



Protestant Ecumenism

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Although there have not altogether been wanting from the Protestant churches since the time of the Reformation sincere desires and attempts to bring about a reunion of the Christian churches, historians of the ecumenical movement customarily regard it as properly a development of the twentieth century. The pietist "Revival" of the preceding century may however be considered as having had a cer-

tain ecumenical character, and as having prepared the way for the present-day movement. The influence of the "Revival" was responsible for the formation of such interdenominational organizations as the Universal Evangelical Alliance in 1847, the Y.M.C.A. in 1878, the Y.W.C.A. in 1898 and the World Student Christian's Association in 1895.

The 1910 World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh marks the beginning of the Protestant ecumenical movement. This setting was a most appropriate one for the start of the movement, for much of the impulse for the ecumenical movement has come from the missions of the churches. During the course of the Edinburgh meeting it was emphasized how great was the obstacle to the spread of the Gospel in mission lands occasioned by the divisions so conspicuous in Christianity. Among other achievements of the conference, the International Missionary Conference was established not long afterward as a permanent body to promote the missionary efforts of the churches and to study the various difficulties involved in the mission effort.

Subsequent to the Edinburgh Conference, the formation of the Life and Work Movement constitutes the next step in the course of the ecumenical movement. Assembling in Stockholm in 1925 under the leadership of Nathan Söderblom, Archbishop of Uppsala, the aim of Life and Work was to treat solely of the practical aspects of Christianity. Under the slogan, "Service unites; doctrine divides," it sought to manifest the unity of Christians by a common working together and the application of Christian belief to practical issues. It listed as its concerns: "economic and industrial questions"; "moral and racial problems"; "international relations"; "education"; and "methods of cooperation and federation."

One of the things revealed by the conference was that doctrinal questions could not be altogether left out of the picture. What the nature of the church was had to be determined before it could be decided what its role in practical affairs should be. As a result, the second conference of the Life and Work Movement, held at Oxford in 1937, was much more alive to the importance of doctrine, and the way was clear for the joining together of the movement to that of Faith and Order.

Faith and Order was a second movement within the Protestant churches more or less parallel to that of Life and Work. It had its

origins in the Edinburgh Missionary Conference and was inspired largely by an American Episcopalian bishop, Charles Brent. The intention of Faith and Order was to study the divergent doctrinal systems and methods of government of the different churches, topics which had been excluded from both Life and Work and the Edinburgh Missionary Conference. Its first session was held at Lausanne in the year 1927. The concern of the Lausanne conference was with the fundamental ecclesiological ideas of the different churches, and it discussed such questions as that of the nature of the church, the signs by which the church is recognized, the church as visible and invisible, the confession of faith, the ministry of the Church, and the sacraments.

On all these points there was a tendency to split into two opposing trends, one termed "Catholic" and the other Protestant. The Catholic viewpoint was that of the Orthodox delegates and also of the representatives of the Anglican and Swedish Lutheran churches. This basic split is a very important one as it has persisted even to the present time.

The Movement of Faith and Order held its second conference in 1937 at Edinburgh. This was presided over by William Temple, Archbishop of York, and managed to secure agreement on a few basic points, notably on that of grace. There remained nonetheless very serious and fundamental differences, especially between the two fundamental divisions of thought.

The following year it was decided at Utrecht that the two movements should be combined in a new body, to be called the World Council of Churches. It was arranged however that Faith and Order would preserve a certain measure of autonomy within the new organization, maintaining its own "continuation committee." Due to the intervention of the war, however, it was not until 1946 that there came into being in Geneva the "Provisional World Council," which then was established on a permanent basis in 1948 at the Amsterdam Assembly.

The World Council of Churches stands very much at the center of the whole Protestant ecumenical movement, and because of its unique importance it will be well to describe it in some detail. As of 1963, the council included in its membership some 170 churches existing in 43 different nations. The council describes itself as a "fellowship of churches which accept our Lord Jesus Christ as God

and Saviour." A church is judged to be such by evidence of "autonomy," "stability," "reasonable size," and "proper relationship to other Christian bodies." Member churches need not recognize other member churches as churches in the true and full sense of the word, but they do recognize in them elements of the true church.

The World Council of Churches is not in any sense a super-church. It is simply an organization designed to foster consultation between churches and other organizations which exist to bring questions relative either to reunion of the churches or to the impact of Christianity on the world. At Amsterdam Dr. W. A. Visser 't Hooft, General Secretary of the World Council, said of the Council's function: "What then is the true function of our Council? Our name gives us the clue to the answer. We are a Council of Churches, not *the* Council of one undivided Church. Our name indicates our weakness and our shame before God, for there can be and there is only one Church of Christ on earth. Our plurality is a deep anomaly. . . . Our Council represents therefore an emergency solution — a stage on the road." Thus, the aim of the Council, at least in the conviction of many of its prominent members, is to foster such union among denominations that there may be ultimately only one Christian church.

The Council lists as its functions the following:

- (i) To continue the work of the two world movements of Faith and Order and Life and Work.
- (ii) To facilitate common action by churches.
- (iii) To promote cooperation in study.
- (iv) To promote the growth of ecumenical consciousness in the members of all churches.
- (v) To establish relations with denominational federations of world-wide scope and with other ecumenical movements.
- (vi) To call world conferences on specific subjects as occasion may require, such conferences being empowered to publish their own findings.
- (vii) To support the churches in their task of evangelization.

The spokesmen of the World Council are:

- (a) Ultimately the Assembly of all the member churches, meeting ordinarily every five years.

(b) The Central Committee, which numbers about one hundred members of the Assembly chosen by the Assembly. It meets once a year.

(c) The Executive Committee of the Central Committee which numbers thirteen or fourteen. It meets ordinarily twice a year.

(d) The General Secretariate is a permanent body and its officials are permanent.

It is necessary to explain briefly also the nature of statements put out by the World Council. At the earlier Faith and Order Conferences there were published "agreed statements," which represented some kind of a consensus of the delegates present at the Conference. The World Council does not make statements of this kind. Most, if not all, pronouncements of the World Council take the form of reports from a committee which are "received" by the Central Committee or by a subordinate Committee, and are "commended for study and comment in the Churches." It would be a mistake to take the reports as if they represented the judgments or opinions of the member churches; they may indicate trends of thought and perhaps widely held convictions, but they represent no more.

Apart from its truly ecumenical, in the sense of world-wide, aspect on the level of the World Council of Churches, the drive for Christian unity has also brought about other significant developments. In a number of instances, different churches have joined together in unions and federations of various kinds. These unions may be placed into three basic divisions. First, there are "organic unions" formed by denominations of the same general tradition. Here churches of more or less the same general nature, but differing on some point or points of doctrine and in organization, have come together with one structure of church order and administration. Among unions of this kind may be cited that of the Church of Scotland with the United Free Church of Scotland in 1929, and the union of the American Lutheran Church with the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in the late 1950's.

Second, there have taken place federations with less than full organic union. These usually involve arrangements in such things as appointment of ministers, collaboration in training ministers, divisions of territories and common publications.

Third, there have also occurred "trans-confessional organic unions,"

where different denominations of different traditions have come together to form one organic church. Notable examples of this have taken place in Canada where in 1925 Presbyterians, Methodists and Congregationalists united to form the United Church of Canada, and in India where in 1924 the United Church of North India was formed, mainly from churches and missions of a Presbyterian tradition. The most interesting of these unions, though, is that of the Church of South India, in that it involves the union of an episcopal church with others whose tradition was against episcopacy. In this case Anglicans have come together with Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Methodists to form a single church.

It is worth noting that the majority of the unions of this last kind have been effected in what are called the "younger churches," that is in what are more or less mission areas. It is here that impatience with existing division is the greatest and the desire to achieve unity most strong. The Church of South India, above the others, stands out as a kind of advance guard to the whole ecumenical movement: its ecumenism is far more thorough-going and radical than what is found in the traditional Protestant lands.

In Great Britain, in 1957, an interesting attempt was made to bring about a closer relationship between Anglicans and Presbyterians. The aim in this case was not to secure immediate organic unity, but to make tentative proposals which would lead to this. Representatives of the Church of England, the Church of Scotland, the Episcopalian Church of Scotland, and the Presbyterian Church of England drew up a report calling for certain changes to be made in the churches which would bring them closer to each other in their ways of life. According to the proposals, the Church of Scotland would accept "Bishops in Presbytery," who were to be consecrated by bishops, while the Church of England would give a much bigger role to the laymen, accepting something akin to the office of Presbyterian elder.

The four churches would remain "Churches," but would be in full communion with one another in "the one church of Christ," with interchange of communicants and mutual recognition of ministries. The principle underlying these proposals is that unity is the fundamental and paramount thing; that steps toward unity be taken first, and the more or less sticky issues resolved later in an actual context of unity. This approach has a good deal of merit, especially when

looked at in the light of the general fluidity of doctrine which is characteristic of nearly all Protestant bodies. However, in the final event, the proposals were voted down in 1959 by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, the judgment being that the proposals implied a denial of the validity and regularity of the Church of Scotland ministry.

It will also be worthwhile to consider here, at least briefly, some of the factors responsible for the rise of the impulse toward unity, as well as some of the developments which have come about in the course of the movement. One of the most powerful influences behind the ecumenical movement is the conviction that the Christian witness to non-Christians is seriously weakened by the divisions existing among Christians. The historical causes of the religious divisions of Christianity have little meaning for those in mission territories. It is found incongruous by them that there should be such deeply rooted division among those who profess a doctrine of brotherly love. Hence it is that the most ardent ecumenists are found among the Christians in these mission lands.

A second factor behind the impulse toward unity is the increasing danger from secularism and irreligion. In many cases the churches were not holding their people, or were at least failing to keep up with the population increase.

A third factor is the general tendency toward centralization characteristic of our age. Such groups as the Congregationalists and Baptists, which have traditionally laid much stress on the autonomy of the local congregation, have become aware of the serious disadvantages resulting from their lack of organization and coordinated activity, and have formed themselves into national and international bodies. And, more generally among the Protestant churches, there seems to be a fairly strong tendency toward combined operations and toward a modification of the traditional individualistic element, religious problems being seen more as problems of the group.

We must also realize that the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the prayers of faithful Christians are causes of the Protestant ecumenical movement. An Instruction of the Holy Office to the Roman Catholic bishops on the subject of ecumenism, in the year 1950, gives full recognition to this, saying:

The present time has witnessed in different parts of the world a growing strong desire amongst many persons outside the Church for the

reunion of all who believe in Christ. This may be attributed, under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost, to external factors and the changing attitude of men's minds, but above all to the united prayers of the faithful.

Within the ecumenical movement there are certain points on which there is found nearly universal agreement. Most fundamental of these is simply the conviction that all Christians must unite. Implicit in this also is the feeling that Christians must have active and positive charity toward one another, not merely tolerance. They must try to understand one another and recognize the good that is in others, both as churches and as individuals.

There is also general agreement that unity among Christians ought to be outward and visible and not inward and invisible only. There is considerable difference of course as to just what this would entail, but a greater number would desire an approach at least toward unity in doctrine and administration. And a third fundamental conviction is that the existing divisions between denominations are contrary to God's will.

Within this general setting of agreement, there has been a considerable development of thought since the initiation of the movement, and we will try briefly to present a picture of this development.

First of all, in the course of the movement there has come to be an increasing recognition that doctrinal matters are first in importance. The early stages of ecumenism were characterized by a tendency to minimize doctrinal differences, and to gloss over them by means of vaguely worded formulas that could be interpreted in various ways. In a short time though, the depth of the differences between groups became more evident. Now there is quite general agreement that these differences ought to be faced very frankly. Dr. Visser 't Hooft has stated for example, ". . . doctrinal relativism is not an ally but a danger for true ecumenism . . . the only unity we are concerned with is unity in obedience to the truth."

Furthermore, there is considerable sentiment against settling for anything less than complete organic union. Federation and cooperation tend invariably to raise questions of doctrine. What is the doctrine which will underlie the training of candidates for the ministry, for example? Inter-communion raises even more difficult doctrinal issues, the meaning of sacraments and the meaning of the church. More fundamentally, federation is against the will of Christ, in that it is

not full organic unity. For Bishop J.E.L. Newbigin of the Church of South India, it is strictly absurd, in the light of the New Testament, to speak of any plurality of churches.

A second development which the movement has brought about is, paradoxically, a strengthening of denominational loyalties. What has occurred is that the contacts among the churches have prompted many to seek a deeper understanding of the distinctive positions of their own churches, the result being a rather widespread revival of confessional or denominational consciousness. Insofar as this involves an increased appreciation of firmness in matters of doctrine and operates against a watering down of the faith, it is actually a development favorable to ecumenism.

It should be observed, though, that a variety of elements can be placed under the heading, denominational loyalties. Not only doctrinal matters, but also such things as customs, usages and sentiment are the objects of this loyalty. There is lacking any clear distinction between what is matter of faith and what is only custom, among nearly all non-Catholic groups.

But in this respect there has also come to be an increasing awareness that non-theological factors, social, cultural and political, have a significant involvement in the continuing separation of the churches. Studies within the World Council have pointed out many of these factors, e.g., past persecutions, church-state associations, involvement of churches in education, and have stressed that prejudices must be put aside and the religious problem not confused with anything other than itself.

There are also many signs of a trend toward a greater interest in sacraments and liturgy. Those denominations which have tended to observe a "preaching-centered" worship have begun also to center their worship around the Eucharist as well. The doctrine of the Real Presence has taken on more widespread acceptance than previously. There has been a rediscovery of the sacramental character of worship, and there has come to be a strong sense of the corporate nature of worship.

It is quite significant that there is now a recognition of man as a union of the spiritual and physical; there should be no opposition between these two aspects of his nature.

It is not that the importance of the inner life is diminished but it is set in the context of the human situation in which nothing can have its

full importance which is not human all round, physical as well as spiritual. For God did not create merely souls, He created men. He does not merely regenerate our souls, He regenerates us. (*Ways of Worship*, Continuation Committee of Faith and Order, 1952.)

On the question of the sacrificial nature of Eucharistic Worship, the same report states:

It is well known that both Luther and Calvin rejected this conception on the ground that the sacrifice of Calvary had been offered once for all and was not to be repeated . . . But recent studies of both the New Testament and the patristic evidence have led to a reopening of the question, and it is asked whether sacrificial language does not appear in a new light when the idea of representation replaces that of repetition, and when communion and offering are seen as two sides of the same thing.

The wording of the above is indeed cautious, but nonetheless it does give indication of a very considerable shift of thinking on this one question.

Finally, we should touch upon the attitude of the ecumenical movement toward Rome. Although some involved in the movement, Karl Barth, for example, had an attitude of evangelism toward Catholics and Orthodox, by which they would want us to drop such things as devotion to Our Lady and papal authority, others associated with the World Council of Churches look to eventual reunion with "Rome." The concept which these have of Christian unity precludes any resolution into two ecclesiastical bodies; they are not interested in some sort of pan-Protestant communion, but are seeking that single unity which is in Christ.

Characteristic of this school of thought is the assertion first made by the Lambeth Conference in 1908 and reiterated on three later occasions. "There can be no fulfillment of the Divine purpose in any scheme of reunion which does not ultimately include the great Latin Church of the West. . . ." But it is not only among the Anglicans that we find such sentiments. A certain appreciation of Roman Catholicism is now present among those of the Presbyterian and Lutheran traditions as well. So although even among those in the ecumenical movement many of the Orthodox and Catholic doctrines appear alien and not attractive, it would seem that the Protestant ecumenical movement takes account of us and will indeed try to come together with us.