



The Goal of Ecumenism: A Unified Witness

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There are at least two goals of ecumenism, immediate and long-range. The immediate goal includes lowering the decibels in polemics, laying aside caricatures of one another, recognizing non-theological factors which will continue to divide churches until the parousia, and acknowledging the fact that Jesus Christ is always present where the gospel is preached and the sacraments are rightly administered. That acknowledgement, the *satis est*, is a uniquely Lutheran formula, which at present confounds other Christians, all of whom confess that salvation is by grace alone through faith because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The ultimate goal is to recognize mutual ministries and sacraments. This is already a reality among most Protestant churches, but it remains elusive with Roman Catholics and the Orthodox. For this reason, I believe that Lutheran ecumenical efforts should concentrate especially on these churches without ignoring the Protestants. Institutional unity is not a goal, except perhaps within denominations. If it occurs, that may be a blessing, but pluralism with peace may be more desirable. The goals here outlined may in themselves be only a means toward the end of presenting the world with a unified witness to the gospel, that God in Christ will be glorified.

Problems related to these goals are many. One such problem is living with a caricature or misconception of other churches, usually fostered by insularity or provincialism. Suspicions bordering on hostility are still not uncommon between Protestants and Roman Catholics, with the former still living with a sixteenth-century image of the latter. One remedy for this is to visit other churches and speak with other Christians, so that one is able to describe their beliefs in such a way that they will recognize their own beliefs.

Other factors which impede ecumenism include ethnicity, styles of worship, and church structure (i.e., authoritarian vs. democratic). Some Christians are uncomfortable with an Orthodox service, with clouds of incense, limited congregational participation, and an unknown language. Others find prayers addressed to

Mary or the saints not to their liking. Similarly, worship in a charismatic style with hands uplifted and speaking in tongues, enjoyed by many Christians, will be profoundly disconcerting to others. Discomfort is acceptable, but not if it means excluding from the communion of saints those who differ.

Often it is difficult to distinguish between theological and non-theological factors. Some

have made the question of authority in the church a matter of indifference, whereas others see it as crucial to the gospel. Some understand styles of worship to be a matter of individual taste, whereas others find worship practices to be central to the gospel (e.g., understanding of the eucharist, place of the homily, “entertainment worship”). I believe the *satis est* of Article 7 of the Augsburg Confession was intended to be narrowly understood, that is, for the true unity of the church it is necessary for all Christians to agree that we are justified by grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ (Article 4). It is my understanding, after years of dialogue with other Christians on the national and local level, that this is the common understanding of the gospel within Christendom. The dialogues tend to focus on doctrines and practices within our churches which are thought to be inconsistent with this confession.

There remain significant theological differences among believers. The Orthodox, for instance, do not accept the concept of original sin; Baptists refuse to baptize infants; some groups place a higher value on the experience of being “born again” than on water baptism; the Roman Catholics claim that the pope is the Vicar of Christ on earth by God’s will. The list goes on. The immediate goal of ecumenism is to recognize that despite these differences, we are all within the communion of saints which we confess in the Apostles’ Creed. A goal of ecumenical dialogue is to lower the decibels of polemics and acrimonious charges in order to listen to one another. The greatest impediment to such dialogue is the conviction that one is in possession of absolute truth, which seems to be a uniquely Lutheran, Orthodox, and Roman Catholic failing. In such cases, “dialogue” is a mere euphemism for convincing one’s opposite of one’s own truth claims and the falsity of the other. None of us has the plenitude of “true doctrine.” If any of us claims to know the mind of the Lord we are guilty of the sin against the First Commandment. All of us are heretical to some degree. We are not only sinners in life but also in faith, and God’s grace is intended not only to forgive our sins but our theology as well, and our pride that claims to have pure doctrine. No church has a corner on truth or on God’s love.

It is a simple goal: to recognize Jesus Christ in other churches, to acknowledge that people are fully justified regardless of the church in which they confess their faith, that one can be “saved” within any “expression” of the gospel, and in making this recognition, to offer a more unified and therefore credible witness to the world. The God who created the cosmos, who called forth the big bang from a subatomic particle, who directs the expanding universe with its billions of entities—stars, galaxies, black holes, anti-matter—must surely cry more than laugh as he views the posturing and certitudes of his people, flailing away at each other over the nature of truth while the rest of this speck of dust called earth is quickly going to perdition. It is time to join together as God’s agents of salvation.

The Goal of Ecumenism: A Celebration of Differences

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Once upon a time, when the local episcopal dominie asked if he might have my father’s “overflow”—folks who couldn’t find seats in our church—I imagined the ecumenical movement to be a last circling of wagons by the doomed. In early adulthood I had experience with “combined services” on holidays, where I found myself with a motley of Presbyterians,

Episcopalians, Congregationalists, Methodists, and members of my own flock, swearing yet again never to trade for this a “service of our own” at which attendance, if not the collection, promised to be larger. Where I was raised or worked, the number of Christians of all persuasions gathered together for the purpose of witnessing to their “oneness in Christ” never equalled the number of each in its own place. The “ecumenical rule” appeared to be that the sum of the whole was never equal to its parts. On occasion, the local Roman Catholic priest would be involved, even to the point of making his sanctuary available—naturally, upon removal of the “host,” which, of course, rendered the place a plain vanilla meeting hall, and so much for ecumenism.

Not even Lutherans have been able to achieve a smidgin of empirical unity. Two years ago I dined at a restaurant with representatives of the “Little Norwegian Synod,” the Wisconsin Synod, and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Members of the “Little Synod” enjoy pulpit and altar fellowship with members of the Wisconsin Synod, but not with the LCMS. Members of the LCMS do not enjoy pulpit and altar fellowship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—which being interpreted means neither the Little Synod nor the Wisconsin Synod nor the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod enjoy pulpit and altar fellowship with the ELCA. After ordering our dinners, each prayed silently, as if to guard his petitions against possible infection from whatever his neighbor might have said to God. In the orient, where things are calculated to eventuate in action, our eating together would have constituted an “ecumenical witness” far in excess of the mere sharing of a prayer. But, as the Germans say, “other lands, other customs.”

To cavil at events like the one just referred to may be the habit of chief ecumenical officers of the various communions or of world councils and conclaves,

but such events reflect conditions actually obtaining with flesh and blood creatures, with pastors and their people. True enough, what obtains perhaps should not, but what should not hardly annuls what is. And what if it should be that what obtains does not have its primary explanation in the standoffishness or xenophobia of Christians, but in their appetite for the polychrome, for difference? It may well be that the apostle Paul’s celebration of the wild profusion of gifts inevitably led to a chaos the later church had to undo with organization, even suppression, but the cheering for variety in Paul can’t be denied: “Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers?” (1 Cor 12:29-30). The original requires a negative reply. Those dissensions in Corinth which irritated Paul (“Each one of you says ‘I belong to Paul’...‘to Apollos’...‘to Cephas’...‘to Christ.’ Is Christ divided?”—1:12-13) had nothing to do with differences among persons who confessed the cross as the power and wisdom of God.

In 1962, the World Council of Churches met in Montreal on the theme of the church’s unity as grounded in the unity of the Bible. Over the objections of the General Secretary, Willem Visser t’ Hooft, Ernst Käsemann of Tübingen was invited to speak. The New Testament scholar promptly announced that the Bible did not establish the church’s unity, but rather a plurality of confessions. Visser t’ Hooft was “terribly angry,” Käsemann reported, and forever after refused to shake his hand. “Good grief,” Käsemann exclaimed, “you can’t just ignore the mass of confessions, can’t just ignore the struggle occurring between them. It’s simply not true that there’s a mutuality of support as in a good marriage, that one makes up for or hides the other’s faults. There’s been strife, and has been for 1900 years—ever since Antioch, according to Acts....”

Visser t' Hooft's reaction was typical among those, who, like my doctor father, believed that since God is one and his love undivided, those who hearken will manifest their unity concretely; that it is ludicrous to misrepresent the hermeneutical principle *solus Christus* as if it deprived us of any and all this-worldly security. Perhaps even Paul may be subpoenaed to witness against his "natural" bent toward a chaos of differences. Reconciliation, a manifestation of unity through acceptance of the legitimacy of his apostleship and gospel—thus not simply alleviation of economic distress—was the purpose of the apostle's collection for "the poor among the saints at Jerusalem" (Rom 15:25-33). Paul too could "thank God and take courage" in encounter with "brethren" never seen before (Acts 28:15).

Still and all, the Jesus of Paul could never have had in mind what a thousand and one summoners to uniformity have had in mind with that sentence from the "high priestly prayer" in John 17: "that they may be one." And if "they" should happen to represent a conventicle later hereticized, the unity or even uniformity is restricted to a single "denomination." In any event, of whatever sort that unity, it is God who is invoked to create it, and the pattern of its creation is what exists in heaven—"that they may be one, *even as we are one*." So far, the signs are too ambiguous, and the yearning for unity too confused with ambition. "As it is, God arranged the organs in the body, each one of them as he chose. If all were a single organ, where would the body be?" (1 Cor 12:18-19). "God," wrote Käsemann, "makes no creature like another, and even when he forms and shapes Christians after the image of His Son, these creatures bear different features, must stand the test in different ways, in different places."