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Is Organic

By DANIEL WALTHER

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MAN has always sought strength and comfort through unity, especially in times that try men's hearts. The search for unity is characteristic of Christian churches today. After many attempts to draw together, Protestants seem closer than ever. They are eager also to explore means to include Roman Catholics in this *rapprochement*. Hope has been expressed that at long last the "scandal" of disunity may have been considerably lessened.

There is, at present, an almost impatient thrust toward organic unity. Mergers on a grand scale are proposed, and in part already realized. Yet persistent and irritating hurdles seem to jeopardize the endeavors.

The accomplishments of the various ecumenical movements are admittedly impressive. However, at the Edinburgh Conference in 1910, which launched the modern ecumenical movement, doubts were already being entertained as to the feasibility of organic union. But the movement has not only survived; it has grown. The need for unity was urgently felt on the home front as well as in foreign fields. At increasingly numerous meetings all possible means to press the drive for oneness were sought. That has been especially true in what came to be known as the Faith and Order Commission, to which was given the difficult, if not impossible, task of forging a bond of unity in doctrine. But some ecclesiastical leaders, who are impatient for concrete results, want to get on with merger irrespective of doctrinal differences.

Ecumenical progress is also revealed in membership. When the World Council of Churches (WCC) came into existence in 1948 in Amsterdam, churches holding membership numbered 136; there are now 209.

The Protestant-Catholic Dialog

Progress is being made in the dialog between Protestants and Catholics. True, such encounters have been held since Reformation times, but never

with the coordinated intensity that we see today. At recent meetings of the WCC, Catholic participants are heard more frequently. Among Catholics, ten years ago, ecumenism was relegated to the side lines and left to a few specialists like the late Gustav Weigel. Today there is a U.S. Bishops' Commission for Ecumenical Affairs.

The WCC has met with practical results in its foray into the arena of public affairs. It gives advice to governments from time to time on international and political issues. Through the efforts of the WCC 265,000 refugees have been resettled. This work goes on at the rate of a thousand a month. In July, 1966, the World Conference on Church and Society, sponsored by the WCC, was held in Geneva. It sought to increase the means of mutual help, and to have the World Council adopt certain basic concepts of Christian social teaching.

One obvious justification for the ecumenical movement has been the appalling proliferation of denominations. Many a denomination is subdivided into numerous branches, each claiming to have the truth and trying to convert the others. This type of Christianity is now considered obsolete. The claim to possess dogmatic truth caused insurmountable hedges and bitter resentments. Theological particularism developed a monumental denominational egotism, and divisive organizations obscured the basic aims of the gospel.

To be sure, "how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" There is a genuine yearning to reach across man-made barriers and to seek fellowship with all believers. It is good to talk to one another. It may be good to visit in one another's churches and to exchange pulpits occasionally. It is pleasant for all ministers to come together and "compare notes." In the Old World as well as in the United States, Protestant places of worship have been used interchangeably. It is good that in serving the community,

all Christians should make concerted efforts in behalf of the needy. These and other practices have long existed and do not necessarily depend on a world federation of churches.

Obstacles to Organic Union

Well-meant criticism of ecumenical experiments comes not only from the so-called conservative Evangelicals but also from within the movement itself. To cite one example: In 1963 a work by 14 contributors, *Unity in Mid-Career; An Ecumenical Critique* (New York, 1963), engaged in self-examination and self-indictment. One significant criticism from within ecumenism is voiced by the Orthodox Church, which claims that the fundamental issue was obscured by a basic misunderstanding. The fundamental idea, according to Orthodox priest A. Schmemmann, is not unity but truth. Unity, he points out, is nothing else than the natural consequence of truth; to seek after organic unity *per se* is to ignore the living tradition of the church.

One basic worry derives from a misunderstanding of the nature of the unity that is being sought. Christian unity has been the yearning of the church since it began in the first century. What, precisely, is the nature of the unity being sought today: unity in spirit, or method? Is it a seeking after a common denominator in aims, teachings, liturgy, and the administering of the sacraments?

Christian oneness is not easily defined, and even more difficult to put into practice. The Reformers were far from being united on the meaning of the *Una Sancta* (the "One Holy" church). In order to have unity in spirit there must be a mutually acceptable authority. The authority which, traditionally, the Protestants have stood on is the Bible, or, in a larger sense, the *Word*. The Protestant genius allows for individual interpretations, a direct reaching for God without necessarily requiring the assistance of a church.

Christian Unity Possible?

An analysis of the difficulties that confront Christendom along the road to church union.

Another criticism that keeps recurring has to do with the concept of a super church. Well aware of this criticism, ecumenical leaders have often given the assurance that they have no intention of creating a super church, a "monolithic" structure. These assurances are sincere. But the apprehension persists. The history of the Christian church shows that, usually, a movement that started in simplicity soon becomes not only complex but tends to move to awesome power.

The ecumenical idea was to seek a common denominator among all Christians, but to respect the identity of each member denomination. E. Stanley Jones used to illustrate this in a rather homely way. Ecumenism, he said, is like a pair of pants; each leg walks separately but they are united at the top! It is precisely the "top" that some are concerned about. Much uneasiness continues to exist about an organization moving toward a unified command. Many are afraid of a super church, even as they fear a super state. There is an abiding need among Christian churches for check and balance. The various branches of Christendom have their contributions to make. Why this seeking after bigness? Why a consolidated "one church" which may lead to central power, losing its sense of mission, which is to bring a message of certainty and comfort to frightened, lonely men?

Another element appears to jeopardize the very idea of unity. Ecumenism itself is divided into many branches. There is the old-fashioned, somewhat obsolete ecumenism; but we have also a "private" and an "anonymous" ecumenism and, recently, a "rebellious" ecumenism. There are at least three conservative types of ecumenism represented by the American Association of Evangelicals, which met recently at Wheaton, Illinois; the American Council of Christian Churches, and the National Association of Evangelicals. Foreign-mission problems are dealt with by half a dozen organs.

A top-heavy organization is not likely to remove the concern about a super church. There is a never-ending proliferation of boards at every level, making an ever more complicated bureaucracy unavoidable. In the words of Henry P. Van Dusen: "The NCC [National Council of Churches] is beyond challenge the most complex and intricate piece of machinery which this planet has ever witnessed."

Another basic concern has to do with the vagueness of theological belief. This uncertainty in a federation of Christian bodies lays it open to the charge of doctrinal inclusivism. Denominational independence, on the other hand, is in danger of exclusivism. Ecumenism faces the subtle challenge to fuse individual convictions into one unified system of belief.

The Catholic Church has re-examined its own teachings in an enviable way. While Vatican II has produced a theological boom, Protestantism continues to be in a theological slump. Methodist A. Outler, an old hand at ecumenical problems, complains of Protestantism's "death-of-

God hullabaloo," which he calls a noisy spasm of theological colic, and adds that Protestants seem to have reached the end of the "Bible only" as authority. The ecumenical leadership, well aware of this confusion, endeavors to bring stability and direction into the present chaos. Understandably, the general secretary of the WCC, Dr. Eugene Carson Blake, is rather impatient with such charges.

Is Christian unity possible? Yes, if by unity we understand a concerted effort and a joyous joining of hands to preach and live the message of the Lord Jesus Christ. No, if by unity we mean an organic, structural unity. The strength of Protestantism is in its independence.

A long time ago a few simple men with little intellectual equipment, without publicity or prestige, said to their neighbors: "Listen. Something has happened. Death has been overcome by the Man executed on the cross. God has fulfilled His promise. He has come down into our miseries and anxieties. We are no longer condemned for our sins. A bridge has been established between man and

The Wayside Pulpit

By HARRY M. TIPPETT

"Knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed." Romans 13:11.

Sound sleep is a precious physical boon. Its restorative powers are priceless. It is a part of the rhythmic ebb and flow of energy that keeps life in balance. Without sleep for any length of time we become nerveless, confused, unable to function in any direction.

But to sleep when the house is afire is fatal. To sleep on guard in time of peril is unthinkable. To sleep when vigilance might save a soul from death is tragic betrayal. To stay asleep when the call comes, "Go ye out to meet him," will be eternal loss.

Let us then not let spiritual drowsiness take a toll of our hours of preparation for the coming of the Lord. Dreamy unconcern for our spiritual condition can dim the vision of the life to come. Let no downy couch of privilege lure us to a dalliance with

sin that closes our ears to the morning trumpets of the day of God.

Sleep typifies many spiritual conditions. When our religious experience becomes one of mere sentiment, of spasmodic worship, of token sacrifice, we are asleep to our high privilege as Christian witnesses. When we accept the opinions of men without critical analysis, charmed with the form of their arguments while heedless of their conclusions, we are asleep mentally. When our leisure hours have no constructive assignment, and we accept life's mold via TV and the passing show, we settle into moral stupor.

What, then, shall we wake up to? First, to reality. "The morning cometh, and also the night." Jesus paid it all, but we must validate our credit with holy service. The light of the world is Jesus, but we must trim our lamps. The song of Moses and the Lamb will be the theme of the redeemed, but we must learn the score in this life.

God. We are saved." How simple an idea! But it contained the dynamite that was stronger than the Roman Empire. Eventually it conquered the world.

And what is the idea today? Is the goal of the ecumenical movement to revitalize the basic practices of the Christian church, aiming at a powerful Protestant block? An initial idea usually is shared by a few men of intense conviction. When the movement grows the politicians take over. The spirit wanes. The message goes on paper. The fire dies out.

Seventh-day Adventists are not members of the World Council nor of any ecumenical organization. Yet we are actively seeking genuine Christian fellowship with Christians of all denominations; we gladly participate in all endeavors that foster understanding and participation in community projects. We make every effort to be on friendly terms with all ministers and laymen. But we are most definitely *committed*. We have a deep sense of responsibility for sharing the message entrusted to us for this time.

May God grant that we remain true to the divine commission. Our convictions will not hinder us from living in cordial, courteous Christian relationship with all men.

THE BEAUTY OF EARTH AND HEAVEN

By PATSY MURDOCH

ABSORBING the scene before me, I sat staring at the picture on the wall above grandma's couch.

It seemed to me I could walk down that path, pick the lovely lavender, pink, blue, and white flowers. I was sure my hand would respond delightfully to the touch of the rough bark of the magnificent trees.

What adventure lay before me around the bend of the path? What sort of people might be living in the little cottage by the bayside? I could imagine the thrill of the cold water as I plunged my bare feet into that bay.

"Grandma, I just love that picture!"

Her rest was disturbed as she arose from the couch, picked up a pencil from the table, took down the picture, and wrote something on the back.

"I'll put your name on it, and you may have the picture when I'm gone."

Dear little grandma! That was not what I meant at all. Truly, I wasn't hinting for the picture. I was only admiring it.

I could only stammer my thanks.

That was some 15 years ago. About half that length of time back, the picture came to hang in my living room.

When I dust the back of my picture I see it there, as grandma had always spelled it, "For Patsie." She had turned the picture over and upside down to write it there.

Today, the picture still almost hyp-

The Art of Living..... **when**

you're

young

PLEASE TAKE "NO"

"Don't take No for an answer" is a philosophy so highly touted that many people have come to think of it almost as a pronouncement from Sinai. Much like an afterthought, or an addendum to the Decalogue, this bit of dubious wisdom undoubtedly accounts for foot-in-the-door salesmen, endlessly haranguing politicians, importunate suitors, and tireless civic workers, to mention only a few don't-take-No people.

Actually, the idea itself is good. Without it, progress might have groaned, squeaked, shuddered, and ground to a halt long ago. I'm equally certain, though, that No has its place. Sometimes a person must say No, and others must accept it. Accepting it both gracefully and graciously is a skill.

Two recent happy encounters with people who've mastered this skill brought this phase of the art of living to my attention. In both cases I was asked to be a participant in enterprises that were decidedly worth while. In both cases, I wish I could have given an affirmative answer; I honestly and sincerely *wanted* to participate. But after a careful appraisal of my responsibilities, I came to the reluctant conclusion that to say Yes would do a disservice to existing commitments. My affirmative answer would mean that people who count on me rather heavily might be very much left in the lurch. And since these commitments were definitely of top priority, the No was inevitable.

If there's anyone who *likes* to give this answer, I've yet to meet him. To be aware that you'll crush someone's high hopes, disrupt program plans, and upset long-range projects is a soul-deadening prospect to contemplate. Therefore, when I had to write two refusal letters recently, I writhed in anguish. And I tried to explain my refusal, feeling that the request in each case had been a high compliment.

Having sometimes received much chiding, overpersuasion, shaming, and downright bullying in similar situations, I was understandably reluctant to open the first letter which came in reply to my No. But

notizes me until I take my Bible and read, "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard . . . the things which God hath prepared for them that love him" (1 Cor. 2:9). The picture's loveliness fades as I humbly pray, "Dear God, help me to be ready to meet Thee and go with Thee to that far more beautiful place!"

how wonderful—the phrases fairly leaped from the page—"understand perfectly," "can see that your reasons are completely valid," "wish you well in all you're doing." I hadn't been exiled from the human race after all!

My first impulse was to write another letter, humbly thanking my correspondent for knowing about No in all its ramifications. Only my conviction that he'd have been slightly surprised and bewildered by my fervency deterred me.

When the second reply arrived, I was still on guard. I viewed the envelope with a great deal of suspicion, and waited until after I'd eaten to open it. (An empty stomach makes everything seem so much worse, somehow.) But my luck held out. I'd encountered *two* people who could take No gracefully.

Modern living is highly complex. People have interlocking responsibilities and commitments that often are unknown to the public. Prayerfully, they have to decide what's of highest importance. And it just doesn't make much sense to rob Peter to pay Paul—to take on new assignments which will mean that someone else, equally overburdened, will have to carry on the *old* assignments.

Before pens are taken in hand to disagree, though, allow me to state that I *do* think each one should do all he possibly can, particularly in the area of church work. "A man's reach should exceed his grasp" throughout his lifetime. Nonetheless, an answer to a request can't always be in the affirmative.

Please, then, take No graciously and gracefully—when there's no alternative for the person who must give you that answer. You may be in his shoes someday.

Miriam Hood