Ecumenical Bridges

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There is a growing concern to build bridges across the chasm separating Evangelicals and the rest of the World Church. Inasmuch as the true values of the ecumenical enlightenment belong to all areas of the Church, and inasmuch as all areas of the Church are experiencing in some degree an ecumenical awakening, it is inevitable that we should be looking across the chasm at one another with a new expectancy.

There are many today who say "We" in both the evangelical and conciliar contexts. Clyde W. Taylor, in his pamphlet, "Evangelicals Examine Ecumenicity," while assessing the movement from a critical evangelical stance, states, "We must first recognize that there are millions of conservative, evangelical Christians in the World Council of Churches." Many of these have built their own bridges and are experiencing a two-way communication across the chasm. On the other hand, it is recognized that many who are organically related to a conciliar church by conviction, and related as well by conviction to an evangelical understanding of the faith, are communicating very little at all ecumenically. What is the Christian responsibility at this point? This question, and the realization that many Evangelicals and Christians of other persuasions have no concourse with one another, when to have such concourse would further the Gospel's claims upon us all, is the ecumenical burden of this paper.

One encouraging reason for taking up this burden is the awareness of the creative influence of the Holy Spirit among our churches. The ecumenical spirit is becoming powerfully operative within the whole body of Christ. Most groups are responding only partially by seeking unity within their own traditions. Yet, even this response is having a profound effect upon our ecumenical awareness. Beyond this, many groups and individuals are reaching out with sensitivity to their fellow Christians and doing so without compromising the

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basic convictions that mean life in Christ. The sons of God who have found their Father in Christ now seek their brothers in Christ. The bridge-building is carried on with the firm belief that our diversity is a gift of God, but our dividedness is a hindrance to His Kingdom purposes. Those of us who build must build with a serious consciousness that humanity fails when we rely on our humanity, and with the confidence that the Holy Spirit succeeds when we respond to His executive will.

WE ARE ALL IN THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

The ecumenical awakening of our time has its roots in the Evangelical Awakening of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It began with the Protestant concern for unity in mission. It expressed itself in interdenominational and international missionary societies and Bible societies. The earliest of modern ecumenical alliances was the Evangelical Alliance formed in 1846 to promote Scriptural Christianity. In 1910, the great Edinburgh Missionary Conference was held and the "ecumenical movement" was fully on its way. The steady strides of the church in response have led to the effective work of the International Missionary Council, the establishment of National Councils of Churches in scores of nations, the associations of like-minded groups such as the National Association of Evangelicals, and the National Holiness Association. The ecumenical awakening has brought into being the World Council of Churches and many other world-wide church-related bodies. It has also brought the Eastern Orthodox Church out of its seclusion and into fellowship with other Christian churches. It has recently stirred the conscience of the Roman Catholic Church to begin an honest appraisal of the work of the Holy Spirit in the creation of Protestantism. It has created among Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox churches new stirrings of common Christian concern for a shockingly secularized world. Presently the movement which started among conservatives is once again being given major attention by conservatives. The National Association of Evangelicals has organized itself for united action with effective secretariats, centralized headquarters, agents in Washington, D. C., who raise a united evangelical voice in government affairs, and for social-humanitarian outreach across the world. Furthermore, conservative churches are merging; evangelical mission boards are in discussion over merger possibilities, and the National Holiness Association is discussing the federation of holiness churches. We have recently witnessed a World Congress on Evangelism held in Berlin, including persons from many denominations and many evangelical groups. The whole Body of Christ is taking ecumenical strides and is caught up in the ecumenical movement.

Obviously, the church is only on the threshold of where ecumenicity might lead us. Our efforts toward unity may be judged to be sound, forward movements, although they are still being carried out largely on tradition-bound islands. Bridge-building between these islands is in process and is gathering an increasing number of recruits for the task that lies ahead. Sensitive assessment of this process must indicate the serious care which characterizes the move toward one another. The beginning has been to observe one another across the chasms with intense interest mingled with anxiety as each ecumenical step is taken. Each step is taken with characteristic Christian caution. We are anxious and cautious because we are concerned about continuity, precious heritage, deep-rooted traditions. In the World Council of Churches each move is covered by detailed academic study. Among the Evangelicals each step is prayerfully sought as a directive of the Holy Spirit. Among the Roman Catholics, each ecumenical word is pondered by ecclesiastical councils. Can we not say that in spite of human frailty and obvious blunders, when we become over-enthusiastic and impatient, without checking well the lessons of history, that the Lord of the Church is in this awakening? At the same time, notice how much closer we are in understanding our fellow Christians across the chasms and notice as well a growing understanding of a "true ecumenicity" that is becoming common Christian ground for all of us.

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL AFFIRMATIONS

This common ground leads us to make some affirmations about ecumenicity; they are necessary for bridge-building. These affirmations arise out of our biblical and theological understanding of the Church. The ecumenical spirit is found in the major themes of the Scriptures. Passages of Scripture that relate to major themes place this dimension of ecumenicity clearly before us. It is a dimension of love: "You yourselves have been taught by God to love one another; and indeed you do love all the brethren throughout Macedonia. But we exhort you, brethren, to do so more and more" (I Thess. 4:9,10). It is a dimension of fellowship and partnership. It is found in the rich gift of *koinonia* of which the New Testament speaks so freely. *Koinonia* speaks of the common bonds which all men share in their nature (Heb. 2:14). It speaks of the fellowship of believers: "That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship [*koinonia*] with us; and our fellowship [*koinonia*] is with the Father, and with His Son, Jesus Christ" (I John 1:3). It speaks also of a participation in the Spirit (Phil. 2:1), and a partnership in the work of Christ (Phil. 1:5).

The biblical foundations for the ecumenical spirit are also found in the fervent pleas for unity and the consistent affirmations about unity in the Church. The Lord of the Church prayed that we may all be one that the world might believe (John 17). Paul affirmed that there is one body, one Spirit, one hope, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all (Eph. 4:4-6). He further affirmed that "by one Spirit we are all baptized into one body" (I Cor. 12:13). Each part of the body has need of the other (I Cor. 12), and we are admonished to "stand firm in one Spirit, with one mind, striving side by side for the faith of the Gospel" (Phil. 1:27).

The ecumenical foundation lies in the nature of the Church, which has the gift of unity bestowed upon it by its Lord, along with the task of affirming this unity. In the earliest of ecumenical alliances, the Evangelical Alliance, the avowed object was "to confess the reality of the one church, not to create it." Subsequent ecumenical theological studies have continued to affirm this belief. Does such a theological and biblical understanding of the nature of the Church give us any alternative but to confess this reality in living terms?

THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT IN ECUMENICITY

The ecumenical awakening is the work of the Holy Spirit more than it is the manipulation of man. Such a statement does not give blanket approval to all that has gone on in the name of ecumenicity, yet it does recognize the Spirit's instruction and inspiration to the church of the twentieth century. There has come over the church a humble and contrite awareness of division and estrangement and brokenness within the body of Christ. The church has reflected within itself a divided and sinful world. Penitence has brought the church to its knees to seek renewal. Fruits of the Spirit are manifested in love, joy, peace, patience, and new-found fellowship where reconciliation between Christian groups has been experienced. There has come a new creative impulse in theological research, in biblical theology, and in understanding the nature of the Church as that Gospel community which is to shape itself to the needs of the world as a servant church. Seemingly impossible chasms have been bridged as widely divergent member groups have found one another to be of the same body of Christ.

PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

There is a monument in South Africa raised in remembrance of the atrocities perpetrated by the British in the Boer War. As long as

that monument remains in the center of the South African nation to impress future generations, there is a barrier to the successful bid for peace and unity between the English and the Boer in South Africa. Similarly, the history of the church has been marred by atrocities committed by one Christian group to another. Monuments have been built to these atrocities in our memories. Such monuments must come down if we are to build bridges between "our church" and the rest of the World Church. We must all begin with contrition.

There is no need to minimize the formidable barriers that separate evangelical and conciliar churches. Furthermore, we must recognize the fact that we do not have specified blueprints for completing bridges of effective communication leading to unity. The church has been given no specific blueprints for any of its tasks. It has been called to creative adventure as the Gospel community. The plea is that the major affirmations made in the ecumenical spirit require of us the kind of venturesome faith that we must exert toward unity if we are to be the Gospel community in full capacity. The conviction is that we now have adequate materials from the Holy Spirit, and adequate common language and understandings for communication so that we may confidently say we now have a call to this. If the call is from one brother to another, that is encouraging enough. If the call is from our Lord Himself, then it becomes a command.

THE MATERIALS FOR BRIDGE-BUILDING

The materials available are many. We have the positive historical realities that give evidence of the high motivations of love for Christ's Kingdom and vision for mission which characterize the ecumenical concern of evangelical and conciliar churches alike. We have the successful achievement in ecumenical relations of the many who have experienced vital participation in both the evangelical and conciliar fellowships. We have the rich store of stimulating studies spawned by the ecumenical movement. We have many evidences, amid the decreasing criticisms of one another, of common respect and understanding for one another. All sides have exposed their doctrinal positions and their traditional heritage. The evangelical concern is for the "pure church," and the conciliar concern is for the "inclusive church" into which all are invited who "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 the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." These open commitments are known to one another. This openness should lead us to honest dialogue with one another rather than separate monologues about each other. We know each other. There should

be no condescension in our approach to one another. There is enough mutuality in our understandings for each to approach the other with confidence that there will be, not loss, but gain in the relationship.

There need no longer be a fear of reaching a mechanical rather than a spiritual unity as we approach one another. One cannot read and enter into either side's viewpoint on the necessity for spiritual unity without recognizing that mechanical unity is guarded against by all Christian forces everywhere in these days. The unity we seek is a spiritual unity. Both evangelical and conciliar groups have affirmed positively that the Holy Scriptures are the basis for such a spiritual unity. Though we may approach the Word of God differently from one another, we must still have confidence that God's Word will speak to us.

There is a common determination in both evangelical and conciliar church circles that we should have no goal of a "super church." We are in a position to trust one another insofar as ecumenical structures are concerned because we can determine our own structures. Independence is not endangered in ecumenical relationships as we know them today. There is deliberate avoidance of ecclesiological domination. The possibility of power structures controlling member bodies is clearly guarded against. The spirit of openness in structures that allows the Holy Spirit His freedom within the church is the concern of all.

There exists today in most ecumenical structures of whatever origin the liberty to witness to one's viewpoint as well as the liberty to participate in whatever fellowships one considers appropriate to one's own convictions. Ecumenical councils are forums where churches meet to discuss matters of mutual concern and where all member churches are made to feel entirely at liberty. Each one's witness is welcomed and respected. There can be no true ecumenicity without that which is given in the Toronto statement of 1950 made by the World Council of Churches which says: "Each member church may bring its full untruncated witness of the truth openly and joyfully into the Council and then give it full expression without holding anything back." In the framework of mutual respect and magnanimity of spirit which Christians should manifest toward one another, this liberty leads to growth and productivity in faith.

Evangelicals and conciliar church Christians alike recognize the essential value of cooperation to achieve mission. That recognition which has come through experience to all church groups is logically to be enhanced by a wider unity. The younger churches have stirred our consciences at this point. The absolute necessity of cooperation and unity of spirit and voice within the Christian church as we give witness to the non-Christian world has been made clear to us. Younger churches have furthermore given evidence of

the success in overcoming barriers and hindrances to the church's witness by achieving unity. The voice of the younger church is passionate and keen at this point as it calls the parent bodies to unity. This voice of the younger church adds one more encouragement to bridge-building and strengthens our faith for such a task.

THE ULTIMATE REQUIREMENT

The ultimate requirement is faith in the Holy Spirit. Evangelical churches and conciliar churches alike are His creation. Fear will quench the Spirit. Confidence in men will quench the Spirit. Unwillingness to enter into relationships with Christians of different theological persuasions, to discuss and to seek what it means to be the church, is obviously quenching the Spirit in our generation as it has throughout history as the church expresses itself in divisiveness rather than unity. We must have confidence in the Holy Spirit, who has proven that He builds Christ's Church through filling us with that perfect and adventurous love that casts out fear, and who still communicates the Word of God to human hearts. We must have confidence that the Holy Spirit is forming the Church of Jesus Christ and constantly bringing renewal to it. The form of that Church may not be what we now see, for our institutions are not permanent. That there will be continuity with the Church that has already been is assured, for God is creating His church. He who has given us the Reformation and the Evangelical Awakening is to be trusted as He stirs His people with the Ecumenical Awakening. Let us follow the Lord of the Church who prayed that we may be one that the world might believe. It was He who "loved the church and gave himself up for it, to consecrate it, cleansing it by water and word, so that he might present the church to himself all glorious, with no stain or wrinkle or anything of the sort, but holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:25-27).