

ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT IN THE 21ST CENTURY: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

There are glaring efforts being made in christendom today to achieve a supposed structural unity, which the proponents of this movement claim is implied in Christ's prayer as recorded in John 17. This movement, called ecumenism, has a long history. The major goal of this paper therefore is to explore its history and appraise its acclaimed Biblical support. The paper also attempts to look at the various responses it has received in both orthodox and protestant christian churches. Finally, efforts are also made to identify some challenges the ecumenical movement might face in achieving a non-legislative end of its mission.

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INTRODUCTION

Ecumenism, according to Beach, (1974:15) "is the glittering word in today's religious vocabulary." More and more attempts are being made in Christendom towards the realization of this prophetic but threatening phenomenon which has been described as the "movement in the Church towards the recovery of the unity of all believers in Christ, transcending differences of creed, and policy With a view to the ultimate reunion of the churches." (Cross, 1958:977). Despite its potent challenge, very few Christians seem to be fully abreast of it. In this article, we shall briefly look at the history of the ecumenical movement, its prospects and the possible challenges it faces in the realization of its intended objectives.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Ecumenical

Etymologically the word ecumenical originates from the Greek word *oikoumene*, "the whole inhabited earth." The term has undergone several meanings. In the context of this work, the ecumenical movement may be defined according to Beach (1974:24), as the unity of "the universal Christian Church across denominational barriers." C. S. Lowell, (1967:11) rightly observes that "its forte is brotherhood based on the feeling that our differences really do not matter so long as we can eat together and talk together."

ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT IN BIBLE PROPHECY

What appears to be a biblical prediction of the ecumenical movement in the last days could be gleaned from Revelation 13: 15-17; 16: 12-17; 17: 1-6. John, the revelator, saw in his vision at Patmos Island the union of strange religions and forces at the end of time to accomplish a desired purpose-the enforcement of a contrary worship system. While in the context of this prophecy, some christians see the ecumenical movement as fulfilling an ominous prophecy, the ecumenists view it differently. To them the rise of this movement is the long-awaited fulfilment of Christ's prayer in John 17:20,21: (NIV)

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

THE RISE OF MODERN ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

Modern ecumenical movement arose from the series of efforts to end what Bishop Charles H. Brent called "the sin and disaster of sectarianism ... an attempt to restore meaning to the Bible's prescription of "One fold, one Shepherd ..." (Neufield, 1962: 37). The rise of modern ecumenical movement is associated with the World Missionary Conference of Edinburgh in 1910. This landmark interdenominational conference was followed by Stockholm (1925), Lausanne (1927), Edinburgh and Oxford (1937), Armsterdam (1948) and Evanston (1954). These series of conferences culminated in the founding of its chief organ; the World Council of Churches in 1948. At its inception it had 178 Protestant, Anglican and Orthodox groups in 50 countries.

Commenting on the historic significance of Edinburgh 1910, an international Religious Liberty promoter expresses that "it remains a great landmark of both missions and ecumenism; it became both the capstone of previous cooperative efforts and the foundation stone of modern ecumenical movement. (Beach, 1974; 84).

FACETS OF ECUMENISM

Modern ecumenism has been identified to have three facets. The first according to Lowell (1967:12) refers to cooperation or to a feeling of cooperativeness among churches. It pursues Christian unity of togetherness and cooperation and organic structure. Trends towards this type of ecumenical movement could be considered as seen in inter-denominational crusades such as the one which held in Lagos late 2001 under the name the "Millennium Harvest Crusade". It might also be responsible for what we may call "the cross-denominational crusades," where a clergy of a different Christian denomination is invited to participate or preside in the revival or evangelistic program of another denomination. Where this occurs, doctrinal differences are not emphasised.

Another type of ecumenical trend is the attempt to unite all world religions. Goncalves (2002) reports of projects for inter-religious encounter aimed at "helping religions to purify themselves, uniting in that which is essential and which transcends each of them individually." She further cites the effort of the Unification Church's Council to "assist believers who wish to examine the roots of the diversities and division within their own communities and facilitate ecumenical movements within the world's religions." (Ibid.).

A third aspect of ecumenical movement, seeks to foster "Christian

unity which envisages bringing all churches including the Roman Catholic, under one ecclesiastical tent" (Lowell, 1967:12). This seems to be the current direction of the ecumenical movement. In an article Survey of Church Union Negotiations 1996-1999, Thomas F. Best and other Church Union correspondents (2002), reported the efforts of so many churches in uniting. Countries where this is already taking place include the Philippines, India, South Africa, the United States of America, New Zealand, Australia, Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. Churches which are involved in this unification process are: the Anglican Church, Roman Catholic Church, Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (RCN), Evangelical-Lutheran church, Presbyterian church, Methodist Church, United church of Christ among others.

Africa is also not spared from the ecumenical wind. In fact, Hastings (1967,238) opines that the strength and weakness of Christianity in Africa lie in embracing or rejecting ecumenism. A similar position was projected by Mugambi (1998). It is instructive to note that the quest for ecumenism with "visible defining features" is not alien to the Nigerian religious society. This appears to be the thesis of Akinwale (2002). Similarly, Odum (2001), in an attempt to bring prophetic fulfillment into the attack on the World Trade Centre (WTC) in New York, on September 11, 2001, wrote that the World Trade Organization (WTO) is to New Economic Order (globalization) monitored with the digital microchip (666), *what the World Council of Churches (WCC) is to the World religions.* (emphasis mine). That assertion seems to affirm the fear of some as far back as 1948 when the WCC was formed in Amsterdam. Schwarz (1979:539), quotes an observer at Amsterdam who predicted that:

...the associated Churches could be led into unbiblical lines of development, which have little respect for the great principles of Protestantism and thus the world council could become a powerful weapon against rather than for the truth of God.

ECUMENICAL ASSUMPTION

The ecumenical movement's principal objective is the supposed gathering and or bringing together of all Christian bodies under one ecclesiastical umbrella, that is, an organic union of all Churches. This assumption that structural unity of all Christians under one big church has been alleged by many Protestant Clergy as God's ideal for His children. According to Hill (1963), a one time President of the Methodist Church in

England; "the fundamental reason for unity is that it is the will of God. These are exciting times and we have set ourselves an ideal so high that it seems impossible to attain." Robert McAfee Brown (1964), a Presbyterian ecumenist posited that:

Ecumenical activity must involve genuine reaching out from both sides, a mutual contribution and a mutual forgiveness, a willingness by both partners to walk along a new path together, not knowing quite where it will lead but willing to talk with a degree of risk because of the assurance that the Holy Spirit is taking the lead.

In the same vein Archbishop Iakovos (1964), who once served as the Greek Orthodox Primate of North and South America asserted that "those opposed to christian unity must ask themselves frankly whether they are christians." On the Roman Catholic front, Cardinal Augustine Bea (1963), as head of the Vatican Secretariat for Christian Unity forty years ago in March 1963 warned "the way will be long and hard, but the divisions of christendom are wounds in the body of Christ urgently in need of healing." This position seems to have been re-echoed by Bishop Floyd Begin (1963), Roman Catholic Prelate of Oakland, California Diocese when he declared "the division in Christendom is a scandal and keeps people from God."

ECUMENISM'S SCRIPTURAL APPEAL

The ecumenists have sought scriptural shelter to justify the movement. A favorite passage is the prayer of Jesus Christ in John 17: 20-23.,(NIV) (see also Mugambi, 1998). Though earlier quoted, it shall be repeated here:

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that world may believe you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me that may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

A correct exegesis of this passage however, does not lend credence to the ecumenists' claim of structural unity of all churches. Rather the nature

of oneness for which Christ prayed is certainly the kind, which exists between Himself and the Father. The Christians are to be 'in us' in the sense that the Father is in Him and He in the Father. In other words, Christ prayed for the spiritual identity of true believers in the oneness of the Father and Son. This spiritual identity can not be achieved by legislation nor in the midst of divergent and distorted theological beliefs and practices, as it exists in Christendom today.

Another passage appealed to in support of ecumenism is Paul's statement in Ephesians 4:4-6: *One body and one spirit - just as you were called to one hope when you were called - One Lord, One Faith, One baptism, One God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.*

A closer study of the entire context of this passage would not lead to a conclusion of call to the structural unity of a church.

CATHOLICISM AND THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

At the inception of the ecumenical movement, the Roman Catholic Church was non-committal. But its position changed dramatically when Pope John Paul XXIII appointed a Secretariat for the promotion of Christian Unity. The goal of this development was to promote closer relations with the non-Catholic churches. Neufeld (1976:411) however, observes that;

High-ranking Catholic spokesmen have made it clear that Catholic concessions to facilitate Unity cannot alter either the magisterium (the teaching authority of the church) or the papacy (its governing authority).

Beach (1968:294) also states that:

The Roman Catholic Church sees the unity of Christendom very largely in the light of herself as the only true Church. Unity will be achieved when the non-Catholics become Roman Catholics and accept the primacy of the Papal See.

He continues by asserting the general feelings held by the Catholics at present which is:

Unity promoted by the World Council of Churches is not in the last analysis against Rome, but unity is accomplished for Rome, which may someday in the distant future become a unity within the Roman Catholic Church. (254)

THE CHALLENGES TO THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

The ecumenical movement faces a lot of challenges and certainly some hindrance to the non-legislative realization of its objectives. We shall briefly highlight a few of these.

Variant Interpretations of Scripture

A continuous faithfulness to the Sola Scriptural (the Bible alone as the sufficient source of doctrine, faith and belief) principle of the protestant Reformation of the 15th and 16th centuries by a section of christendom is a prime factor that may challenge the realization of the ecumenical movement's ideology of structural unity. Some core biblical doctrines that set Churches apart include:

- The literal interpretation of the Genesis stories of creation and the flood contrary to the figurative interpretation by some christian denominations.

- The nature of man and his state in death is another point of departure; while some Christians biblically teach the unconscious state of the dead, majority of Christians believe and teach consciousness at death and the immortality of the human "soul".
- The nature of Christ, His atoning works as the basis for the sinner's salvation, the imminence, prime importance and nature of His second advent is also not harmoniously taught.
- The Christian community also understands the emphasis on the biblical Seventh-day Sabbath, its origin, purpose and perpetuity differently and it is a strong barrier to any anticipated Christian unity devoid of coercion.
- A group of Christians, the Seventh-day Adventists, also emphasize prophecy, including the conviction that they were prophetically

portrayed in Revelation 14 as having a commission to call people into a special reformatory work at the end of time. Thus it will be impossible to convince them otherwise in the quest for ecumenism.

Restricted Evangelization

Ecumenism seeks to promote the plan of dividing non-christian areas of the world and assign them exclusively to specific denominations for evangelism. The Biblical global mission concept with a special message of salvation of grace and total obedience as a proof of this in a believer's life cannot accept such evangelistic arrangement (see Matthew 28:19; Acts 1:8; Revelation 14:6-12). What appears an undercutting of this is the arrangements of inter-denominational crusades where different Churches come together to conduct an evangelism and converts could choose membership of any.

Ecumenism is also averse to one church seeking converts from another. This may not appeal to a group like the Seventh-day Adventists who feel called to awaken God's children everywhere to specific truths and are commissioned to sound the call "come out" (see Revelation 18:4) and not "come in".

Mundane Interest

While ecumenism may appear to give some immediate gains such as emphasis on Bible Study, some Christians fear that as the years go by, discussions might detour from basic salvation doctrines to economic, political, and social issues, which are in conflict with genuine Christian faith.

Ominous Reference to Ecumenism

Scriptural references to the ecumenical movement at the end of time are awesome. The Book of Revelation pictures this end-time religious movement as culminating in the elimination of the divisions between Protestants and bridging the gulf that separates it from Rome. This movement, which will enlist the support of civil authorities, is the great apostasy referred to as "Babylon the great". This movement shall then repress and persecute non-conformists - those who refuse to accept the false doctrines that shall bind the ecumenical movement, (See Revelation 13:15-17; 14:6-11; 16:12-14; 17:1-6; 18:1-4).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted a survey of the history and various facets of modern ecumenism in Christendom. It was also observed that the ecumenists' appeal to scripture for support cannot be substantiated. Christians who wish to remain faithful to genuine Biblical faith may find it difficult to embrace the ecumenical movement. Nonetheless, it does appear that the threat of the failure of this ominous movement may result to punitive legislation against its opponents. But rather than seeking the structural unity of Christians, God's imperative to His children is to embrace completely and eternally His revealed will and be united to Him.

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