

Christian Unity

2. The Ecumenical Movement

The second of three addresses given by the Rev William Macleod at the Salisbury Conference in June 2005.

We have looked at Confessional Christianity. We saw the importance of having a good confession of faith like the Westminster Confession which summarises the teaching of Scripture and repudiates error. As churches we should be confessional churches which stand clearly for the truth. We should know what we believe and reject heresy. This of course immediately separates us from other churches which are either:

1. Broad churches allowing for all kinds of views or
2. Churches which hold to false doctrine.

I now want to look at the Ecumenical Movement which over the past hundred years has been trying to bring all the churches together into one organisation. The Ecumenical Movement argues that there should be only one church. We must all get together, they say, and then the church will be truly effective and all the world will listen to and respect the church.

Brief Survey of the History of the church

Before the Reformation there was only one church in Western Europe. The pope was the head of it. It was the ecumenists dream. Yet these were the Dark Ages – times of ignorance, superstition and awful immorality even amongst the clergy. The Church was powerful, but more often than not it was an influence for evil rather than good. Of course there were other churches in Eastern Europe – the Eastern Orthodox Churches. Also there were little groups like the Waldensians in the Italian and French Alps who stood apart and believed and proclaimed the Gospel. There were other individuals also who stood out protesting eg John Wycliffe (c1329-1384) and his followers who were called the Lollards. Starting from the south of England they reached as far north as Ayrshire in Scotland preaching the Gospel. There was Jan Huss (1373-1415) in Bohemia. He was burned at the stake for his evangelical faith. His followers, known as the Hussites, were also severely persecuted.

Then Luther appeared on the scene nailing his Ninety-five Thesis to the church door in Wittenberg in 1517. He was accused of being a schismatic, dividing the one mother church. But who are the real scismatics? Not those who stand for the truth, but those who promote error and so divide the church. God has a purpose in allowing heresy: "There must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you" (1Cor.11:19). It is a testing time for true Christians.

With the Reformation came greater freedom of thought. Every man had a right to read the Scriptures and an "unction from the Holy One" by whom he knew all things (Jn.2:20). Tyndale's great aim in translating Scriptures into English was that every ploughman have the Word of God and be able to read for himself: "It was impossible to establish the lay people in any truth, except the Scripture were plainly laid before their eyes in their mother tongue". Various Reformed churches appeared following the different Reformers: Luther gave birth to the Lutherans; Zwingli and Calvin to the Swiss and French and Dutch Reformed; Cranmer to the Anglicans or Episcopalians, and Knox to the Presbyterians. Then there were Baptists and Independents or Congregationalists. The Roman Catholics argued that these divisions showed the error of leaving the one Church. Surely the Reformation was a disaster when the Reformed could not agree among themselves and broke into so many separate churches. However, even in Rome there are and were divisions, for example between Franciscans and the Dominicans and the Augustinians and the Jesuits. Nowadays there are the Tridentine conservatives who will allow the mass to be administered only in Latin, and on the other hand liberals or modernists and of course the charismatics. The only thing that kept them together is the pope and for a while there were two of them competing – one in Rome and one in Avignon (Fourteenth Century).

The history of Church in Scotland is one of further divisions. The Reformation was presbyterian but episcopalianism was actively encouraged by the Stewart Monarchs who believed in the "divine right of kings" and an absolute monarchy. They wished to be head of the church as well as the state. Both churches remained as a result of the Revolution Settlement 1690, although the presbyterian Church was recognised, supported and endowed as the Church of Scotland. Also in 1690 some presbyterians stayed out of the national church and called themselves the Reformed Presbyterians because of the failure of the Revolution Settlement to recognise the National Covenants. Then further divisions took place in the 18th Century when in 1733 and 1761 secession churches were formed and, later, further divisions took place among them. In 1843 the Great Disruption meant that about a third of the Church of Scotland ministers left the Establishment to form the Church of Scotland Free. But in the following years there was some coming together. The majority of the Original Seceders and the Reformed Presbyterians joined the Free Church (FC). Two others of the Secession churches formed the United Presbyterians (UPs). Then at the end of the 19th Century there was a move for the UPs to join the FC. But the UPs were weaker in their Calvinism and wanted no contact with state while the FC believed in the Establishment Principle. Liberalism had weakened both churches. To facilitate union a Declaratory Act was passed in the FC in 1892. This allowed freedom for the individual minister in subscription to Confession of Faith. It demanded adherence only in the matters which entered into the "substance of the faith" and this was not defined. Basically ministers and elders could believe what they liked. The idea was that coming together as churches is good whatever people believe. Church leaders must find forms of words that suit everyone. They saw strength in numbers and in their pride viewed themselves as competing numerically with the Church of Scotland. So at last the union took place in 1900. Truth was downplayed. The Free Presbyterian Church was formed in protest against the Declaratory Act (1892) in 1893 and a minority stayed out of the Union of 1900 and continued to claim that they were the Free Church. The vast majority of the large United Free Church joined Church of Scotland in 1929. Today, for example in Portree in the Isle of Skye there are five different Presbyterian churches (along with an Episcopalian one, a Charismatic one and a Roman Catholic one) in a village of less than 3000 people. This situation seems far from the ideal.

Modern ecumenical movement

The modern ecumenical movement usually traces its roots to the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910 which met under the leadership of John R Mott. This was the first really international conference of a multi-denominational character. The motto of the Conference was the world evangelised in a century. How far short that ideal is from being realised. Surely a great reason for this failure is that evangelistic zeal is killed by liberalism. The ecumenical mindset is to accept all churches as true churches and from that develops the idea that all religions are equally valid as ways to God. If the Muslim or Hindu finds salvation through his own religion then why evangelise him? Various other organisations grew from this Conference. In 1927 a world conference on "Faith and Order" was held at Lausanne with some ninety churches represented but not the Roman Catholics or the Russian Orthodox. It discussed the questions which divided the churches. In 1937 a second "Faith and Order Conference" was held in Edinburgh with 123 churches participating under the presidency of William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury. A Life and Order conference was held in Oxford the same year. Both these proposed to set up a World Council of Churches (WCC). This was delayed by the outbreak of war in 1939. After the war the World Council of Churches held its first Assembly in Amsterdam in 1948. Dr Mott was a co-president. Bodies which made exclusive claims to the truth did not feel they could join initially and so the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Churches and most Evangelicals stood apart. However the Orthodox Churches are now fully involved. The Roman Catholic Church participates now from the sidelines. In 1965 they became members of a Joint Working Group. They became full members of British Council of Churches in 1973-74. Many so called "Evangelicals" are now also involved.

In the First Assembly of the WCC, delegates from 147 churches from 44 countries took part. The next WCC was in Evanston (Illinois) 1954; then New Delhi 1961 and Uppsala 1968. In 1998 at the eighth WCC in Harare, Zimbabwe there were 342 member churches involved from 120 countries, representing 400 million Christians plus observers for example from Roman Catholic Church. The ninth Assembly is planned for Porto Alegre, Brazil, from 14-23rd February 2006.

The "Basis of Membership" is a fascinating statement: "The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus as God the Saviour according to the Scriptures and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit". Few of us would disagree with this orthodox sounding statement. However the various churches can take it as they like and no discipline of a church is allowed for how it interpret it. The WCC is dominated by theological liberalism and left-wing politics.

Scripture Argument for Ecumenical Movement

John 17

The most commonly quoted verse in support of the Ecumenical movement is, "That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me" (Jn.17:21). Christ here prays for unity. It is argued therefore that we must unite. There is only one true invisible church of Christ which He has saved and of which He is Lord. Surely that church should have a visible united expression. But notice:

1. Christ is here speaking of a certain group – the elect given to Him. He first prays for the disciples and then prays for those who shall believe through them. These are to be brought in so that there will be one church.
2. Christ is not just wanting an outward superficial organisational unity but the kind of unity that Father and Son have in the Trinity. In practice there can be closer real unity between two evangelical congregations of different denominations than there is between for example two Church of Scotland congregations where one is evangelical and the other is liberal.
3. Christ is not here issuing a command to unite but praying that the unity which already exists would be preserved: "Keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are" (v11).
4. Christ is only talking of those in whom He is: "I in them" i.e. the regenerate. It is a unity of true Christians, of believers, of those who are born again.
5. Christ states quite clearly that He is not praying for the world. He is praying for those who were called out of the world and who are quite different from the "world". Sadly many of the big churches, so called "mainline churches", are just expressions of the world and its philosophies.

Ephesians 4

The second passage often referred to in this debate is Ephesians 4 and particularly the words, "Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph.4:3), and also, "Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ: that we henceforth be no longer children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine" (Eph.4:13-14). Ecumenists say Paul wants us to strive for unity. We must evangelise and work together and that will automatically bring unity. Leave doctrine to one side because doctrine divides. But this chapter begins with "therefore". It is building on the earlier teaching and doctrine. Paul in Ephesians 4 is stating that there is one body of true Christians (the invisible church). There is one Spirit who is in every true Christian and must be in us if there is to be the unity described. There is one hope of heaven. There is only one true God. There is one faith and only one way of salvation and not lots of different ones according to our theology. We must not be tossed about by every wind of doctrine. Paul is deeply concerned about doctrinal unity which is unity in the truth. Doctrine does matter for Paul. He wants unity of belief and holiness of life.

It is fascinating to contrast the ecumenical councils of the first centuries of the Christian era with the present day World Council of Churches. D M Lloyd-Jones states: "The great concern of the

former was doctrine: definition of doctrine and denunciation of error and heresy. The chief characteristic of the modern movement is doctrinal indifferentism and the exaltation of a spirit of inclusivism and practical co-operation”.

Reasons why the WCC and the Ecumenical Movement is Wrong

1. The WCC is concerned for unity with all, at all costs. But unity is not the most important principle in Scripture, though some apparently see it as such. There are also many calls in Scripture for separation from error and wickedness.
2. The WCC lays all the stress on unity of organisation yet there can be that, with relatively little true unity.
3. The WCC has little interest in truth. Yet the church exists to proclaim truth for essentially the Gospel is truth and doctrine. The great commission from Christ was to go and teach, to present the facts about Himself and tell what they meant. But in the WCC there is no commitment to a system of truth. Rather the Gospel is watered down to a kind of lowest common denominator teaching which can offend none but the true Christian.
4. The WCC in the main proclaims a false Gospel. It is that of liberalism: “Be good to your neighbour and all will be well” and that of universalism which teaches that at the end of the day all will be saved.
5. The WCC makes church discipline impossible. The Bible clearly teaches that the church should discipline heretics and immoral people. That is impossible if you are going to keep everyone together.
6. The WCC accept all kinds of churches and has no standard of right and wrong. It has no criteria for determining what a true church is or what the church’s sacraments are. The three traditional marks of the church are missing – preaching of the word, the sacraments and discipline.
7. The WCC is essentially pluralistic. It asserts that the different religions of the world are different roads to heaven eg Islam, Buddhism. It has thus lost all missionary edge.
8. The WCC is Rome-ward bound. It appears determined to set up one great church with the pope as its head. What could this be but the harlot and the Antichrist. Rome’s idea is absorption, and it will wait long to accomplish its goal.
9. The WCC is ridiculously politically correct. Christ tells us that He came to bring a sword, that is to offend man in his unbelief and sin and demand repentance, to set one against another, but here the attitude is that no one is to be offended by the church’s message. Everyone’s views are to be accepted as equally valid and so there is constant pressure against true Gospel.
10. The Gospel of the Ecumenical Movement is a Social Gospel. Charitable work is all that is important and the Church’s message is seen simply as an encouragement to love your neighbour. It dedicates all its resources to helping the poor and oppressed. However the biblical message begins first with loving God, honouring and worshipping Him, and only then does it turn to loving your neighbour

Let us look at three Bible verses which make biblical teaching on the Ecumenical Movement crystal clear. Jesus said, “Beware of false prophets which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves” (Matt.7:15). What unity can there be between sheep and wolves? False teachers tear the church like wolves would do to a flock of sheep. Paul states, “Though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other Gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed” (Gal.1:8). There is no soft peddling of doctrine here but a curse on false teachers. John declares, “If there come any unto you and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God’s speed: for he that biddeth him God’s speed is a partaker of his evil deeds” (2Jn.10-11). So the New Testament teaching is quite clear. Error is to be condemned and totally opposed because it destroys souls.

The Ecumenical Movement has not brought and cannot bring blessing. As it used to be said: “You can’t get a resurrection by uniting grave yards”. The Ecumenical Movement sets up the harlot of Revelation as over against the true church which is the bride of Christ.

Mixed denominations

A closely related issue is the question of mixed denominations. What should the attitude of the true Christian and the faithful minister be to such churches as the Church of Scotland, the Church of England, the Methodists and the Baptist Union. Some good and godly people are to be found in these churches and also some evangelical ministers. They have their reasons for staying in the big, broad churches. Some of the main reasons are stated below:

1. Some ministers argue that they prefer to fish in the larger pool of the so called "mainline churches". One missionary who had laboured for years in Africa came home and was called to a Church of Scotland congregation. He reckoned that there was not one converted person in his church. That is indeed a new mission field, but surely it is not a church – where even the elders are unconverted?
2. A minister in the large churches is respected and has access to many homes. That gives particular advantages in evangelism. This is especially the case as regards the so-called "parish" ministers. However does not society itself and the non-evangelical, unconverted leadership in the church not force such a minister to compromise and water down his message? If he will not do so he will soon be got rid of as awkward, insensitive and extreme.
3. Some argue for the possibility of greater influence for good when belonging to say the National Church. This should certainly be the case but these big churches have no clear biblical voice. What is the unambiguous message of the Church of England to the men and women of Britain? What has the Church to say on the sin of homosexual acts?
4. Others argue that the shepherd must not abandon the sheep. Good people stay in the big churches. So, it is said, that the ministers must also stay and not abandon the flock but rather feed and care for them, or they will perish. But should the sheep not be taught that for their own good they must follow the shepherd?
5. Some argue that you will never have a pure church on this earth anyway so we should just accept the reality of the situation. However the Bible demands that we must resist all sin and impurity in the church.
6. Others find comfort in that the old confessions still have a standing in the constitution of the church. That is true, but in reality these confessions mean nothing in the denomination. What does the Thirty Nine Articles mean to Archbishop Rowan Williams? They are certainly not a confession of his faith.
7. Often it is argued that those who leave the big churches soon fall out among themselves and further divisions follow. These further divisions make it plain that God's blessing does not rest upon those who separate. However we must take great care in how we read providence. No church on earth is perfect but yet perfection must be aimed at. Truth is vitally important and the Bible emphasises the danger of compromising with error and sin.
8. I have heard some say that they have freedom to preach and practise the Gospel as they will in the broad church to which they belong. However, I have had others, for example Church of Scotland evangelicals, say to me that they could not possibly preach as I did. There would be riot from unconverted elders and fellow presbyters. If an individual were to preach and practise as Paul did they would soon find themselves thrown out as a trouble-makers.

Reasons for evangelicals to come out of broad, liberal churches

1. If you belong to a denomination then obviously any member of that denomination has a right to become a member of your local congregation. Although you belong to an evangelical congregation, and by the preaching and teaching and exercise of discipline have succeeded in maintaining reasonable standards locally yet a non evangelical member (unconverted person) or group of members can come from another congregation and demand membership and you have no right to refuse them. This cannot be right and undermines much of the good work done locally.
2. In a mixed denomination there are ministers who do not preach the Gospel. They deny the existence of hell, undermine the authority of Scripture, and proclaim salvation by good works.

Such preachers are false prophets and yet you must regard these enemies of Christ as brothers in the ministry.

3. The large denominations in Britain are all ruled by unbelievers. They are dominated by liberals who have never experienced the new birth or felt the saving grace of God in their own heart. How can this be right for a true church of Christ?

4. Not only are the "main line" churches ruled by unbelievers but they are also almost always represented publicly to the media, to government and to the watching world by those who deny the faith.

5. The Scriptures speak clearly against women ministers, "I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence" (1Tim.2:12). Yet in the large churches one must accept women ministers as co-workers.

6. The Bible speaks about homosexuality as "vile affections" (Rom.1:26) and yet it appears that soon ministers who practice homosexuality will have to be accepted as fellow-workers. They are already accepted in many churches.

7. If you belong to one of the large churches you are duty bound to raise money for the denomination. Doing this you are raising money for liberals and to support these wolves who destroy the flock.

8. Virtually all the training colleges of the large denominations are dominated by false teachers. So if you belong to these churches and have a young man who feels called to the ministry you must send him into the hands of these enemies and hirelings to train him to be a true shepherd. Seldom will the young minister emerge unscathed from that awful trial. Is it right that ministers of God be trained by the devils agents?

9. Church discipline is virtually impossible in the broad churches especially if the individual being disciplined appeals to the higher courts. The only discipline possible is the discipline of those who are regarded as trouble-makers. The Bible asserts that we have a duty to practise church discipline for heresy and immorality but acting and protesting in that area will soon see you thrown out of liberal denominations as happened to some of us recently even in the relatively conservative and evangelical majority Free Church of Scotland.

The Bible's teaching on discipline

Very briefly we would like to summarise the clear teaching of Scripture on the question of discipline because this is relevant to our subject. When did you last hear of a heresy trial? Is it because no heresy around? Definitely not. But we are in an age when little stress is laid on purity of doctrine. Post modernism, pluralism and political correctness demands that we must all accept everyone else's views as equally valid. But Paul says "A man that is an heretic after the first and second admonition reject; knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself" (Tit.3:10-11). There is such a thing as heresy and normally it should be obvious to the person who has "an unction from the Holy One" and so knows all things (1Jn.2:20). This is impossible in the big mixed churches.

Similarly where there is a case of scandalous behaviour, e.g. immorality or drunkenness, note the teaching of Scripture: "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (1Cor.5:4-5). This also is impossible in the large so called "mainline churches".

What is the duty of ministers and Christians in these Churches? Personally I believe it is very clear in the Scriptures: "Be not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? ... Wherefore come ye out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord" (2Cor.6:14,17).

A Modern Example of Ecumenical thinking

Protestant Church of the Netherlands

On 12th December 2003 the decision was taken to form the Protestant Church of the Netherlands (PKN) from a union of the Reformed State Church (Hervormde Kerk), the Reformed Churches (Gereformeerde Kerken) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church (Evangelische Lutherse Kerk). The three synods met separately that day in Utrecht and decided by more than the two thirds majority required to come together on 1st May 2004. The process began in 1961 and was called "A United Journey". Basically it was an attempt to halt decline in church attendance. The PKN will allow subscription not simply to the Reformed Confessions, the so called "Three Forms of Unity", but also to the Augsburg Confession and the Leuenberg Concordance. But these documents contradict one another, e.g. on election the Reformed Confessions assert unconditional election while the Lutheran ones teach conditional election and on the sacraments the Lutherans assert consubstantiation – that Christ is invisibly present in the bread contra Reformed view which is that Christ is spiritually present as the believer by faith receives Him. But this new PKN is a pluralistic church in which office-bearers are no longer bound to a set of exclusive confessional standards. Also the new church officially sanctions same-sex marriages, women in office and paedocommunion (young children at the Lord's table). Some decided they could not join a non-confessional church like this which no longer asserts the confessional faith to which they subscribed at their ordination and so left. Others argued that they will remain in the large group to try to be an influence for good. It has been painful for families who are split apart by what has happened. There are more than 2.5 million members in the new church.

What we have here is unity at the expense of purity of belief and life. Certainly you would expect the influence of such a large denomination to be much greater than that of the individual churches but the problem is that there is no clear voice from this denomination. What does the church believe or stand for? Who knows? You can believe anything and be a member. It cannot even speak out against immorality or for marriage because it stands for same-sex marriages. No discipline for immorality or heresy is possible but only discipline for causing trouble, ie for contumacy. This uniting of churches is a trick of Satan to confuse and to undermine the clear Gospel message.

Free Church split of January 20th 2000

A certain man was highly honoured for his undoubted preaching and writing gifts. Rumours were heard of his alleged immorality. Many felt these things should be hid for the sake of peace. The individual was so idolised that many thought him incapable of immorality. He was so popular that many thought that to try him for immorality would split the church. Failure to follow thoroughly the normal disciplinary procedures and "covering it all up" was done with the best of intentions by some – for the good of the church. We must all stay together, they argued, and we must put these things behind us. They asserted that we must not do anything which will adversely affect the good name of the Church. An unconstitutional law was passed in 1995 forbidding anyone to raise these matters again in the Church courts and in 1999 all the documentary evidence that the Church had against the individual was destroyed by a decision of the majority of the Assembly. Eventually those who called for faithfulness and no respect of man in the Church's dealings with individuals were seen as troublemakers, threatened, then removed. The majority attempted to crush the minority. Who are the schismatics in this situation? Surely it is those who tolerate evil and who force out of the Church those who stand for truth and justice.

Reformers had three marks of the true church

The Reformers had three marks of the true church. We must ask ourselves are these to be found in our church?

1. The first mark of the church is the faithful preaching of the Word of God. If a false Gospel is preached in some pulpits is it the true church? For example if justification by works is proclaimed or if the physical resurrection of Christ is denied, can it be the true church? Surely not! Paul makes plain that anyone who denies justification by faith should be accursed (Gal.1:8). He states that "if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins" (1Cor.15:17).

2. The second mark of the church is the proper administration of the sacraments. Rome has seven sacraments. The Salvation Army has none. When we search the New Testament we see that there are two sacraments and only two.

3. The proper administration of discipline is the third mark of the true church. Where it is not practised properly can that be a true church? Surely failure to discipline destroys the church.

We should aim to have the purest churches we can get on earth. In aiming at that we would stress three points:

1. Purity of doctrine is vital. Cling to the whole truth, asserting it all, defending it all and denying none of it.

2. Purity of life is also essential. We are to strive for the highest standards of holiness and godliness among all the members of our church.

3. Purity of worship is also closely tied in. The second commandment, on which the regulative principle of worship is based, demands it. We are to have nothing in the worship but what God, Himself, specifically authorises in His Word.

Conclusion

The Ecumenical Movement is a great enemy of truth in doctrine, holiness in life and purity in worship. It is really the world taking over the church of Christ. But the Scriptures assure us that Babylon the great, the harlot, the false church shall fall, but the holy Jerusalem, the pure and perfect bride of Christ, the true church of God shall descend out of heaven having the glory of God and she shall stand for ever.

Rev William Macleod (June 2005)