“The great new fact of our era,” is William Temple’s famous description of the ecumenical movement. Regardless of one’s attitude toward it, we are living in an ecumenical age. Indeed, there is abroad throughout much of the Church of Christ an ecumenical concern which is perhaps greater than at any other time in her history. Communions which traditionally have been conservative and which have tended to be independent of other bodies are now feeling the impact of an ecumenical interest. The recent World Congress on Evangelism is but another evidence of the current interest in ecumenicity.

Even Roman Catholicism, not notably characterized by an irenic stance, has recently shown a remarkable interest in matters ecumenical. Several “holiness” churches, which have formerly tended to be isolationist, have become concerned with the existence of other bodies within the Church and are even seeking organic union. Underlying this ecumenical spirit is the conviction that Christ is the Head of the Church and that all Christians are members of His body. A spiritual unity already exists for all believers. As Karl Barth observes, there is a growing awareness of a “solidarity” (Zusammenhalt) of all believers.1 Moreover, to use a phrase of Visser ‘T Hooft, there is the “pressure of our common calling” which urges Christians out of their isolation to cooperate in the sharing of a common task.

By no means is the ecumenical spirit to be equated with any one organization. It is a mood and a trend. Some of the more common institutional expressions of this mood are the World Council of

Churches, the National Council of Churches, the National Holiness Association, and the National Association of Evangelicals. Yet the ecumenical concern goes beyond any institution. For example, several member bodies of the NHA are studying federation and/or union, yet they are in no way related to the NCC. Thus, one may fairly conclude that the ecumenical movement is primarily a desire for unity (not necessarily union) which is evident throughout the Church.

With the exception of a few isolated sect groups, most communions desire a spiritual unity of all Christians. But problems arise as to the form this unity should take. Some Christians see that spiritual unity cannot and must not be indifferent to the "scandalous" proliferation of denominations. These Christians maintain that a full witness of the truth of the Gospel is hindered as long as there is no visible union among Christians. Other Christians see nothing scandalous in the multiplication of denominations, and can see little value in a united Church. Denominationalism is regarded by these Christians as desirable.

**ECUMENICITY AND ROMAN CATHOLICISM**

The opening sentence of the *Decree on Ecumenism*, which has come out of Vatican II, and which bears the signature and papal seal of Pope Paul VI, states that "The restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council." Recent self-examination by the Roman Catholic Church has produced in many areas an apparent renewal of the church. Such *avant-garde* papers as the *National Catholic Reporter* are critical of many of the provincialisms and much of Roman Catholic "popular piety" and are urging a genuine renewal.

One must never say that a church cannot change her character. Vatican II is dramatic evidence that a church can change. Nevertheless, there are enormous, if not insurmountable, obstacles in the path of any organic union between Protestants and Roman Catholics. It seems to this writer that three of the most serious obstacles between these two branches of the Church have been erected in comparatively recent history. These are doctrines which have been defined by the Roman Catholics as dogma, and which, from their perspective, are binding upon all Christians. They are the Immaculate

2. A "definition" is "an irrevocable decision, by which the supreme teaching authority of the Church decides a question appertaining to faith or morals, and which binds the whole Church." *Catholic Encyclopedia*, IV, 675-676.
Conception of Mary, defined in 1854, the definition of papal infallibility in 1870, and the Assumption of Mary, defined in 1950. The acceptance of all three of these dogmas is necessary for the faithful. These dogmas are especially offensive to non-Roman Catholics, and can not be accepted by most Protestants, yet they have been defined as binding by the Roman Catholic Church.

In view of these developments, it would appear that the only course open to Protestants is to follow the advice of Jaroslav Pelikan, viz., to have both "a gentle and firm testimony," and also "a program of honest self-examination." It seems evident that for our own lifetime and most probably for many generations to come, we must face the certainty that the separation of Roman Catholicism and Protestantism is permanent.

ECUMENICITY AND PROTESTANTISM

Many Christians do not see such insurmountable barriers among the various Protestant communions. Positions range from belief in restricted dialogue, as seen in NAE and NHA, to desire for more free dialogue in WCC and NCC. Some Christians are quite hopeful of the possibilities for ecumenicism within these groups, and others are considerably less sanguine.

Christians who oppose the efforts of the WCC and NCC are not opposed to the ecumenical ideal in principle, but feel that there is not sufficient spiritual and theological unity to warrant cooperation. This indeed is the basic argument of those Christians who are not in favor of being a part of NCC and WCC. Constantly stressed is the view that unity of faith must come before union of churches. Perhaps W. Stanley Mooneyham, the editor of the NAE symposium of ecumenicism, is representative of the group of Christians which does not participate in NCC. "Evangelicals just don't see," he writes, "that corporate union can necessarily be equated with spiritual dynamism. The merging of two half-dead churches does not make one live." Christians working within the context of NCC point out,
moreover, that the NCC constitution forbids that organization's participation in mergers.

A second objection is that there is a live "threat" of the abuse of ecclesiastical power. Christians opposing NCC feel that it speaks on subjects upon which it ought to remain silent. NCC is seen as too top heavy, and as placing too large an emphasis upon political, social, and economic issues. It is further argued that spiritual birth rates do not rise in churches that have merged and that missionary outreach and stewardship are not augmented. Others within NCC admit that this is often true, but that at the same time no appreciable decline may be traced.

Essentially, those opposing the efforts of NCC feel that many denominations may be expected within Christendom, and that denominationalism is a blessing and not a bane. The division at the time of the Protestant Reformation is the classic locus in history in support of this view. Division is felt to be both necessary and desirable.

The Christians who support and participate in the NCC insist that there is widespread misunderstanding of the nature of the work of the council. They feel that those who use clichés of "one Church and one world" fail to see the nature of the organization. The official statement of NCC is that it is "a fellowship of Churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour, according to the Scriptures and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit." The Bible is at the center of discussions: "The only valid authority in this fellowship of Churches is that of the Holy Scriptures." There is no "official" theological position of NCC or WCC except the above.

To be sure, persons active in NCC and WCC make public statements from time to time. Indeed, there are occasional statements that seem visionary, and which are prompted more by ecumenical zeal than by good judgment. For example, some very sweeping proposals of organic union have been made by leaders of the WCC and NCC. But none of these statements made independently by private persons reflect the official position of NCC or WCC.

The basic purpose of the WCC and NCC is that of being a forum of member denominations—a forum for the purpose of discussing matters of common concern. Each member is allowed, indeed encouraged, to bring his distinctive witness to the discussion. The minimum theological creed, as stated above, is the only theological requirement. No member denomination is required to conform to the theological position of any other group, and full veto powers are maintained. At the outset, WCC and NCC assume that no single group has a monopoly on the truth of God. They recognize that the Holy Spirit is evidently at work in the different communions of the world.
It is correct only to say that WCC and NCC create a possibility for eventual organic union of member churches. It is not correct to say that WCC and NCC legislate such unions. Any merger which takes place does so only as member churches pursue such mergers independently of WCC and NCC.

Christians who support the WCC and NCC are motivated by two fundamental questions: (1) Is the catholicity of the Church in danger of being lost in a maze of provincialisms and nationalisms? (2) Why can not Christians with allegiance to the same Lord share a common communion table?

**EITHER/OR OR BOTH/AND?**

The question arises: Can one be a member of NAE and NCC at the same time? Is it a matter of either/or? Is there a great gulf fixed between the ideals of these two organizations? It is the position of this editorial that one can conscientiously be a member of both. One does not have to choose on which side of the "fence" he must be. It is the feeling of this writer that only as the Christian engages in honest and open conversation with other Christians can he understand how much he agrees, or does not agree, on basic issues. Indeed, it is difficult to see ourselves as we really are until we come into sincere and humble dialogue with Christians of other communions.

To be sure, truth and spiritual unity must be paramount in ecumenical endeavor. It is precisely for this reason that ecumenical dialogue is never easy. Christ did not ever turn down a sincere invitation to dialogue, nor should his modern disciples. Any ecumenical endeavor which provides for the Christian an opportunity to bear his distinctive witness, and at the same time enables him to learn more of the Church universal, is more than an opportunity—it is a responsibility.