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Ecumenism: At What Cost?

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Efforts in recent years to unify the entire Christian faith have grave consequences for belief.

By Gerhard Pfandl

In May 1997, Cardinal Basil Hume, spiritual leader of Roman Catholics in Great Britain, spoke at Canterbury Cathedral. In the presence of the Archbishop of Canterbury, he stated publicly that the primacy of the Pope was a necessary ingredient of any move toward Christian unity involving Rome.

Christian unity has become the focus of most Christian churches today. And why not? After all, did not Jesus say, "I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You

gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one” (John 17:20-22, NKJV).¹

Just over 200 years ago, in 1792, an English Baptist village pastor and village cobbler by the name of William Carey was instrumental in founding the Baptist Missionary Society. A year later, in 1793, Carey and his family became the society’s first missionaries. They went to India. In the years following, missionary and Bible societies sprang up all over Europe and America. Men like Robert Morrison, Adoniram Judson, John Williams, Robert Moffatt, and Hudson Taylor were sent out to the four corners of the globe to preach the gospel.

And what a job they did! Christianity increased from 23 percent of the world population in the year 1800 to 34 percent in the year 1900.² The century of mission, as the 19th century in church history is now called, increased the percentage of Christians in the world by more than one-third. Today, Christians are still only about one-third of the world population. In other words, Christianity made no progress in the evangelization of the world in the 20th century.

Although the Christian Church as a whole had tremendous success in evangelizing the world during the 19th century, tensions developed among churches and missionaries over the new converts. Sheep stealing became a common accusation that they hurled at one another. The heathen, therefore, began to ask: “How do you serve the same God, yet remain so divided?” The missionaries did not have good answers.

The Ecumenical Movement

This question was taken up in 1910 at the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, Scotland. One of the topics discussed was “How to Evangelize Without Fighting.” At the end of the discussion a resolution was passed, the goal of which was “to

plant in each non-Christian nation one undivided Church of Christ."³ But to do that, they needed some kind of unity.

At Edinburgh the idea of the ecumenical movement was conceived, but because of World Wars I and II, it took almost another 40 years to bring the ecumenical baby into the world. In 1948, 351 delegates from 147 Protestant churches gathered in Amsterdam, Holland, to organize the World Council of Churches. Since then, the ecumenical movement has made progress. Today, 349 churches with more than 560 million members belong to the World Council of Churches, whose administrative center is in Geneva, Switzerland.

Unity! Yes, but at what cost? There is no more sheep stealing, but there is also hardly any evangelization.

The Roman Catholic Church

During the first 12 years after 1948, only Protestant churches belonged to the World Council of Churches. Then in 1961 all the Orthodox churches joined.

The largest Christian church, however, the Roman Catholic Church, with about 1 billion members, is still not a member of the World Council of Churches. Until the 1960s, one could not really be a good Catholic and be ecumenical. In 1964, however, the Roman Catholic Church officially stepped into the ecumenical age. In that year, the second Vatican Council adopted the decree on ecumenism, which says that "all who have been justified by faith in baptism are incorporated into Christ; they, therefore, have a right to be called Christians and with good reason are accepted as brothers by the children of the Catholic Church."⁴ The decree refers to non-Catholic Christians as "separated brethren."⁵

The Catholic ecumenical position is very simple: The separated brethren ought to accept the supremacy of the Pope, and either become members of the Roman Catholic Church or

join hands and continue their existence as separate entities within the framework of a fraternal religious system. Some Protestant leaders are in fact seriously considering doing just this. In 1989, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, leader of about 70 million Anglicans, after his audience with the Pope, said: "For the universal church I renew the plea. Could not all Christians come to reconsider the kind of primacy the bishop of Rome exercised within the early church, a 'presiding of love' for the sake of the unity of the churches in the diversity of their mission."⁶

Popes Paul VI in 1969 and John Paul II in 1984 visited the headquarters of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, but the Roman Catholic Church still is not, and probably never will be, a member of the World Council of Churches. Nevertheless, there exists close cooperation between the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church in many ways. In a number of countries around the world, for example, the Roman Catholic Church is a member of the National Council of Churches.

Every Sunday, ecumenical worship services are held around the globe, and in 1991, for the first time in history, the Pope held an ecumenical service with two Lutheran bishops at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. After the service, the Swedish Lutheran bishop, Bertil Werkström, said: "The moment has come where we must say that the denunciations at the time of the reformation are no longer valid."⁷

In 1994, Paul Crouch, the founder of Trinity Broadcasting Network, told two Roman Catholic priests and a leading Catholic laywoman who were his guests: "In the essentials our theology is basically the same: some of these even so-called doctrinal differences . . . are really matters of semantics. . . . So I say to the critics and theological nitpickers, 'Be gone, in Jesus name! Let's come together in the spirit of love and unity.'"⁸

Unity? Yes, but at what cost? Truth is sacrificed on the altar of unity.

A Prophecy

In 1885, Ellen G. White wrote: "When Protestantism shall stretch her hand across the gulf to grasp the hand of the Roman power, when she shall reach over the abyss to clasp hands with spiritualism, when, under the influence of this threefold union, our country shall repudiate every principle of its Constitution as a Protestant and republican government, and shall make provision for the propagation of papal falsehoods and delusions, then we may know that the time has come for the marvelous working of Satan and that the end is near."⁹

In 1885, when she wrote this, the ecumenical movement, as we know it today, was not even thought of. At that time, not only were Protestants quarreling amongst themselves, but most were passionately opposed to the Roman Catholic Church, as some still are today in Northern Ireland. Over the past 40 years, the first part of this prophecy is being fulfilled. The second part will surely be fulfilled in the future.

Revelation 13

Revelation 13 presents two symbolic beasts supporting each other. Seventh-day Adventists have always taught that the first beast is a symbol of papal Rome, and the second a symbol of Protestant America. It must be made clear that when we speak of papal Rome, we are not referring to individual believers in the Roman Catholic Church but to a religio-political empire, an institution teaching doctrines based on the traditions of men rather than on the Word of God and with the political power to impose those doctrines. God has His people in all Christian churches, including the Roman Catholic Church.

Revelation 13:12 says, "He [the second beast] exercises all the authority of the first beast in his presence, and causes the

earth and those who dwell in it to worship the first beast, whose deadly wound was healed." According to this text it may be expected that sometime in the future, the United States will tell the world to worship, i.e., to obey, the papacy.

In 1888, Ellen G. White wrote: "Through the two great errors, the immortality of the soul, and Sunday sacredness, Satan will bring the people under his deceptions. While the former lays the foundation of Spiritualism, the latter creates a bond of sympathy with Rome. The Protestants of the United States will be foremost in stretching their hands across the gulf to grasp the hand of Spiritualism; they will reach over the abyss to clasp hands with the Roman power; and under the influence of this threefold union, this country will follow in the steps of Rome in trampling on the rights of conscience."¹⁰

"Protestants of the United States," she says, "will be foremost in reaching over the abyss to clasp hands with the Roman power." Are there any indications that this could ever happen?

On March 29, 1994, 39 leading evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholics—men like Pat Robertson and John Cardinal O'Connor—signed a document entitled "Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium." Headlines emblazoned upon newspapers across America proclaimed: "Christians Herald New Era" and "Catholics Embrace Evangelicals—Conservatives of Both Faiths Agree to Accept Each Other as Christians." On Reformation Day, October 31, 1999, Lutherans and Roman Catholics signed a common declaration on justification by faith, the very issue that started the Reformation in the 16th century. According to this document, Lutherans and Roman Catholics "are now able to articulate a common understanding of justification by God's grace through faith in Christ."¹¹ The remaining differences, it is asserted, no longer justify doctrinal condemnations.

Unity? Yes, but at what cost? The process of the ecumenical rapprochement is virtually wiping out the Protestant Reformation.

In 1995, the authors of *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission*, reported that “European Catholics and Protestants have concluded that the condemnations of the Reformation were based on misconceptions, were aimed at extreme positions on the other side and no longer apply to today’s situations.”¹² What would Martin Luther and the thousands who gave their lives for the principles of the Reformation say to that?

For years, the Christian Coalition has been operating in the United States. Ralph Reed, former General Secretary of this organization, claims: “The future of American politics lies in the growing strength of Evangelicals and their Roman Catholic allies. If these two core constituencies—Evangelicals comprising the swing vote to the south, Catholics holding sway in the north—can cooperate on issues and support like-minded candidates, they can determine the outcome of almost any election in the nation.”¹³

What does prophecy say?

“He deceives those who dwell on the earth by those signs which he was granted to do in the sight of the beast, telling those who dwell on the earth to make an image to the beast who was wounded by the sword and lived. He was granted power to give breath to the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak and cause as many as would not worship the image of the beast to be killed” (Rev. 13:14, 15).

The Christian Coalition, or an organization similar to it, could well become the instrument for the development of the image to the beast, which is the union of church and state to enforce religious laws.

The cost of this unity is threefold: (1) There is hardly any mission to the non-Christian world because it is no longer

politically correct to convert unbelievers, since all religions lead to God anyway. Christ as the exclusive way of salvation has been abandoned. (2) Truth has been sacrificed on the altar of unity. (3) The Reformation is virtually being wiped out. Nevertheless, through all these events prophecy is being fulfilled.

That They May Be One

But did not Christ say Christians should all be one? Jesus' prayer in John 17:21, "that they all may be one" is often cited as the biblical basis for the ecumenical movement. But what did Jesus really pray for in John 17?

In verses 11 and 12 He says: "Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are. While I was with them in the world, I kept them in Your name. Those whom You gave Me I have kept; and none of them is lost except the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled."

The prayer of Jesus in John 17 was not an appeal to the disciples to produce unity. The unity He referred to was already there. Jesus was not dealing with something at which the church should aim. He was not even speaking to His disciples or to us. He was praying to His Father that God might keep His followers in that unity which He, through His Word, had already brought into existence.

The essence of this unity was that between Father and Son (vs. 21). This unity is a spiritual unity, not some organizational unity. And this spiritual unity has always existed among true believers. It is not a superficial unity that negates God's Word for the sake of political or social goals, as worthy as some of them may be.

Those who are living at this time in human history are

privileged to see the fulfillment of prophecy taking place. They are privileged to have a part in that spiritual unity, which all true believers, whatever their church affiliation, share. It is a unity based on the Word of God, not on political or social manifestos. It is a unity that safeguards God's teachings, rather than changes and accommodates them.

True Christian unity comes from above. It is a God-created spiritual unity, not an outward organizational unity created by sinful human beings. As individuals, we may become part of this spiritual unity through conversion, revival, and reformation in our lives. This should be our goal.

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