

# Ecumenics and American Evangelism

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More than seven hundred delegates are expected to attend the sessions of the World Congress on Evangelism this October in West Berlin. Serving as United States sponsor for the Congress is the Protestant non-denominational review, *Christianity Today*, and famed evangelist Billy Graham has been named honorary chairman. In part this event will serve as a measuring device for the ecumenical progress made recently by many conservative denominations in this country and abroad. Whatever may result from the Berlin meeting for the evangelical Christians represented there, the real import of the Congress will escape Christians unfamiliar with modern conservative Protestant belief and practice, or who equate evangelical Christianity with a sort of simplistic "Bible-belt" mentality.

In this country, Catholic attention to dialogue with Protestant believers has been focused mostly on the numerically large denominations; this is witnessed in the official dialogues now under way with Episcopal, Presbyterian and Lutheran Church representatives. Interest in American confessions identifying themselves as evangelical, or conservative, is quite recent. Fr. John B. Sheerin, C.S.P., has pointed to the authenticity of the Scripture message these Christians proclaim in stressing "the need of personal responsibility and individual initiative in God's service" and in detecting "the pitfalls of a gospel that removes suffering as an element in Christian life."<sup>1</sup> A broad sketch of so-called "fundamentalist" attitudes and alignments in this country will give a context for the forth-coming discussions at Berlin.

The terms "conservative" and "evangelical" cover a wide spector of American Christianity, delineating a doctrinal position which cuts across strict denominational lines. The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, for example, has usually been considered fundamentalist in

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<sup>1</sup> John B. Scheerin, C.S.P., *The Catholic World* (June, 1965), editorial.



doctrine and until recently it held itself aloof from other Lutheran confessions. The Southern Baptist Convention is also designated in this way when compared with other American Baptist conventions. In general, evangelical churches are characterised by an adherence to the Bible which militates against the development of systematic theology, that is, a theology rooted in the Word of God but de-

pending on man's reason for its elaboration. Evangelicals fear that structuring Christian theology *upon* the inspired Word rather than searching for it *within* the scriptural source—which they feel adequately explains itself—will only lead to a mellowing and misinterpretation of God's salvific will. In the past this attitude took shape as a reluctance to participate in Protestant public life. According to the leading evangelical journalist, Dr. Carl F. Henry:

. . . evangelical withdrawal from the arena of public life came mainly in reaction to Protestant liberal attempts to achieve the Kingdom of God on earth through political and economic changes. The modernists so excluded supernatural redemptive facets of the Christian faith and so modified the proper content of the Christian ethic that, as evangelicals saw it, they had altered the very nature and mission of the church.<sup>2</sup>

Although conservatives will call for a return to a fully biblical Christian faith, it is not easy for fellow Christians with more broadly based theologies to precise the contours of this position. Since only a minority of American conservative denominations belong to either of the bodies now serving as their self-constituted spokesmen, this situation is likely to continue unless more agreement can be reached in the near future.

A good omen for the October meeting in Berlin was a gathering of some twenty churchmen last summer at Colorado Springs, where possible areas of cooperation among conservative Protestants were discussed. "It was the first concrete expression of our desire for closer cooperation" said Dr. G. A. Taylor, editor of the *Southern Presbyterian Journal* and leading participant. On another front, the Missouri Synod voted at its 1965 convention in Detroit to affiliate in 1967 with two other Lutheran churches; the result will be the new Lutheran Council in the United States of America. Last June the United Church of Christ, which issued from the 1957 merger of the Evangelical and Reformed Church with the Congregational Christian Churches, decided in Chicago to continue discussions for an anticipated union with Methodists, Disciples of Christ and the Evangelical United Brethren.

But if evangelicals, long known for their reluctance to engage in ecumenical activity with other churches, are having first visions of

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<sup>2</sup> Carl F. Henry, *Christianity Today* (September 10, 1965), editorial.

greater Christian unity, they remain fully aware of their somewhat paradoxical situation. Dr. Wayne Dehoney, president of the Southern Baptist Convention, expresses the Convention's dilemma in this way: "... if we want unity we must scrap our doctrinal convictions, and if we uphold our convictions we cannot have unity."<sup>3</sup> The concern of individual denominations centers around their attitude toward the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches, the two largest and most ecumenical-minded agencies in Protestantism. Also, invitations from the Catholic Church to send observer-delegates to the Second Vatican Council have sharpened conservative interest in a dialogue with Rome. But official communication with the two Councils and the Catholic Church, not to mention cooperation with fellow evangelicals, demands from these churches a re-examination of their theory of denominationalism: what it requires and whether it continues to be necessary.

### ***The Denomination: Key or Obstacle to Doctrinal Truth?***

Many American conservatives argue that although the oneness of Christians is a biblical teaching, this unity should be accomplished through spiritual as opposed to ecclesial means. They tend to interpret the current ecumenical thrust as the embryo of a super-church that would eventually assume authority over every Christian, destroying their understanding of the traditional Protestant principle of the "priesthood of all believers." Evangelicals stress that while some early inter-denominational efforts such as the Christian Endeavor youth movement were inspired by conservative churches, Protestant ecumenism at present is fostered by churchmen of what they consider a liberal theological persuasion. Christians in fundamentalist communions are wary of joining in efforts which they feel are more concerned with a blanket unity of believers than with doctrinal integrity. But the larger Protestant denominations hold that the cause of union among Christians deserves even more emphasis than it has received in the past, and seem willing to sacrifice in order to achieve this goal.

Dr. Addison Leitch, formerly president of the influential Pitts-

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<sup>3</sup> Wayne Dehoney, "Southern Baptists and Ecumenical Concerns," *Christianity Today* (January 29, 1965), p. 15.



burg-Xenia Theological Seminary, has pointed out that the World and National Councils gain their enormous support from churches that agree to lay aside some of their theological differences to satisfy this yearning for oneness.<sup>4</sup> In fact, this can be seen as the motive behind the establishment of the National Council at Cleveland in 1950. The delegates of each joining Church rose there to declare: "In the providence of God the time has come when it seems fitting to manifest more fully oneness in Jesus Christ as the Divine Lord and Saviour. . ."<sup>5</sup> And yet Council members continue to insist that the NCC is not "a church or a super-church. . . It is a medium through which members voice their common aspirations and convictions. . ."<sup>6</sup> This same assurance is given by the World Council, but the claim is of little help in quelling evangelical misgivings. The unity activities of the two great Councils often results in indignation on the part of conservative Christians. In their view, even Christian faith "according to the Scriptures"—a phrase the WCC added to its profession of belief in 1961—is of uncertain value for fundamentalist churches confronted with modern Protestant theology. "However loosely or stringently we wish to express their signification," Dr. Leitch warns, "the words 'according to the Scriptures' have all kinds of implications in the day of Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann, not to speak of John Robinson."<sup>7</sup>

The vast majority of American Protestants do not consider membership in either the NCC or the WCC as a surrender of denominational status; still, many are not opposed to discussion of this as an eventual possibility. In his widely noted *Church Unity and Church Mission*, Dr. Martin Marty, Lutheran faculty member of the University of Chicago's Divinity School, has called for a procedure with regard to denominations that would promote their ultimate transformation into a unified Christianity. For the present, however, Dr. Marty thinks Protestants should continue "living in denomination and being faithful to their disciplines."<sup>8</sup> This vision of

<sup>4</sup> Addison Leitch, "The National Council and the World Council," *Christianity Today* (January 29, 1965), pp. 6-8.

<sup>5</sup> *Foundation Statement of the National Council of Churches*, 1950.

<sup>6</sup> *NCC 1963 Triennial Report*, p. 41.

<sup>7</sup> Leitch, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Martin E. Marty, *Church Unity and Church Mission* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1964), p. 124.

Protestantism's future continues to draw negative reactions from fundamentalist communions; indeed, their own national agencies are largely reactions to the eventuality of a unity requiring doctrinal compromise. According to Southern Baptist Convention president Dr. Wayne Dehoney, ecumenism's objective can only be accomplished at the price of "perpetrating a colossal deceit upon the world in the name of 'The Christian Church'."<sup>9</sup> The Convention, Dr. Dehoney insists, is not apologetic for the divided condition of Christianity, since the only solution Southern Baptists see ecumenism offering Protestantism for doctrinal differences—and hence denominations—is an attitude of theological indifference. The posture of evangelical Christians on this matter and that of communions which disagree with them has been accurately but unhappily described as the "continental divide" in American Protestantism.

### **Fellowships for Conservative Witness**

The tendency to view American evangelicals as a body of smaller denominations opposing the ecclesial efforts of the World and National Councils oversimplifies contemporary Protestant conservatism. While it is true that as a group these Christians reject the ecumenical pleas of the two great Councils, along with their fundamental principle that spiritual unity cannot be attained without some form of organic church union, evangelical resistance in the name of doctrinal purity takes various forms. In fact, the two largest conservative agencies in this country, the National Association of Evangelicals and the American Council of Christian Churches, may be mutually distinguished by their attitudes towards the National and World Councils.

The NAE considers its attitude towards the NCC and WCC as moderate and positive; the Association has formulated a program for service and cooperation among churches which find it doctrinally advisable to stand apart from these Councils. It insists on "the wisdom of a constructive program as against one with a polemical and negative approach."<sup>10</sup> The unity of this agency is based, then, on

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<sup>9</sup> Dehoney, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> James DeForest Murch, *Cooperation Without Compromise* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1956), p. 59.

common action in the cause of common biblical belief; but at the same time the formation of a council of churches which would attempt to parallel the NCC is viewed by the Association as futile and unchristian.

On the other hand, the American Council of Christian Churches sees active opposition to National Council objectives as the only authentic method of maintaining a true biblical faith, given the dangers its member churches find in all ecumenical activity. This militancy is being sustained especially during the current trend towards Protestant-Catholic dialogue. The American Council contends that biblical faith will be preserved only if a council of churches opposes the National Council and supplies for its function among evangelical Christians.

The distinct views of both agencies are reflected in international counterpart organizations. During August, 1951, churches from several countries whose positions on WCC ecumenism and biblical interpretation in general correspond with those of the National Association met at Woudschoten in the Netherlands and formed the World Evangelical Fellowship. With a membership now exceeding twenty national groups, the WEF held subsequent conferences at Clarens, Switzerland, Barrington, Rhode Island, and Hong Kong. But whereas the Fellowship offers evangelicals a moderate channel for reacting to the World Council, the International Council of Christian Churches proclaims a staunch opposition to this body in the name of a scripturally sound Christianity. This organization, the world-wide arm of the American Council, is based mainly in the United States and is supported by only a small minority of Reformed Protestant churches.

It strikes their fellow Christians as unfortunate that belief in the integrating fulness of biblical truth should require the conservative Protestant to remain outside the dialogue chambers of Christianity; and there is an aspect of tragedy in the dissensions among conservatives which have resulted in further sub-division and separation.

### ***Is Christ Divided?***

As the prospect of the Berlin Congress next October draws nearer, we can expect to find American conservatives preparing themselves for full-fledged discussion of their beliefs. Evangelical denominations

are now selecting delegates and formulating their positions on traditional Protestant questions at synods, conventions and assemblies around the nation. The problems surrounding ecumenism have high priority at their gatherings. While fellow Christians pray for them, evangelicals re-study their response to St. Paul's question: "Is Christ divided?" (I Cor. 1:13) Are their denominations called upon to sacrifice traditional stands in order to achieve less division? Or rather, must evangelicals bear witness to biblical truths, as they understand them, regardless of how uncompromising—even unchristian—this testimony may appear in the eyes of other Christians? Dr. Oliver Harms, president of the two and a half million member Missouri Synod, recently described the new thinking of his formerly "isolationist" denomination. In announcing that the Synod is joining the other Lutheran Churches in an official dialogue with Roman Catholicism, Dr. Harms noted: "We have been breaking out into a world that is somewhat strange, always changing, and quite terrifying . . . old answers are being put to the test in our lives and in the marketplace where people live."<sup>11</sup> Along with his Christian brethren, the evangelical Protestant is turning to St. Paul for guidance and finds in the Scriptures that there is one Lord, one faith, one Baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and throughout all, and in us all. (Eph. 4:4)

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<sup>11</sup> Religious News Service, August 29, 1965.