from England and one from this country, on the specific topic: “Should Methodist missionary efforts be directed toward service of a world-wide confessional Methodism or toward regional organic church unions?”

Again it is not the province of this paper to answer the question. The decision, however, has major implications for Congregationalists who are expanding by geometric progression, for Methodists who are negotiating mergers in North India, in Malaya, in Pakistan, in Ceylon, in Great Britain itself. Similarly it should be recognized as an extremely live issue for teachers of missions. No account of the world Church today can ignore these problems, whether we start from within full ecumenical participation or from independent external criticism. The relationship of Christian groups to one another is perhaps the most conspicuous and urgent issue affecting the missionary movement today. It can hardly be less so for professors of missions.

Clearly the ecumenical movement throws organizational stumbling-blocks, or stepping-stones, in the road of the world mission. It also scatters innumerable practical pebbles along the path of daily policies. Those who seek to interpret the evangelistic outreach of the Church to its ministers, and through them to local congregations, must be aware of the current revolution in missions. We teach, I hope, about self-government, self-support, self-propagation, about devolution and indigenization. Surely each of these is influenced by, and in turn helps to shape, the ecumenical climate of the Church. A few examples, without elaboration, will be sufficient to make the point.

Not only missionary candidates in our seminaries, but pastors whose understanding support is essential, should understand the changing role of the “fraternal worker.” The Secretary of the Synod of the Church of South India was quoted (Christian Century, June 4, 1958) as saying: “Missionaries from overseas are beginning to occupy a different but an even more important position in the life of the church, and in several cases are pioneering in various kinds of rural service.” Again a significant change has taken place. Not long ago administrators were saying that national pastors could minister more effectively to local congregations at the “grass roots” than could “foreigners,” and that missionaries would have to hold down the institutional posts of training and supervision. Now the more widely-influential executive and educational offices are going to nationals, and in India and Brazil at least, it is the overseas missionary who goes out to the remaining frontiers to establish new churches.
This development has several possible ecumenical effects. Although some few nationals outdo the missionaries in denominationalism, by and large, as they assume responsibility in church councils, they are more susceptible to ecumenical pressures, less bound by Western traditions and procedures. Emotions of patriotism and independence pervade the Church too, and experiments in Christian unity in India and Japan are watched with a far greater sense of identification in Asia than in the United States. Without analyzing the process of devolution or self-government more fully, it is clear that professors of missions must recognize and interpret these trends fairly and sympathetically.

One very practical concern lies with the “mother church” in the matter of self-support. The younger churches are still desperately afraid, despite the experience of the Kyodan, that organic union will cause a reduction in funds and personnel from abroad. Some Chinese pastors quite frankly opposed joining the Church of Christ there because it might mean a lower salary or institutional budget. Here in this country it requires education to persuade local congregations to give to institutions and projects no longer in American hands; it will require even more understanding to continue contributions that are no longer directly strengthening “our denomination.” Financially and emotionally, many church members in this country still react like the president of one of our major Methodist mission agencies: “I just can’t stand the thought of having six hundred thousand Methodists wiped out in North India.” Surely this is a challenge to pastors and professors of missions.

On the one hand, our generosity needs to find ecumenical incentive and the challenge of cooperative endeavors. On the other hand, self-support requires new wisdom in withholding or redirecting gifts. Boards which are adopting a systematic time schedule for reducing direct pastoral subsidies must explain to their constituencies at home and abroad not only the reasons but the alternatives. Contributors who may no longer provide “discretionary funds” for an individual missionary to dispense bountifully must be shown the values of helping the younger churches to send out their partners in obedience.

This in turn points to a reappraisal of missions in terms of so-called self-propagation. On the one hand, every branch of the Church needs to share in the central task of evangelism, and the interchange of non-Western missionaries, though still hardly more than a token, is one of the most significant steps of the post-war era. On the other hand, the Three-Self emphasis can too easily focus on the self, forgetting that administration, stewardship, and evangelism are all cooperative tasks. As local and regional
agencies assume responsibility for Christian witness in their own areas, limitations on personnel and money (not to mention the spiritual values of unity) require increasing ecumenical partnership. Financially speaking, American churches can afford to establish competing congregations side by side; Indonesian and Burmese Christians cannot. Unity is an economic necessity if churches and institutions are to thrive.

A council of state, in preparing its report to Queen Victoria, proposed to begin as follows: “Conscious as we are of our shortcomings...,” “No,” protested an aged earl, “we must not lie to Her Majesty. Let us say rather, ‘Conscious as we are of each other’s shortcomings...’” Conscious as we are of each other’s shortcomings, we all know hideous examples involving our own denominations, where sectarianism has blighted the evangelistic impact of the Christian Gospel. Those examples need not be cited here. Let us rather pay tribute to such positive witness as that of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church (report in the Christian Century, June 11, 1958). In two separate instances, converts won by that communion felt more at home in a different linguistic group and were allowed to join other churches, thirteen families to the Church of South India and forty English-speaking Chinese in Singapore to the Anglican Church. Now that ought to shame those who are primarily engaged in piling up denominational statistics!

The ecumenical missionary task brings together communions in Europe and America as well as in Asia. In this country we have the Interboard Committee for Christian Work in Japan. Pierce Beaver in his Carey Lecture referred to a new awareness in Europe of the Church’s responsibility for mission, instead of leaving the job to the earlier independent mission society. When the Church itself is involved in mission, it cannot help but be more conscious of the need for Christian unity. We Methodists are proud of the experiment now taking place in Sarawak, where preaching, teaching and healing among the Ibans has enlisted Bataks, Filipinos, Malays, Chinese, white and Negro Americans, Britishers, Indians, a Swiss and a Swede. This is ecumenical in the sense of drawing on the inhabited world from several branches of Methodism. But in the first place, such opportunities for non competitive pioneering are almost extinct. In the second place, there are some Methodists who feel that the international, inter-racial, and inter denominational team in Nepal comes even closer to the ecumenical idea. Both of these projects represent a partnership in evangelism between younger and older churches, but the mission in Nepal has the added advantage of being rooted in an adjacent state which is closely akin, racially, culturally, politically.
This leads to one other practical field of identification. Nothing has been said specifically about the growing emphasis on indigenization, and it need take but a paragraph. Most recent missionary programs have encouraged the younger churches to develop their own music and art forms, their architecture and liturgy. Sometimes indeed it has been the missionaries who have pressed forward, and the nationals who have felt that Gothic or New England Colonial were necessary to distinguish Christian sanctuaries from pagan shrines. But we need to persevere. Today, despite the dubious frowns of a few artistic literalists, our ecumenical worship and our Christmas tables are enriched by indigenous manger scenes from Korea or Africa or India. Who knows or cares the denomination of Lu Hung-nien, Sri Oue, or Kimi Koseki? Can we really call for the development of creative theology in Asia, or the formulation of appropriate creeds for national churches, without anticipating and welcoming new and ecumenical products? Should we hail the freedom of the Church in China, from Western imperialism at least, in the very same report which mentions proudly that “the service (in Shanghai) followed completely the 1662 Book of Common Prayer”? Is no missions professor donning the mantle of Daniel Fleming in the vital area of ecumenical art and symbolism? Are we learning anything from the stimulating experiments among divergent liturgical traditions in the Church of South India?

III. THEOLOGICAL APPROACH

It is long past time to shift to the most important area of all: the theological importance of the ecumenical movement for Christian mission, and vice versa. Dr. Beaver, in the aforementioned Carey Lecture, quoted Emil Brunner as saying: “The mission is the central issue in theology, as well as in the practical work of the Church. We do not know what mission is, and until we do, we shall not know what the Church is.” The doctrine of the Church (which Brunner calls “the unsolved problem of Protestantism”) has become the central issue of the ecumenical movement, for the sacraments and the ministry and the structural polity are but expressions of this deeper question. As faith and order discussions, or church union negotiations, wrestle with this basic concept, the world mission has much to learn -- and even more to teach.

Dr. Visser’t Hooft has said at Oberlin: “A common rediscovery of the Una Sancta and its world-wide mission means there can only be one Church… The task of the Church can only be fulfilled in unity.” However we may visualize the fullest expression of that unity-- in organic union, conciliar organization, functional cooperation, or world-
wide confessionalism – we cannot escape its imperative. However we may describe the Church -- as a monolithic structure, as a fellowship of individuals, as an organismic diversity of talents and functions -- we are drawn to the necessity for greater unity in Christ. It would be superfluous to reiterate here the great theological insights into mission and unity which have emerged from Rolle, from Whitby, from Willingen, from Evanston and Oberlin. They all point in the same direction.

It would be superfluous, too, to point out the relevance of ecumenical theology for the evangelistic mission of the Church. Most ecclesiastical leaders would admit today that the unity God gives us in Jesus Christ must be made manifest in our visible witness, that somehow the diverse Christian traditions must be reunited in the Christian Tradition. We are all familiar with Emil Brunner’s dictum that “the Church exists by mission as fire exists by burning.” Those of us who have forgotten the classic illustration from the furnace or the hearth are relearning at the suburban charcoal grill that fire does not exist by burning if the coals are scattered and isolated. Only in the unity of close association can the true warmth of the Gospel be shared among the churches and used for the purposes of Christ. As Dr. Charles Taylor, secretary of the American Association of Theological Schools, said in a letter about this paper to the chairman of this group: “Although we find our place in the whole Church of God through our several traditions, we do not really know ourselves until we know ourselves in relation to others also.”

We do not really know our Christian mission until we know it in unity with others. This paper has barely suggested, superficially and pragmatically, some of the ways in which the teaching of missions must be reconceived in the light of the ecumenical movement. The history of Christian missions, the practical programs and policies of the world Church, and the theological motivation which underlies our entire raison d’être -- all these are inescapably bound up with the contemporary search for the full meaning of Christian unity. To those who fear the ecumenical movement as a threat to sectarian autonomy, or to those who dilute the mission in terms of “fraternal workers” and “inter-church aid,” the closing word comes appropriately from the president of this group, once more from his stimulating Carey Lecture: “The existence of churches in the oikumene does not signify the end of the mission but rather that the time for a world mission has come.” It is our task, as professors of missions, to interpret that wider and deeper and higher mission of the Church.