INTRODUCTION

The emphasis on Christian unity in this twentieth century is as pronounced as was divisiveness in the seventeenth century. The word usually used to express this desire for unity is an old one recently refurbished for contemporary use—the word "ecumenical" and its derivatives. The word οἰκουμένη means 'the whole inhabited world,' as in Luke 4:5 when the tempter showed Jesus "all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time." In The Martyrdom of Polycarp (5:1, cf. 8:1; 19:2) the term occurs in a phrase which means "the churches throughout the world." Recently the term has come into general usage as the label of the present emphasis on Christian unity and especially of church union.

In this study a review of the ecumenical movement in Protestantism is undertaken for any help it may afford in evaluating present trends. The complexity of present trends is then noted before an evaluation of the whole is attempted. Finally, some guiding principles in Christian unity are presented. In this perspective new horizons in ecumenicity may profitably be envisioned.

LESSONS FROM THE PAST

The conscious effort to unite Christians goes back at least to the Jerusalem Conference (Acts 15). In its struggle for dominance the Roman Catholic Church achieved outward uniformity by the suppression of freedom. The Protestant Reformation in its struggle for freedom sacrificed unity. Thus, after Luther and Zwingli debated their respective positions on the sacraments, Luther refused to shake hands. He felt to extend the right hand of Christian fellowship, even to a fellow

Protestant, would be compromise. Melanchthon protested in vain the ensuing trend, a divisiveness which has plagued and embarrassed Protestantism to this day. One of the first to voice a protest over the divisions in Protestantism was Casper Schwenkfeld (1490-1561), a younger contemporary of Luther. The real thrust towards Christian unity in a divided and distrustful Protestantism came from "the Father of Pietism," Philip Jacob Spener, in the latter half of the seventeenth century. It was this evangelical Lutheran pastor who first popularized the motto, "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity." The unity which the Pietistic movement urged and exemplified was a unity of the heart, not primarily one of doctrine. While the Lutherans stressed purity of doctrine the Pietists stressed purity of life. Some fifty years later a son of Pietism, Count Zinzendorf, as zealous for Christian unity and charity as for vital piety, came to the American colonies for the purpose of cementing the bonds among the German-speaking religious communities. In this he was not successful since the German immigrants were not inclined to surrender their petty animosities and provincialisms in the interest of a more catholic spirit.

English Methodism is in the spiritual lineage of Continental Pietism no less than of the Anglican church. As a true Pietist and evangelical, John Wesley was consistent with the inner spirit of the Evangelical Revival when he preached his famous sermon on "A Catholic Spirit." But Wesley did not embrace the principle of Christian unity by softening theological distinctions. In his most elaborate theological treatise entitled "Original Sin" he could be quite intolerant of what he considered false doctrine, saying that he who did not accept the classical doctrine of original sin was more heathen than Christian. His bitter quarrel with Whitefield over doctrine did not, however, prevent him from delivering the main laudatory oration at the funeral of Whitefield.

**CENTRIFUGAL FORCES OF DISUNITY**

Historians have noted that denominational divisions followed in the wake of the Second Great Awakening in America. The

great revival itself was divisive as well as unifying, a re-

minder that even Jesus came to bring divisions in the earth 
(Lk. 12:51). In this case a division was between the "New 
Lights" and the "Old Lights." This was the era which saw the 
beginning of the first denomination which originated on 
American soil—the Disciples of Christ. Many factors con-
tributed to the rapidly multiplying denominations in the United 
States: the new spirit of individualism and freedom which was 
native to the New World, and the sheer spiritual vigor of the 
Great Awakenings, especially the Second (1800-01 A.D.),
which in itself contributed to the proliferation which often 
accompanies growth. Bigotry, sectionalism, and provincial-
ism were also heavy contributors. The result was a total of 
over two hundred and fifty communions of Christian origin. In 
some cases, such as the Lutheran, Baptist, and Methodist 
odies, as many as twenty-five smaller bodies splintered off 
the parent stem. Freedom of faith was won at the sacrifice of 
a corporate witness, so much so that often the Christians spent 
more time and effort in fighting each other than in confronting 
the unregenerate with a coordinated effort at soul winning. The 
unsaved were quick to take advantage of the situation and sought 
to justify themselves by saying, "When you Christians quit 
bickering and agree among yourselves as to what is true we 
will then take your testimony more seriously."

CENTRIPETAL FORCES OF UNITY

While divisive trends were spreading, becoming entrenched 
and gradually sanctified by time, contrasting trends in inter-
denominational cooperation were in process. The so-called 
"Ecumenical Reformation" really began in the nineteenth 
century rather than in the twentieth.

Four distinct historical expressions of the desire to Christian 
unity are discernible:

(a) The original impetus was in the area of missionary enter-
prise (highlighted by the British Bible Society in 1805 
and the American Sunday School Union in 1824).

(b) The second phase was the Student Union Movement in 
colleges and seminaries.

(c) Cooperation in international understanding among 
churches then followed, culminating in the World Council 
of Churches in 1948.
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(d) A distinctly evangelical phase of ecumenicity emerged as the National Association of Evangelicals in 1942.

(e) An ultra-fundamentalist reaction found expression as the American Council of Churches.

The British and Foreign Bible Society was essentially a missionary enterprise. This and similar societies ministered to all groups regardless of denominational affiliation. The modern missionary movement is unprecedented in that missions is considered the responsibility of the individual rather than the state as was the case during the Middle Ages and in the Reformation period. Such modern missionary societies enlist the support of widely separated churches and individuals. The Pietists were pioneers in the foreign missions movement. Moravian missionaries from north Europe were among the first Protestant missionaries, in the modern sense of the term. Other landmarks in the ecumenical movement of a century or more ago include the formation of the American Bible Society in 1816, the American Society for the Promotion of Temperance in 1826, the American Sunday School Union in 1824, the Young Mens' Christian Association in 1844, and the World Evangelical Alliance in Liverpool in 1846. The last was in the vanguard of a strong movement toward unity among evangelicals. Its two-fold purpose was to express the essential unity among evangelicals and to encourage the spread of religious tolerance. As such it was "the major expression of Christian cooperation in the nineteenth century."3 One of its achievements which survives today is the annual observance of an interdenominational week of prayer.

THE MODERN ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

The modern ecumenical movement is often traced back to the World Student Christian Federation which was organized at Oxford in 1895 with Dr. John R. Mott as one of the principal figures.4 From this enterprise came the World Missionary Conference meeting at Edinburgh in 1910. It is noteworthy that international, interdenominational conferences of this type originally stemmed from the missionary movement. This

3"Evangelical Alliance," Hastings, Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics.
cooperative endeavor came about as a result of several factors: It was a natural consequence of recognizing that Christianity is a world faith. Also the magnitude of the tasks on foreign fields made competition and duplication of effort almost absurd. Third, on the foreign fields the historical differences which brought about denominationalism seemed irrelevant and hard to explain to converts. Fourth, the confrontation of these Christian outposts with entrenched non-Christian ideologies accelerated the demand to substitute cooperation for competition. Competition was a luxury which the missionaries could ill afford. It became increasingly clear that a true perspective is virtually impossible apart from the insights and evaluations of the newer churches.

In 1923, at another gathering of the International Missionary Council, it was agreed that the work of the Council was not to formulate doctrines nor to press for cooperation in work which would "compromise doctrinal principles or strain consciences." Instead, they reported that, in their words, "We have experienced a growing unity among ourselves in which we recognize the influence of the Holy Spirit." A commission set up at the Edinburgh Conference in 1910 was authorized to study matters of doctrine and polity. Another was named the Commission on Life and Work which was to explore areas in which fellowship and action would be mutually advantageous. In 1938 these two commissions were merged to form the provisional commission for the World Council of Churches which was formally enacted at Amsterdam in 1948. The World Council embraces Christians of some eighty nations united in the confession of loyalty to Jesus Christ as God and Saviour. During the 1950's the number of nations represented in the World Council exceeded those represented in the United Nations.

Meanwhile, in the United States the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America was formed (1908), later to be known as the National Council (1950) and to become affiliated with the World Council of Churches. It represents some thirty million Protestants and about eighty denominations. One of the main concerns of the National Council has been in the area of

6Loc. cit.
social action, an area in which the advantages of cooperative action and witness are obvious.

In the conviction that the National Council represented only the liberal sections of American Protestantism, the National Association of Evangelicals was organized in St. Louis in 1942. Its creedal statement is much more restrictive than that of the National Council, yet is limited to a seven point creed. It conceives itself to be a continuation of the emphasis of the World Evangelical Alliance and a corrective to the liberal tendencies in the National Council. Its earlier negative stance is becoming replaced by more mature and positive pronouncements and actions. It has been particularly effective in speaking for the conservative elements in Protestantism on national and international issues.

To complete the picture it remains to be noted that the American and International Council of Churches are radical splinter groups, ultra-conservative in doctrine, which regard the National Council as reprobate and the National Association of Evangelicals as compromisers.

AN EVANGELICAL APPRAISAL

What is the attitude which a conservative, evangelically-minded person should take toward this movement in the direction of church union? To what extent and on what ground should he associate himself with such groups? In reply the "evangelical" often finds the main stream of the modern ecumenical movement wanting in the following respects:

(a) Leaders of the current main-stream ecumenical movement fail to sufficiently distinguish between Christian unity and church union.

(b) They fail to keep in proper perspective the difference between the οἶκοι Χριστού (world-wide organized Christian churches) and the Κοινωνία (fellowship among believers).

(c) The Lord’s prayer for oneness in John 17 is often taken out of context to support organic union rather than an underlying spiritual unity.

(d) Their leadership is largely limited to religious liberals and hence is not truly representative.

(e) Their leaders often presume to give advice in the realm

7W. C. Mavis, Beyond Conformity, p. 145.
of international politics which is sometimes amateurish, and often based on an unscriptural and unrealistic idealism, such as the urge to welcome Red China into the family of nations regardless of the moral and political considerations involved.

(f) Crusaders for the "ecumenical reformation" sometimes seem obsessed with the idea of a super-church while failing to recognize that history presents few demonstrations of the values of church uniformity. Such uniformity is seen during the Middle Ages and in today's state churches in Europe. In neither is there the spiritual vitality which church union is supposed to bring. On the contrary, in the countries of northern and southern Europe and in Latin America, areas where the church enjoys an institutional monopoly, there is complacency, dogmatism, and often an intolerance of religious minorities. However, there is not an exact parallel between churches with monarchical control and a federal union of varied communions.

On the other hand, evangelical Christians—those who consider a spiritual "birth from above" as indispensable and normal in New Testament Christianity—can ill afford to scornfully brush aside the widespread desire for international and interconfessional fellowship among those who name the name of Christ. Such a plea was given eloquently and movingly at the National Christian Conference held in Shanghai in 1922. The statement said in part:

We Chinese Christians, who represent the various leading denominations, express our regret that we are divided by the denominationalism which comes from the West...which however real and vital to the missionaries from the West, are not shared by us Chinese...there is an essential unity among all Chinese Christians, and...we have the desire...to a speedy realization of corporate unity.8

Some evangelicals recognize the resurgence of ecumenicity as a belated recognition that primitive Christianity considered itself one faith for one world.9 Actually, it is not a question

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as to whether one is favorable or unfavorable to the ecumenical movement; it is rather the basis and extent of participation. The only ones who do not believe in ecumenics are iconoclasts like Jehovah's Witnesses or isolationists such as independent congregations who oppose both Sunday Schools and foreign missionary societies because they allegedly threaten the autonomy of the local congregation.

EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANS HAVE OFTEN LED IN ECUMENICAL COOPERATION

As already noted, the early evangelicals such as Spener and Wesley were exponents of a catholic spirit towards other spiritually-minded persons however they might differ in opinions or "non-essentials." George Whitefield labored in the Atlantic colonies in a truly ecumenical spirit. Dwight L. Moody, both in mass evangelism and at his Northfield school and conference center, was a trail blazer in interdenominational cooperation. The ministry of Billy Sunday and now Billy Graham exemplify the ecumenicity which is fostered by cooperation through mass evangelism. The Christian Endeavor Society is an evangelical cooperative endeavor. Recent examples of the same spirit are seen in the National Association of Evangelicals and the Evangelical Theological Society. Even in these latter there is considerable latitude given in the area of doctrine. In the National Association of Evangelicals, Calvinists and Arminians enjoy both fellowship and a united witness.

In the current international "cold war" Protestants, Catholics, Moslems, and Jews, can appropriately cooperate as fellow-theists to challenge the threats of a militant, atheistic Communism.

WHAT PRINCIPLES SHOULD GUIDE EVANGELICALS?

The area and nature of cooperation depends on the situation. Just as Catholics and Protestants united in the sixteenth century to resist the Turkish threat to Islamize Europe so all theists—Christians, Jews, and Moslems—can work together as the condition of survival against atheists. Liberal and conservative Protestants can appropriately unite against a hostile Romanism, ecclesiastical totalitarianism, civic evils, and other matters
of common interest. Calvinists and Arminians can appropriately concur in support of Biblical evangelism or against an unbiblical "liberalism." Factors of opportunism and expediency are perhaps justifiable here; even as with Paul when he "became all things to all men..." and "being crafty caught [them] with guile."

1. Spiritual *unity* is more essential than either *union* or *uniformity*.

2. The basis for spiritual unity is a common *faith*, the acceptance of the grand central doctrines of the Christian faith.

3. Agreement on the reliability of the Bible is more essential than uniformity in polity or in the sacraments.

4. Evangelicals can be ecumenically minded more naturally than sacerdotalists, who insist on such things as "apostolic succession."

5. The most essential bond of union among Christians is belief in Jesus Christ as God and Saviour.

6. Tolerance of another's viewpoints is often a sign of maturity and not necessarily one of indifference.

7. A conservative Christian is justified in cooperation with other Christian groups, giving them the benefit of a doubt rather than permitting suspicion and pre-judgments to determine his attitudes.

8. Conditions determining participation by an "evangelical" might include the following:
   a. Participation in ecumenical groups is normally better than isolation.
   b. Participation should not be on the basis of surrendering one's distinctive convictions, but rather on the basis of sharing them.
   c. Professions of granting equal status and opportunities to evangelicals should be taken at face value until experience teaches otherwise.
   d. Patience and humility are essential in such inter-group gatherings; a participation on the basis of being willing to give and receive.
   e. If the choice lies between a liberal and conservative fellowship, the latter would be preferable in most cases; however, the better alternative might be the meeting of both liberals and conservatives, especially on academic levels.
f. The most articulate leaders in the realm of ecumenics cannot always be trusted to represent their constituencies. It is not safe to assume that their views will be derived from the Bible. Instances of this include the condemnation of Fair Employment practices in an editorial of United Evangelical Action in 1949 and the Cleveland recommendation by a committee of the National Council in 1958 concerning the admission of Red China to the United Nations.

g. Asbury Theological Seminary is in a good position to demonstrate the unity, variety and vitality which results from cooperation among evangelicals in theological education.

9. The World Council at Evanston in 1948 could not conclude with a communion service as planned. Such embarrassment would not occur among evangelicals.

NEW HORIZONS

1. Asbury Theological Seminary is in itself an expression of the ecumenical movement. With over six denominations represented on its faculty and thirty in the student body it is more cosmopolitan than most theological schools. This makes for cross-fertilization and vigor and inhibits the tendency to become ingrown and provincial. On the horizon is the possibility of this school's becoming the main evangelical center for post-graduate ministerial training in the Wesleyan tradition.

2. There are new fields to be entered, or at least existing relations implemented, in the inter-seminary relationships. Our teachers need the stimulus and insight which comes from participation in gatherings of other teachers and scholars. In many of such gatherings their contribution as scholars or witnesses is welcomed. In view of the fact that our alumni will certainly have opportunities for ecumenical participation, whether in the pastorate, missionary field, school, or evangelistic field, their representation in the inter-seminary movement should be encouraged. This should be a part of their seminary training.

The Inter-seminary Movement is a part of the World Council of Churches and of the National Council of Christian Churches. Its antecedents are in the nineteenth
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century when Y.M.C.A. was extended to the college campus in 1858. The Inter-college Movement was organized in 1875 and the World's Student Christian Federation in 1895. Prominent students in this movement include Henry Drummond, J. R. Mott, Robert L. Speer, Sherwood Eddy and others who later became leaders of various phases of the church universal. Dwight L. Moody in 1873 won Drummond to the cause of student evangelism. An indirect result of Moody's efforts was the conversion of J. R. Mott. In 1886 the Student Volunteer Movement was born at Moody's Mt. Hermon Schools and in 1895 similar Christian student organizations in Germany, Scandinavia, and Japan formed the World's Student Federation with Mott as general secretary. Gradually the work of the Theological Committee of the Y.M.C.A. became known as the Interseminary Movement and a meeting in Detroit in 1927 sponsored by the Student Volunteer Movement was a historical marker of note.

Under Mott's initiative in 1939 the Y.M.C.A. and the Joint Committee of the Faith and Order plus the Life and Work Commissions decided to share in underwriting the expenses of the Interseminary Movement. A greater degree of participation in this movement by seminary students should be helpful in sharing their witness and in receiving a broadening of horizons.

Faced with the threat of secularism at home and a militant atheism abroad, earnest Christians do well to acquaint themselves with other witnessing Christians as the condition of survival. The nature of this unity is spiritual rather than formal and the basis for a spiritual unity is Christ. Some of the most rewarding spiritual adventures in the decade ahead lie in the way of united evangelical friendship, witness, and action.

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10 Wm. Adams Brown, Toward a United Church, Scribners, 1946, pp. 31ff.