

Editorial

The Ecumenical Hope

ALL who pray for "the good estate of the Catholic Church" will shortly direct their thoughts to Evanston. The World Council of Churches and the Anglican Congress which follows at Minneapolis rightly demand continuous prayer, that both may be guided and governed by "Thy good Spirit".

As the leading article of this issue suggests, Evanston not only spells hope but "a possible danger", and it is therefore important that every reader should weigh the issues, and thus approach these conferences with an informed mind. The study of a number of recent publications is indispensable for such an approach.

The first is the Burge Memorial Lecture on *The Meaning of Ecumenical*, by the General Secretary of the World Council, Dr. Visser 't Hooft.¹ This brief paper provides a rapid survey of the growth of the word from a merely geographical content in the ancient world, to its gradual adoption in the cause of Christian unity to describe "that spiritual traffic between the Churches which draws them out of their isolation and into a fellowship of conversation, mutual enrichment, common witness and common action".

The Burge Lecture is an introduction; a full and adequate presentation of the subject from the historical angle is provided by *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*,² edited by Ruth Rouse and Bishop Stephen Neill, a volume which is assured of a place among the most important text-books of this generation. Not only have the editors drawn on the best international scholarship available (the names of Kenneth Latourette and Norman Sykes among the fifteen contributors are proof) but they have resisted the temptation to publish merely a symposium of independent essays. Instead, the book was carefully planned, and the plan as carefully carried out. It falls in effect into two parts. The first three hundred and fifty pages, after an introductory chapter covering the period to the Reformation, describe the past four centuries of Church history in terms of attempts to recover unity. Even without its importance for an understanding of the present position it would be valuable as an historical study, for it provides a fresh angle of approach, and illuminates the significance of many lesser known episodes of Church history.

The second and larger part of the book covers the development of ecumenical ideas during the later nineteenth century (mainly through the work of voluntary societies such as the Student Christian Movement) until the Edinburgh Conference of 1910, and the gradual

¹ *The Meaning of Ecumenical*, by W. A. Visser 't Hooft, S.C.M. Press, pp. 28, 2/-.

² *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517-1948*, edited by Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill, S.P.C.K., pp. 822, 32/6.

emergence of the World Council which followed. The subject is treated exhaustively from several angles, and without careful study of these chapters no one can hope to appreciate the work and promise of the ecumenical movement, or to assess its dangers.

There is no denying that many evangelicals, sincere in their loyalty to our Lord and His Word and sharing also the ecumenical hope expressed in the Pauline phrase, "All one in Christ Jesus," have not been altogether happy about the World Council and its work. This later section of the book will relieve some of their fears, by stating and expounding facts which may have been unknown or misunderstood, but it will increase others. A case in point concerns the position of such bodies as the I.V.F. "The I.V.F.," writes Miss Ruth Rouse, "is in general unco-operative in relation to other Christian movements, and has caused a division on the Christian front in many universities".¹ The I.V.F. is dismissed as "not quite ecumenical" because, though in one sense a unifying agent, it has undoubtedly found itself obliged to be divisive in certain circumstances. Yet its decisions do not spring from factiousness.

The factors in the ecumenical movement which have created disquiet among evangelicals may be assessed not only from the History but from a study of another recent book, the *Report of the Lund Conference on Faith and Order*, 1952.² Here may be seen the ecumenical movement at work; and if there are questionings, there is much that cannot fail to provoke thanksgiving. The Conference has been well served by Dr. Tomkins' editing of this book, which includes the Report to the Churches, adopted at Lund, and an able and comprehensive summary of the proceedings, with transcripts of the major addresses. The representatives at Lund did not hide their points of difference and these have been recorded honestly; much evidence as to varying outlooks and interpretations throughout the Christian world is thus to be found in these pages.

It is good to note the emphasis on evangelism as a primary work of the Church, though it is inevitable that the meanings given the word must differ widely. "Faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, the original simple New Testament affirmation,"³ may be confessed by all the communions represented, but the "certain differences of interpretation and practice" allowed may in point of fact cancel each other out. This danger cannot be ignored.

Each serious and prayerful student of the ecumenical hope must form his own judgment, if he is going to play an effective part in the present movement. It is a movement which has come to stay; to ignore it would be self-condemnatory. If it needs guiding, that guidance must be given in love and prayer, and with the backing of profound and well-informed thought. Evangelicals are surely right to plead for an increasing emphasis by ecumenical leaders on the Authority of Scripture. It might be easy to say that fruitless hours could be spent in discussion on niceties of the interpretation of the

¹ *op. cit.*, p. 639.

² *The Third World Conference on Faith and Order*, edited by Oliver S. Tomkins, S.C.M. Press, pp. 380, 21/-.

³ *op. cit.*, p. 31.

phrase, but there is no doubt that those for whom Christ in His Word, interpreted by His Spirit, is the supreme authority have a unity which is recognizable and which far transcends anything which man may labour to create. Similarly, there must be further emphasis on the need of personal conversion; the doctrine of justification by faith has undoubtedly taken a larger place in ecumenical thinking of more recent years, but it is still too often over-shadowed by a superficial unity.

In this urge towards unity, which naturally is the ecumenical movement's greatest contribution, lies also its greatest danger. The representatives at Lund recognized that "we cannot build the one Church by cleverly fitting together our divided inheritances. We can grow together towards fullness and unity in Christ only by being conformed to Him who is Head of the Body and Lord of His people".¹ These are good words, but it is impossible sometimes to wonder how much they mean to those who framed them. The continual temptation undoubtedly is to engage in "cleverly fitting together" the divided inheritances. This temptation must be met and overcome. In this connection attention may well be drawn to a fact which emerges from both the Burge Lecture and the *History*: that the event which in modern times first made the word "ecumenical" a living expression was the formation of the Evangelical Alliance in 1846. The present movement places the Alliance in the class of those "nearly ecumenical but not quite", but it is worth reminding the World Council of this connection. For it is the Alliance who sponsored the Greater London Crusade, and this Crusade has surely been a most impressive example of true Christian unity—a unity which arose from devotion to a common evangelistic cause, in no sense artificially created but the result of the movement of God's Holy Spirit.

Is it not in such directions as this that a true unity will develop? Evangelism must be backed by theological thought and scholarship; nor is time wasted which is dedicated to the discussion of Church order and practice; but when the World Council is led into an evangelism which springs, not from an attempt to further the cause of unity but from a passion for the lost, only then will it come to the fulness of its power. Many of its leaders pray for this; and to this end ought all true Christians to pray.

¹ *op. cit.*, p. 20.