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Elmer Towns

Liberty University, eltowns@liberty.edu

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Being Ecumenical And Evangelical

Elmer Towns

This article looks at the nature of the ecumenical movement, specifically attempting to examine the differences between the ecumenical movement as represented in the National Council of Churches, and the evangelical movement as represented by the National Association of Evangelicals.¹ Specifically, we are asking, "Can we be evangelical and ecumenical?"

This article will show a difference between the "old ecumenical" movement represented by the National Council of Churches/World Council of Churches and the "new ecumenical" that is seen among evangelicals. It will show why the "old" has failed and is approaching bankruptcy and will demonstrate the growing strength of the "new." This article will suggest that the "old" is dying because it's tied to denominational alliances, and we are entering a post-denominational era. Also, the new has demonstrated strengths in the age of postmodernity, post-Christianity and post-civilization.

Are we raising these questions now because the National Council of Churches² has staggering financial problems and needs help?³ Are we raising these questions because the National Council of Churches has not been as effective as hoped in its developing new strategies to minister to the needs of the world?⁴ Are we raising these questions because a unified and interdependent world has more desperate needs than ever before and the church must become more unified and interdependent to give it help? Do the needs of a world community demand a world church? Perhaps we are raising these questions because the Bible demands and teaches unity that has not been evident since the apostolic church.⁵ Finally, we could be raising these questions because the evangelical community sees it can

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accomplish more by “partnering” together, than by going it alone. Has the rise of postmodernity, post-Christianity, and perhaps even post-civilization forced the church to a new and different strategy of mission and evangelism? Since this introduction has asked a series of questions, the rest of this article will be guided by a series of questions.

Question 1: What does the word ecumenical mean?

We cannot really understand the ecumenical movement until we comprehend what the word means. According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, ecumenical is, “1. General or universal; 2. Pertaining to the whole Christian church.” The dictionary goes on to indicate that the word *ecumenical* comes from the Greek root *oikoumenikos*, “the inhabited world or universe.”⁶ *Webster’s Dictionary* is a little more pointed, “1. Worldwide or an extended, influence, or application. 2. Related to or representing the whole body of churches. 3. Promoting or tending towards worldwide Christian unity or cooperation.”⁷ By its “worldwide” definition, the ecumenical movement has not reached its objective of unity; has it failed?

The issue of a failing ecumenical movement is an intriguing one. Obviously the “old ecumenical movement has not satisfactorily reached its objective, and people are calling for something different. In my initial study for this article I assumed that the old had failed, so I came up with what I thought was a brilliant new term, i.e., the “new ecumenical” movement. Then I went to the search engine *Google*, and found over a hundred references to “new ecumenical.” Not hundreds of items, but hundreds of pages of items.

Question 2: What is the ecumenical movement?

The ecumenical movement is defined as, “1. (n) a movement among Protestant groups aimed at universal Christian unity. 2. (n) a movement (especially among Protestant denominations) aimed to promote understanding and cooperation among Christian churches; aimed ultimately at universal Christian unity.”⁸ Note the limitations of this standard definition. First, the Roman Catholic church and the whole of various orthodox churches are also left out. Second, it is aimed at denominations (this article will question the presupposition of an ecumenical movement of denominations, suggesting it has failed in the “trickle down” intent from denominations, to churches, to individuals. This article will suggest a “bubble up” effect, starting with individuals, then churches, and finally denominations). A third problem is with the stated aim of “understanding and cooperation” among

groups, rather than a specific aim of ministry of the Gospel to the lost. Finally, the “ultimate aim of universal unity” seems to be our inadequate reason for denominations and churches to get together. Actually, “unity” is only a means to an end; the ultimate end is to complete the Great Commission and glorify God.

Question 3: Do the Scriptures teach an ecumenical oneness?

It is obvious that the unity and oneness of believers is an undeniable tenet of the Bible. Notice the constant warnings (especially in the writings of St. Paul) against (a prohibition of) divisions, schism, and sectarianism, either by command, or by counter-example (Matthew 12:25, 16:18, John 10:16, 17:20-23, Acts 4:32, Romans 13:13, 16:17, I Corinthians 1:10-13, 3:3-4, 10:17, 11:18-19, 12:12-27, 14:33, II Corinthians 12:20, Galatians 5:19-21, Ephesians 4:3-6, Philippians 1:27, 2:2-3, I Timothy 6:3-5, Titus 3:9-10, James 3:16, II Peter 2:1). This is clearly an important matter to God. Our Lord even makes unity a means by which the world might believe that the Father sent the Son (John 17:21, 23), and prays that it will be as profound as the unity of the Trinity itself (John 17:21-22). Paul makes stirring up division a grounds for exclusion from the Christian community (Romans 16:17), and says that divisions divide Christ (I Corinthians 1:13).

The above Scriptures overwhelmingly teach unity, but what kind of unity do they teach? Since I am an inerrantist, I want to live exactly as the Scriptures teach; therefore appeals to pragmatism, church history and ecclesiastical structure are not a primary basis for unity, nor are they a basis by which unity is described. Obviously, the Scriptures teach unity, but what does the Bible mean when it teaches unity?

Question 4: Who is included in unity?

The first question we need to ask: Does the unity that is taught in the Bible apply primarily to individual believers, perhaps applying secondarily to churches? If this is so, then churches should not be the primary focus of ecumenical endeavors. However, perhaps unity is taught to both individuals and to the churches of which individuals are a part, because Christian attitude and ministry by every believer should be reflected in the corporate churches’ attitude and ministry. Does the Bible teach that unity applies primarily to churches and their interrelated fellowship of other churches, i.e., fellowship, Conventions, associations and/or denominations?⁹ The old ecumenical movement was primarily tied to denominations. Are we entering an age of post-ecumenicalism because we are entering an age of post-denominationalism?¹⁰ And then another question—perhaps

unity does not apply at all to local churches; but our Lord and Paul were referring to unity in the universal church, i.e., the body of Christ. Obviously we are positionally united in Christ (1 Cor. 12:13), so if this view is true, then the Lord's Prayer for unity was in fact answered when we were placed in the universal body. But on the other hand, perhaps the universal church is the pattern or picture for unity in the earthly church.

Question 5: In what areas should unity be expressed?

If unity is the norm for Christians in churches, and was assumed in the apostolic churches, in what area should churches and Christians be unified? Does an ecumenical movement necessitate a unity of doctrine, i.e., should we have a unified doctrinal statement such as the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed? Because everyone brings a somewhat different thought process to interpret the objective Word of God, then everyone will probably interpret the Scriptures somewhat differently. However, there is a core of doctrine that identifies Christianity from that which is non-Christian. Everyone should agree on the main emphasis of Scripture, i.e., (the fundamentals).¹¹ Can we assume that unity is based on agreement on the essentials of Christianity, yet allow disagreement among non-essentials?

Perhaps theology should not be the focus of unity, but unity should be based on Christian values and attitudes, such as love. If everyone loved God with all their heart, soul, strength and mind, and neighbor as self, (Matt. 22:37-39), obviously the church would have one passion, one goal, and be unified in spirit (even if not unified in doctrine and/or practice). Some would say that unity must obviously include attitudes, but there is no unity of attitude without unity of endeavor and unity of action.

Does unity suggest aims and objectives? Obviously many would say the church should be unified in the Great Commission, the last command that Jesus gave to the church, i.e., to His disciples (Matt. 28:19, 20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:46-48; John 20:21). When the church is unified in evangelism, several other questions are raised. These answers could possibly divide an otherwise unified church. If evangelism is done in unity, where do new believers (converts) attend for baptism, and nurture? Who determines what church they become involved with? If the lost are won to Christ, does anything else matter, i.e., baptism, oversight, attendance, worship style, and offerings?

One of the past issues of the ecumenical movement is justice. What is the role of the church to bring about justice in the world? Because all are made in God's image, and all are God's creatures,

then shouldn't certain rights be extended to all? Can the church say justice is the duty of civil government and not her duty? What happens in a world where secular government and ungodly people do not extend civil rights to all? Can the church be silent and remain inactive when it sees injustice in the world and does nothing about it? Must the passion and mandate of the church be extended to those rights (civil) to all (justice)? How can the church influence government to give justice to all? Does the church do this through corporate political pressure, or does the church influence its members (individuals) and through them influence government?

And there are those who feel unity includes a totality, i.e., unity in theology, unity in attitudes, unity in aims, unity in the Great Commission, and unity in justice, etc. Just as two Christians on earth can agree together in prayer (Matthew 18:19) to move the Father in Heaven to answer their request, so two churches can agree together for answers to their request. And if two churches can be unified together to get answers to prayer, why cannot all churches be unified together?

Question 6: Why has the old ecumenical movement failed?

The World Council of Churches¹² on the surface has a basic assumption that should appeal to all. Notice the first statement upon which it was organized, "The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior according the Scriptures and therefore seeks to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit."¹³ It is hard to find anything wrong with that statement. This is not a unified "super church," but a fellowship of churches. The WCC has not forced cooperating churches and/or denominations to change their beliefs, practices, or allegiances to fellowship with her. Notice, one group is not voting to recognize or accept the doctrines, practices or attitudes of other denominations and/or churches. It is a fellowship and essentially those who fellowship are a part of the organization, and those who don't fellowship are not a part.

Why hasn't the idea worked? Perhaps the old ecumenical unity did not work because it assumed a "trickle down unity," suggesting that unity began at the bureaucratic top as denominations got together, but for many reasons the "trickle down influence" did not reach local churches and individuals. Perhaps that word "bureaucratic" is the problem. The misguided emphases of the National and/or World Council of Churches did not just happen; individuals with preconceived agendas cause them. Perhaps the World Council of Churches became wrapped up in

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politics, rather than in the purity of Christianity. At times the World Council of Churches was accused of a greater allegiance to a communistic/socialistic form of government and seemed to have a bias against free enterprise. The World Council seemed to have an agenda to enforce justice in some nations (democratic), while being blinded to injustice in others (Communistic dictatorships). The World Council of Churches—including pacifists—backed certain revolutions against established governments, perceived as dictatorial, while tolerating other Communist-dictated governments. The World Council of Churches was fully committed to the creation of a new society that is called “The Kingdom of God,” but that concept was a contradiction of the ideas held by certain participating denominations and/or churches. The World Council of Churches’ concept of disarmament flew in the face of participating nations and their churches that felt their government should “bear the sword” (Romans 13:4) for self protection against predator nations. The World Council of Churches refused to take the Bible as its ultimate authority over human reason and the vote of the majority. However, as we criticize the old ecumenical movement and point out its failures, the purpose of this article is not to perform a post-mortem examination on a dead corpse. However, this criticism is not entirely futile, for by understanding the mistakes and failures of the past ecumenical movement, let’s not repeat them in the new ecumenical movement. Let’s look at the strengths of organizations that have embodied the dream and practice of unity among believers. We can learn from many independent, interdenominational, transdenominational, parachurch and/or denominational programs and initiatives.

Question 7: How have some various evangelical concepts of unity been closer to God’s intent than the old concept?

A broad survey of some of the successes of the new ecumenical movement will illustrate the point where this paragraph is heading, i.e., The Promise Keepers, cooperative evangelism under Billy Graham, the *Jesus* film sponsored by Campus Crusade for Christ, National Religious Broadcasters, Christian Booksellers Association, the National Sunday School Association, World Vision, the Gideons International, International Bible Society, Mission America, and of course The National Association of Evangelicals. This list is only suggestive and could be expanded to include hundreds if not thousands of organizations that have cooperated on the individual, local church, and denominational levels. Some of these are legally incorporated with controlling boards; others are loose fellowships, organized for a

specific purpose in ministry.

Unity in Fulfilling the Biblical Command and Mandate.

The Great Commission commands, "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19, NKJV). Churches have cooperated without compromising their doctrine, nor given up their autonomy, nor have they sacrificed their conviction; but have cooperated in a multitude of interdenominational agencies, i.e., the historic China Inland Mission, Sudan Interior Mission, British and Foreign Bible Society, the American Sunday School Union, etc. Individuals from churches have volunteered to work with organizations pledging their "unity" of service, finances, prayers and support. As a result through foreign and home mission organizations, there have been literally thousands of churches planted, souls won to Christ, Bibles distributed, and the work of Christ has advanced.

Unity at the People Level

Why have these interdenominational/transdenominational agencies worked? In the new ecumenical movement, churches were able to join when they voted to send money, volunteers, or to join in the pursuit of an objective of evangelism and/or church planting. These endeavors happened because individuals in these churches supported the projects and/or crusades. Under the old ecumenical movement when denominations voted to join the World Council of Churches, the vote was far removed from individual churches, and even further removed from individual believers. The strength of the new ecumenical movement is that when churches vote their money and personnel, usually individual believers have a voice in such decisions.

Paragraph 8: Can there be unity without diversity?

Too often people call for unity as though it is some abstract quality to write in documents. If every action has a reaction, and if strength is only understood in opposite to weakness, and if righteousness is only understood in contrast to sin; then unity cannot be appreciated or embraced apart from diversity.

It seems that biblical unity must not only recognize but also embrace diversity. When we ask for the unity of churches and individuals from all various sections of society and the world, we must first of all recognize the diversity of ethnic groups. We are all the same, but we are different. This is why Jesus said, "Matheteusate pauta ta ethne," i.e., "Make disciples of all ethnic groups" (Matthew 28:19, ELT). Notice Jesus did not say to make ethnic groups the same, or to make unity out of ethnic groups.

Rather Jesus recognized the differences in culture so we would use cross-cultural evangelism,¹⁴ recognizing both the culture of the evangelist, and the culture of those who will be evangelized. The Great Commission states we must make disciples of individuals within their ethnic group. The strength of current indigenous evangelism around the world is that we recognize the differences of culture, and we have come to recognize the necessity of inculturated Christianity in individuals and churches, so that the Christian and churches reflect their culture. The indigenous principle has taught us not to try to make foreign churches into American churches, but rather let the Japanese churches reflect the culture of the Japanese and let the Brazilian churches reflect the Brazilian culture.

Different ethnic cultures will be reflected in Heaven (Rev. 21:24, 26; 22:2) without being amalgamated into a homogeneous voice, so why not reflect diversity in the new ecumenical movement? So what does this say about the new ecumenical movement? We are one in Christ, but yet we represent different cultures.

The diversity of the human body is an illustration of the diversity within the church. This view of diversity suggests how unity should function in churches, i.e., in ministry. "The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up only one body" (1 Cor. 12:12, *NLT*). Why the body illustration? "Harmony among members, so that all the members care for each other equally" (1 Cor. 12:25, *NLT*). Then Paul lists some of the various functions/offices that make the body, ". . . apostles, prophets, teachers, then those who do miracles, . . . healing, helps" (1 Cor. 12:28 ff). Then the ecumenical question is: Are the body parts individuals, churches, or denominations? Probably individuals, so the unity of diverse gifted people should begin with church members, probably not denominations as reflected in the old ecumenical movement.

Next, let's look at the diversity in spiritual giftedness (I Corinthians 12). God did not give us all the same giftedness, so He did not intend for everyone to be the same or have the same ministry. Rather He intended that the diversity of gifts should work together in unity to accomplish the Great Commission and bring glory to Himself.

But let's push the diversity of giftedness even further. Our study of Church Growth has indicated the differences of church paradigms and/or church worship types.¹⁵ Most churches tend to have a dominant giftedness. In a world of mobility and communication—called the Interstate and Internet—there are three movements that contribute to the new giftedness of churches,

i.e., 1. Spiritual gift gravitation, 2. Spiritual gift colonization, and 3. Spiritual gift assimilation. This means that Christians gravitate to a local church that expresses the strength of their giftedness, so that the local church becomes a colony of like-gifted people. And those who are converted in a church assimilate the dominant giftedness of that church. Can this not reflect the new ecumenical unity, a church of like-gifted people united in ministry? There may even be new emerging denomination of like-spiritual giftedness.¹⁶

Therefore, spiritual giftedness demonstrates diversity among Christians, which means unity is not sameness, but unity must be reflected in believers of different giftedness in mission and ministry. However, since spiritual giftedness is centered in individuals, this argues for the need of unity beginning with Christians, not with the old ecumenical movement that began with denominations.

Conclusion

Young upstarts like myself (young in church movements, but elderly in chronological age) would like to ask if the old ecumenical movement can be saved? Also, is the old ecumenical movement worth saving? Is it a dinosaur whose day has passed? However, because the world is watching, they will perceive the weaknesses of Christianity in general when and if a visible force should fall into decay; can we allow it to fail? Also, can the new evangelicals who have been outsiders save the old? Also, even more pointed, should the new evangelical movement get involved in a movement that hasn't worked in the past? The answers are obviously, YES! Too much is at stake, and the Bible teaches unity.

Just as individuals can do ministry better together as a church than they can by themselves, and just as churches can do ministry together better than they can separately; so we need a new ecumenical movement focused on Bible ministry to move strongly into the 21st Century.

As we make the transition from the "old" to the "new ecumenicalism," what should be . . .

Diminishing

1. Fear by evangelicals (egocentrism) of being co-opted or diluted
2. Guilt by association
3. Definition of ecumenical as defined by political and social issues
4. Top-down structures
5. Urge to create a metro/mega organization

6. Stone-throwing

Continuing

1. Biblical mandate
2. Felt need for unity
3. An idea of where the Spirit is leading
4. Some sense of mission and justice

New

1. Restructuring
2. Affinity groupings
3. Unity is an unintentional result of unity; expressions of unity rather than organization to achieve unity
4. Relationships lead to doings
5. Evangelical presence in ecumenical gatherings
6. Comfort with using the name ecumenical
7. New source of accountability
8. New leadership, new levels, new job description, new authority
9. Blurring of labels and resistance to labels
10. Emerging needs lead to new justice expressions
11. A broadened sense of mission to include evangelism and justice
12. Sense and expression for groups (fluid but desirable boundaries)
13. Orbits of passion
14. Negative is diminishing and positive is driving the movement

Writer

Towns, Elmer L. Address: School of Religion, Liberty University, Lynchburg, Virginia. Title: Dean. Dr. Towns holds the B.S. degree from Northwestern College, a M.A. from Southern Methodist University, a Th.M. from Dallas Theological Seminary, a M.R.E. from Garrett Theological Seminary, and a D.Min. from Fuller Theological Seminary. He has published over 50 books with four listed on the Christian Booksellers Best Selling list. In 1995 Dr. Towns received the coveted Gold Medallion Award for the Book of the Year, *The Names of the Holy Spirit*.

NOTES

1. <http://www.nae.net/>
2. <http://www.nccusa.org/>
3. Jerry L. Van Marter, "NCC Proposes "a new ecumenical body"

including Catholics, evangelicals and Pentecostals," *Presbyterian News Service*, (24 May 2000), <http://www.pcusa.org/pcnews/oldnews/2000/00207.htm> (25 February 2004).

4. Mark Tooley, "Failing Church Council Struggles for New Mission," *OrthodoxyToday.org*, (17 May 2002), <http://www.orthodoxytoday.org/articles/TooleyNCC.htm> (25 February 2004). "The declining National Council of Churches, once the spokesman for America's flagship Protestant denominations, is struggling to find a new purpose" (pg. 1). "New revenues for the NCC remain elusive" (pg. 2).

5. Both the apostolic and post-apostolic church held the concept of unity. The Apostles' Creed affirmed, "I believe . . . in the holy catholic church." See http://www.reformed.org/documents/apostles_creed.html. The word "catholic" means universal, and apparently did not refer to the invisible or triumphant church, but a universal visible church. Also, the Nicene Creed affirmed, "We believe in . . . one holy catholic and apostolic church." See <http://www.creeds.net/ancient/nicene.htm>.

6. *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, Judy Pearsall (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

7. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, Henry Bosley Woolf, Editor in Chief (Springfield, MA: G & C. Merriam Co., 1976).

8. <http://hyperdictionary.com/search.aspx?define=ecumenical+movement>.

9. There is a decline in several areas in the mainline denominations (that support the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches. Denominations are declining in memberships, income, baptisms (that reflect new members and a commitment to evangelism), new candidates for ministry, and a number of Sunday school manuals (units) distributed. (See *Is the Day of the Denomination Dead?*, Elmer Towns, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Inc. 1973). While the statistics are 30 years old, the observations raised in this book remain valid. God never intended the emergence of denominations, but allowed their existence and has used them when they fulfilled the biblical objectives for an individual Christian and local churches. As some presently older denominations die, let's remember there have always been other denominations that have died and passed out of existence. Also, there are new denominations that are arising (see *Ten of Today's Most Innovative Churches*, Elmer Towns, Regal Books, 1990, Chapter 17). This book suggests the new denominations are gathering around a unique set of emerging principles and /or methodologies, whereas the older denominations were clustered around theology. These new denominations actually minimize sectarian theology—most are conservative in doctrine—and seem to be growing by a new unique methodology. Whereas the old denominations reflected the old ecumenicalism, the new denominations are the Willow Creek associations, Calvary Chapel, and The Vineyard Movement, etc. See also <http://www.bartleby.com/65/ec/ecumen-mo.html>.

10. Perhaps we are entering a post-ecumenical era because we are also entering a post-denominational era. However, these two movements are not isolated; we are also entering a post-Christian and post-civilization area, sometimes characterized as postmodernity (see *The Perimeters of Light*, by Elmer Towns and Ed Stetzer, Moody Press, August, 2004). This book asks several questions: When is the church no longer the church? When is worship no longer worship? When is evangelism no longer evangelism? etc. See also <http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=ecumenical%20movement>.

11. During the early 1900s, a group of ministers began raising the question of the essentials of Christianity. They were called fundamentalists after a series of books that were distributed worldwide by the title, *The Fundamentals* (R. A. Torrey, A. C. Dixon, et al ed., Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Book House, 1970). Most fundamentalists eventually agreed that the essentials of Christianity were: the inspiration and authority of Scripture, the virgin birth of Jesus, the vicarious substitutionary atonement of Christ, His physical resurrection and His bodily return from Heaven at the end of this age. Essentially, these doctrines are the irreducible minimum of Christianity.

12. <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/english.html>.

13. <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/who/index-e.html>.

14. Elmer Towns, (gen. ed.), *A Practical Encyclopedia of Evangelism and Church Growth* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1995), 122.

15. The picture of local churches that cluster around a single giftedness is seen in this book; Elmer Towns, *Putting An End To Worship Wars* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1997), 38-44 (Chapters 5-10).

16. See footnote nine for a description of new emerging denominations.