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A Conservative Evangelical looks at the Ecumenical Movement

BY JOHN WENHAM

The ecumenical movement confronts all Christians with a huge question mark. Is it a mighty movement of God through which the whole visible Church is to be made into the instrument which we long to see? Or is it a mighty device of Satan calculated to squeeze out of the Church all the things which we most treasure? Sometimes it looks like the one, sometimes the other.

The ecumenical movement contains within itself three powerful forces one of which is Christian and two of which are anti-Christian. It contains traditionalism, liberalism, and biblical truth. Traditionalism has always been a potent force in making the Word of God ineffective. It enables a man formally to hold the Gospel, while at the same time to replace it in reality by a man-made alternative. Liberalism is the arch-enemy of the Gospel. It dispenses with even a formal acceptance of the Word of God and replaces it with something directly contradictory to it. This is hardly a hopeful start for a movement of reform and renewal!

Yet there is also the biblical side of the movement. Amongst the Reformed churches ecumenism emerged out of the liveliest element of church life. It was the product of the missionary movement, which was largely evangelical and biblical in impulse. In the Church of Rome ecumenism is a direct product of the biblical movement in the church.

Which forces are going to prevail? Is an unholy alliance of unreformed traditionalism and unrepentant liberalism going to capture the Church and present to the world a vast amorphous organization, full of unresolved contradictions, adept only at mouthing meaningless ambiguities? Or will the traditions be reformed under the Word of God and the liberalism be swept out by a fresh apprehension of the Gospel?

Only God knows. To us the future is entirely open, offering the most glorious hopes and threatening the most dire dangers. It may well be of course that prior to the Coming Again of the Lord, there will be no decisive fulfilment of either our hopes or our fears, but I wish to give my reasons for believing that we should press forward in hope, at least until the pillar of cloud bids us stop.

The fact is that the Church exists for the glory of God and that Christ loves us. He takes no delight in our sins and follies and disloyalties. He intends to present us before God without spot or wrinkle or any such thing. He has long chastened us and given us a famine of hearing His Word. It is His way first to bring us down and then to raise us up. There are signs that the Church as a whole is becoming aware of its bankruptcy and of its failure to present Christ to the world, and it is beginning to hunger for spiritual renewal.

An unrepentant, disunited Church, as the Bishop of Bristol reminded

the Nottingham Conference, is the wrong shaped tool for the job. It is not that unity is an end in itself, nor even that a most effective testimony is not possible in spite of some disunity, as witness the massive missionary achievements of the divided church of the nineteenth century. The twentieth century church is rendered futile, not only by meaningless external divisions, but also by crippling uncertainties concerning its message.

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Schism is undoubtedly a grave evil. Small schisms inevitably attract extremists, and new groups show a tendency to re-split. The new "churches" harden into bodies with unbalanced emphases. A Roman Catholic, emerging from Tridentine modes of thought as a result of studying the Bible and contemplating a change of church allegiance, might well find the fissiparousness of Protestantism his greatest deterrent. Continuity of church life may not *always* be possible, but it is a tragedy to both parties when schism occurs.

It is noteworthy that revival seems more commonly to originate in the larger bodies than in the smaller ones. The Evangelical Revival, for instance sprang up mainly within the Church of England, rather than among the descendants of the evangelical dissenters. Splinter-denominationalism is a denial of the simple evangelical postulate that the bounds of the visible Church should approximate to the bounds of the Church invisible. Differences over minor points of doctrine or order are not differences between those who believe the Gospel and those who do not, and therefore should never split the Church. Even so far reaching an issue as that of infant baptism is not an issue between believers and unbelievers, and there should undoubtedly be room for Baptists and Paedobaptists within the one community, however difficult their presence together may prove to be to both pastor and people. Given a common devotion to the Gospel such differences need do no harm; they can provide a useful exercise in charity.

But groups with more serious differences sometimes have complementary elements, which make it highly desirable that the two parties should come together to resolve their differences and pool their resources. It is notorious, for instance, how conservative Christians often simply cannot find time to acquire expertise in some field of human need, if they are to get an adequate grasp of their Bibles. Similarly, liberal Christians may so give themselves to some sociological task that they have no time to discover the defects of their doctrine. It is no answer to say that they should both divide up their time equally between the two interests. They will both end off by being ill equipped in both fields. The fact is that they need each other. We need a church in which the most diverse gifts are poured into the common pool.

The ecumenical movement provides a meeting point for a great variety of professing Christians. The World Council of Churches, for instance, purports to be "a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." This is too slender a basis on which to found a great programme of united Christian outreach, but it is

a splendid basis on which to meet and talk. Faith in Christ is logically prior to belief in the truth of the Bible, though the one should lead to the other. We have no right to reject anyone's confession of Jesus as Lord unless he is a notorious evil liver or a notorious and wilful heretic. God's grace is given to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ, and we should love them *and trust them*, even if they seem to cling to much that is inconsistent with their faith. We cannot of course trust anyone absolutely any more than we ourselves deserve to be trusted absolutely, but we should look for the work of the Holy Spirit in them and expect that both we and they will be responsive to Him. We should be "always eager to believe the best" and so create an atmosphere in which love will flourish and in which willingness for reformation can grow.

Opponents of the World Council of Churches have been inclined to doubt the seriousness of its adherence to its basis and the willingness of the ecumenical movement generally to give a fair hearing to Reformed orthodoxy. With so vast a movement and with such a ferment of ideas in the churches it is of course easy to find examples of those who seem to sit very loosely to the basis, but it is my firm impression that the basis is taken quite seriously. And I believe that an informed and charitable statement of Reformed views is now not merely tolerated, but earnestly sought. Dr. Visser 't Hooft (as quoted in the *Church Times* of 7 May) recently said: "By far the strongest common tie bringing and holding the churches together is the Bible. The growth of the ecumenical movement took place at a time of the renewal of biblical theology . . . As the ecumenical movement enters into the stage of great complexity, its true value will increasingly depend on the seriousness with which it searches the Scriptures to find the right answers."

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The most impressive thing about the very impressive Nottingham Conference was the excellence of Father Verghese's biblical expositions. This more than any other single factor persuaded me that the hand of God was upon the Conference. In the sectional study groups the delegates seemed to be behaving like practical fundamentalists! There was doubtless plenty of negative biblical criticism latent in people's minds, but it remained latent. The conference was seeking renewal and it found itself experiencing renewal in the Word of God.

The Nottingham experience led last May to a request for biblical exposition in the Canterbury Convocation. The motion was proposed by an Evangelical, seconded by an Anglo-Catholic, ably supported by a "New Reformation" radical, and carried with acclaim. It received no notice in the press, but who knows whether it may not be the beginning of a new emphasis among Anglican leaders. I could be wrong, but I believe that God is in the ecumenical movement, in spite of its weaknesses.

And weaknesses there are. First and foremost, it was quite obvious at Nottingham that the conference had no clear answer to the most vital question of all: What is the Gospel? Here were Christians preparing for mission, but not agreed on the Gospel! The ecumenical fellowship is plainly not yet ready for mission. The typical ecumenist is not an evangelist. Worse still, it is a tragic fact that ecumenism all

too often robs the younger churches of their evangelistic zeal. Church leaders who have been reared on biblical teachings are deliberately sent to seminaries in which the Bible is severely criticized and in which traditions which have no place in the Bible are given high honour. When their courses are completed they return to their pastorates not knowing what to preach.

It is perhaps not fair to lay this situation at the door of the ecumenical movement as such. Rather it is probably the result, on the one hand, of the general decline of biblical orthodoxy in the twentieth century, and, on the other, of the inescapable inter-communication between the churches of the modern world. The liberalism which hit the older churches with such devastating force at the beginning of the century has now hit the younger churches. It remains to be seen whether, in the goodness of God, the Church as a whole will reject liberalism from its system.

It needs to be re-emphasized that liberalism is the arch-enemy of the Gospel. Biblical theism stands for the clearest distinction between Creator and creature, for the absolute distinction between right and wrong, for the reward of well-doing and the punishment of wrong, for the unity and perspicuity of revelation. Liberalism is pantheizing, blurring the distinctions between God and man, between right and wrong, embracing contradictions and ambiguities within its system of truth.

When liberalism takes on the cloak of ecumenism, it is the enemy of clear doctrinal statement. It has no idea of the unity and perspicuity of revelation, so it never expects to reach doctrinal agreement. It finds contradictory beliefs within the Church, but is not worried by them and does not think that they are capable of resolution. It deliberately seeks unity by ambiguity. It sets no store by the value of a clear, united declaration of the one and only Gospel of God. It is this characteristic of the Theological Considerations of the Anglican-Methodist Conversations which is so deeply distasteful to all who are looking for a clear statement of biblical principles. The whole statement is about as clear as mud, in marked contrast to the clarity of the dissentient statement.

Herein lies one of the great dangers of the ecumenical movement. A distinguished ecumenist once said to me, "We must kick them into one church". There will be attempts to force through union schemes without renewal and reformation. If they are successful the last state of the Church will be worse than the first. Every new union will lessen the clarity of the Church's affirmation. But genuine renewal will create an atmosphere of Christian love in which serious doctrinal cleavages will be felt to be intolerable. The contradictions will not be accepted, but will be resolved—literally by the grace of God. The whole Church will emerge with a clearer and a united grasp of the Gospel. Similarly, unity by majority vote is just not unity. We must seek God's face until we are given a common mind.

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Evangelicals often fear (and it is no idle fear) that they will be forced out of the Church as a result of a union scheme which makes some

non-scriptural principle an absolute condition of the Church's being. For instance, some Anglicans still wish to make episcopal laying-on-of-hands an absolute condition of intercommunion. This is the principle of the Anglican-Methodist report. This is also the reason why the Church of England does not in practice recognize non-episcopal presbyters of the Church of South India, in spite of that church's credal orthodoxy and of its historic episcopate. Such a doctrine of episcopacy is not a focus of unity, but an occasion for schism. The *sola scriptura* principle alone makes a true catholicity possible. If something not contained in Scripture is held to be *necessary* to the Church's being, tradition has made void the Word of God. It would seem to be a kindly providence which has allowed the "dark tunnel" period so effectively to separate the apostolic age from the later well-documented ages of church history. In practice it makes the distinction between New Testament teaching and ecclesiastical tradition a fairly sharp one. One of the ultimate divides in Christendom is between those (to use Dr. Visser 't Hooft's description) "who take their stand definitely on the Bible and those whose thought is dominated by other considerations".

One far reaching difficulty is that uniting churches have to agree not merely a common basis for the acceptance of new converts into church membership, they have also to agree some common standard for the acceptance of ordinands into the ministry. A one-point basis like that of the World Council is sufficient as an individual confession of faith and as a basis of Christian fellowship. But if Christians are to unite for a ten-day mission, they need solid agreement on a ten-point basis. When it comes to the continuing ministry, year in year out, of a whole Christian society, there is need for something like a fifty-point basis. Such a basis is not produced in the interests of maintaining a complex intellectual system, but in the interests of maintaining the purity and hence the simplicity of the Gospel in the midst of the complex currents of wrong belief. Such is the purpose of the Thirty Nine Articles and the Westminster Confession. In an ecumenical age the inherited articles of faith demand fresh scrutiny in the light of Scripture, with a view to the elimination of any elements which are over subtle or in any way questionable, and with a view to the clarification of more recent issues. It is idle to think that any great society can make a sustained and consistent impact without an adequate ideological basis.

Our great hope for the ecumenical movement must be that God intends renewal through it; that He intends to make the quest for unity in love a means to "renewal in the Word of God". If some rather woolly Methodists and some slightly case-hardened Anglo-Catholics can meet together in love around their common Scriptures, they will both be corrected and united by the divine Word. The Rev. David Paton's final appeal at the Nottingham Conference was an eloquent plea for a sustained and united effort by a great variety of Christian groups to come together to cross-fertilize each other, and to learn how to speak to this age in such a way that the people will hear what we say. This is a great need, and, if the Bible is at the centre of it, there is no reason why our common efforts should not result in a far more effective preaching of the Gospel.

I dare to hope that God intends to turn the great enemy of the

Gospel to His praise. Liberalism has not merely undercut the Gospel, it has undercut every type of traditionalism as well. Christians in all traditions have been rendered unsure of their faith by the common enemy. After centuries of complete separation they are being drawn together by virtue of their common faith *and their common doubt*. And where do they find unity? In a common New Testament. It is a stratagem worthy of Almighty God Himself that He should use liberalism as a means of reforming the apparently irreformable and of reconciling the hitherto irreconcilable. In such a context there can be a glorious expectation of entering into the length and breadth and depth and height of revelation as never before.

It looks like the verge of the Promised Land. We have not been this way before. There are terrible dangers ahead of us, but even greater dangers if we hang back. I believe that we should go forward until the pillar of cloud says "Stop". Let us work together in those things in which we are agreed, and let us be utterly honest with one another over those things on which we are disagreed. Let us steep our thought in Scripture, knowing that the more fully we are gripped by the Gospel, the less fearful we shall be of letting go of our traditions. Let us press on with reunion studies centred upon the Bible. (The real task of the Anglican-Methodist Commission is, surely, pre-eminently to foster such studies on a national scale.) Let us resist with all our might any bogus unity. Let us be absolutely firm in refusing any act of union which appears to undercut the Gospel, knowing that our firmness is part of the process whereby the divine will is made known. The removal of the difficulty will be itself an indication of God's continuing guidance. We must remain prepared in the last extremity to face the cost of schism, should unity ever be set above truth. But let us press on with prayer and thanksgiving, looking to the living God to renew us.

The Church of God: Invisible and Visible

BY ALAN STIBBS

IN our day there are some who—at least as far as the Church militant here on earth is concerned—deny the existence of any Church but the visible Church, and in some cases even declare that the concept of the invisible Church is a heretical doctrine. There are others, like Emil Brunner, who emphatically declare that the New Testament Ecclesia and the historical "Church" must not be identified. Both Roman Catholics and Protestants err, says Brunner, "in that they understand the Ecclesia of the New Testament to be the historical Church". Yet, Brunner has no use for the distinction made by the title of this paper. "Quite useless attempts have been made," he says, "to elucidate the relationship between the two