

Unity—But At What Cost?

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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.¹

Christian unity has become the focus of most Christian churches today. And why not? After all, did not Jesus say, in John 17: 20–22,

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 (NKJV).

The Century of Mission

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 to the heathen. And what a job they did! During the 19th century, Christianity increased from 23% of the world population in the year 1800 to 34% 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

¹ *Review and Herald*, June 26, 1997.

² David B. Barrett, *World Christian Encyclopedia* (Oxford: UP, 1982), 3.

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other words, Christianity has 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 between different churches and missionaries over the new converts. Sheep stealing became a common accusation which they hurled at each other. The heathen, therefore, began to ask: “How come you serve the same God, yet you are so divided?” And the missionaries did not really have good answers.

The Ecumenical Movement

This question was taken up in 1910 at the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh. 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 in order to do that, they needed to have 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 forty 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 good progress. Today, 317 churches with more than 400 million members belong to the World Council of Churches, whose headquarters are in Geneva, Switzerland.

Unity! Yes, but at what cost? There is no more sheep stealing going on, but there is also hardly any more evangelization of the pagans taking place.

The Roman Catholic Church

During the first twelve 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 one 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

³ B. B. Beach, *Ecumenism—Boon or Bane* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1974), 84.

⁴ Walter M. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild), 345.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 346.

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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. And some Protestant leaders are in fact seriously considering doing just that. In 1989, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, leader of 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 1982 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 Cathedral in Rome. After the service, the Swedish Lutheran bishop, Bertil Werkstrom, 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 White, under inspiration, 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 three-fold 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

⁶ *South Bend Tribune*, Oct. 1, 1989, quoted in D. K. Nelson, *Countdown to the Showdown*, 41.

⁷ *Catholic Herald*, Oct. 11, 1991.

⁸ Dave Hunt, *A Woman Rides the Beast* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1994) 405.

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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 was not even thought of. At that time, not only were Protestants quarreling amongst themselves, but most of them were violently opposed to the Roman Catholic Church, as some still are today in Northern Ireland. Over the last forty years, we believe, we have seen the first part of this prophecy being fulfilled. We have confidence, therefore, that the second part will 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. Lest we be misunderstood, we must make it clear that when we speak of papal Rome we are not referring to individual believers in the Roman Catholic Church but to a religious-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.

In Revelation 13:12 it says: “And 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 we may expect that sometime in the future the United States will tell the world to worship, i.e., to obey, the papacy.

In 1888, Ellen 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 the 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 three-fold 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.” Do we have any indications that this could ever happen? Yes, we do. On March 29, 1994, thirty-nine 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

⁹ *Testimonies to the Church*, 5:451.

¹⁰ *The Great Controversy*, 588.

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emblazoned upon newspapers across America proclaimed: “Christians Herald New Era” and “Catholics Embrace Evangelicals—Conservatives of Both Faiths Agreed to Accept Each Other As Christians.” Just last year, on Reformation Day, October 31, 1999, Lutherans and Roman Catholics signed a common declaration on justification by faith—the very issue which 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, we are told, 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 book “Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission” was published. The authors 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 We wonder what Martin Luther and the thousands who gave their lives for the principles of the Reformation would say to that?

For a few years now, 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 deceived 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 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.

¹¹ *Adventist Review*, June 22, 2000, 8.

¹² Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus, *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Working Toward a Common Mission* (Dallas: Word, 1995), 108.

¹³ Ralph Reed, *Mainstream Values Are No Longer Politically Incorrect: The Emerging Faith Factor in American Politics* (Dallas: Word, 1994), 16.

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Unity? Yes, but at what cost? (1) There is hardly any mission to the heathen, because it is no longer politically correct to convert pagans, 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 may all 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 is not an appeal to the disciples to produce unity. The unity He refers to is already there. Jesus is not dealing with something at which the church should aim. He is not even speaking to His disciples or to us—He is praying to His Father that God may keep His followers in that unity which He, through His Word, has already brought into existence. The essence of that unity is the unity between Father and Son (verse 21). This unity is a spiritual unity, not some organizational unity. And this spiritual unity has always existed amongst true believers. It is not a superficial unity which negates God's Word for the sake of political or social goals, as worthy as some of them may be.

Conclusion

As Seventh-day Adventists we are privileged to see the fulfillment of prophecy taking place. We 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 which safeguards God's teachings, rather than change and accommodate 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. To experience this spiritual unity should be the goal of every Seventh-day Adventist.

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