



Does Ecumenism Have a Future?

WALTER SUNDBERG

*Luther Seminary
St. Paul, Minnesota*

I. UNEXAMINED ASSUMPTIONS

WE ARE COMMONLY TOLD BY THEOLOGIANS AND ECCLESIASTICAL LEADERS THAT the present age is “secular” and that the church is in decline. We have “to begin where we are,” writes Douglas John Hall, “in our empty, or nearly empty, or by no means full churches. For all the worldly melancholy that it may conjure up in us when we recall the supposedly glorious past, this is where we have to begin.”¹

Gloomy membership statistics appear to confirm this pessimistic assessment. In the five largest contributing denominations of the National Council of Churches in the United States (i.e., Presbyterian Church [USA], United Methodist Church, United Church of Christ, Episcopal Church, and Christian Church [Disciples of Christ]), the loss of membership has been staggering. “Membership decline among the five largest oldline denominations has been so severe during the 1970s and well into the 1980s,” writes Kent R. Hill, “that the equivalent of a 700-member

¹Douglas John Hall, *Has the Church a Future?* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980) 31.

WALTER SUNDBERG is professor of church history.

The twin assumptions that the Christian church is in decline and that an episcopal form of organizational unity is imperative for its future are both false. The future of ecumenism lies in boldly proclaiming the truth held by the churches in common and candidly admitting the differences that separate them. A model of this approach is the document “Evangelicals and Catholics Together.”

congregation was shut down *every day* for 15 years.”² Lutheran losses in the United States have not been this dramatic but they have been dismally steady since the late 1960s.

What are we to do about this predicament? To counter declining numbers in a secular age, theologians and church bureaucrats have turned to ecumenism. Inherited denominational differences among churches, they assert, are of little importance to the future of Christianity. The survival of Christianity depends upon the organizational reunion of the churches. Often we are told that the basis for this reunion should be episcopal government. “This unity is a matter of life or death for Christendom,” write the Catholic theologians Heinrich Fries and Karl Rahner, “at a time when faith in God and His Christ are most seriously threatened by a worldwide militant atheism, and by a relativistic skepticism....Christianity can no longer afford to encounter peoples and cultures to whom it still wishes to convey its message—so far almost in vain—in its splintered and ruptured state.”³ The primary means to reunion, assert Fries and Rahner, is the Roman Papacy which is seen as “the concrete guarantor of the unity of the Church.”⁴

“The church is in decline.” “The unity of the church under episcopacy is a matter of life or death for Christendom.” These twin assertions of the ecumenical movement have been made so often that one simply assumes that they are true. But are they? Let us look at them one at a time.

II. EXAMINING THE UNEXAMINED

1. *The church is in decline.* While mainline protestant denominations in America have suffered severe losses and while European territorial churches have experienced near collapse, these church bodies are not representative of global Christianity. The fact is that we do not live in a post-Christian era. We live in the era of greatest Christian advance. At the time of the reformation, Christians accounted for 19% of the world’s population. At the turn of this century, they made up 34% of the world’s population. Since 1900, this population has tripled. So has the membership of the church. One must combine the numbers of Muslims (17.1%), Hindus (13.5%), and Buddhists (6.2%) to exceed the number of nominal Christians.⁵ More people have been brought to faith in Jesus Christ since the Second World War than at any other time in human history. Figures from specific nations that account for this growth are astounding. China, for example, is the largest nation on earth. As recently as 1980, there were two million baptized protestant Christians; in 1996, this figure has risen to 33 million. In 1950, there were

²Kent R. Hill, “Why the NCC Is in Disarray and What Can Be Done about It,” *Religion & Democracy* (January 1989) 1. The specific years Hill refers to are 1970-1986.

³Heinrich Fries and Karl Rahner, *Unity of the Churches: An Actual Possibility*, trans. Ruth C. L. Gritsch and Eric W. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress; New York: Paulist, 1984) 1.

⁴*Ibid.*, 59.

⁵Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989) 1-2; citing David Barrett, ed. *World Christian Encyclopedia* (New York: Oxford, 1982).

three million baptized Roman Catholics in China; in 1996, there were 18 million.⁶ The worldwide growth of the Christian church includes the United States where, outside of mainline denominations, church membership, as a percentage of the civil population, has shown a steady increase.⁷ The Siren song of decline sung by theologians and church bureaucrats is false. It is the result of cultural blinders that cannot see beyond a limited social milieu.

Who is responsible for this growth? First of all, the Roman Catholic Church which, because of its sheer size and worldwide extent, accounts for over one billion Christians in the world. Evangelicalism,⁸ with 300 million members, is next in importance. Despite mainline propaganda to the contrary, evangelicals are not on the periphery of the modern Christian story. In protestantism, they *are* the story, and they have been since the eighteenth century when John Wesley (1703-1791) and George Whitefield (1714-1770) took up the noble vocation of itinerant preaching. One of Wesley's children is pentecostalism, which takes its origins in the holiness movement of Methodism. Pentecostalism is the fastest growing Christian movement that church history has ever known.

2. *The unity of the church under episcopacy is a matter of life or death for Christendom.* Grounded on the false assumption of Christian decline, the call for organizational unity under episcopal government has been a pillar of the ecumenical movement for three decades. It has not gone unchallenged. "I think it is very doubtful," writes the late Harold Ditmanson of St. Olaf College, "whether the existence of separated churches has anything to do with modern unbelief." Ditmanson refers to a number of important books analyzing modern unbelief, including John Courtney Murray, *The Problem of God*; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The God Question and Modern Man*; Arend T. Van Leeuwen, *Christianity in World History*; David L. Edwards, *Religion and Change*; Lesslie Newbigin, *Honest Religion for Secular Man*; Allan D. Galloway, *Faith in a Changing Culture*; Langdon Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind and Reaping the Whirlwind*. He concludes: "Every scholar deals at length with secularization, technology, and the breakdown of traditional categories of thought and patterns of conduct. But not one ever refers to separated denominations."⁹

I think Ditmanson is right. There simply is no demonstrated connection between ecumenical efforts at structural reunion of the churches and the reversal

⁶*Christian History* 15 (1996) 41.

⁷For a detailed account of specific figures, see Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America: 1776-1990* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University, 1992).

⁸By evangelicalism I mean that great variety of Christian sects, subgroups, and individuals who believe that the normal beginning of genuine Christian life is spiritual transformation. Baptists, fundamentalists, pentecostalists are evangelicals; but so, for example, are puritans, who represent an evangelical movement within historic Calvinism, and pietists who represent the same evangelical tradition within historic Lutheranism. My understanding of evangelicalism is thus both specific in definition and broad in denominational identification.

⁹Harold Ditmanson, "A Response to the Fries-Rahner Proposal for Church Unity," *Lutheran Quarterly* 1 (1987) 385.

of decline in membership of those churches. Indeed, it appears that just the opposite is the case. The very churches that are most active in the pursuit of ecumenical reunion are the ones that decline. "One of the marked features of mainstream Protestantism today," writes the Methodist observer J. Edward Carothers, "is a cry for church unity, and this cry is issuing out of a real consciousness of diminishing vitality in the separated mainstream Protestant organizations."¹⁰

This charge is not new. In 1962, the Rev. Ramsey Pollard, then outgoing president of the Southern Baptist Convention, called the formation of the Consultation on Church Union (COCU) by the United Presbyterian Church, the Methodist Church, the Episcopal Church, and the United Church of Christ "an indication of weakness rather than strength. Lack of conviction led to these denominations' decline, and the decline will continue because such mergers are based on expediency and convenience."¹¹ While one may object to Pollard's judgment that the motivation for the formation of COCU was "expediency and convenience," he was right about the fact of decline. COCU never lived up to the original expectation that it would revitalize membership. By contrast, the Southern Baptists, who have shown no interest in the mainline ecumenical movement, have experienced healthy growth in membership. "Robust, thriving churches," says Carothers, "fend off unification efforts."¹²

Lutherans should know something about this. In 1958, the president of the United Lutheran Church in America, Franklin Clark Fry (1900-1968) made the cover of *Time*, which called him "perhaps the most influential leader of world Protestantism." Lutherans in the United States numbered nearly 7,400,000; they had gained a remarkable 2,000,000 members in the ten years between 1948 and 1958. "The Lutheran Hour" was the best known denominational radio broadcast on the air. "This Is the Life" was the biggest-budget religious telecast in the country. All this activity was going on even though Lutherans were divided into seventeen separate synodical organizations. In 1997, the vast majority of Lutherans in the United States belong to two denominations: the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The two million people gained in the 1950s have not been matched in the four decades that have followed. It would not cross the mind of any national news magazine editor to put Lutherans on the cover. Among Lutherans, organizational unity did not figure in denominational growth and it has not stemmed the tide of decline. In fact, despite the claims made for it, organizational unity has brought nothing to the task of advancing Lutherans in the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.¹³ The effort in the early 1980s to reunite Lutherans with Roman Catholics under the papacy, embodied in the document *Facing Unity*, failed to ignite any enthusiasm, in part because it was

¹⁰J. Edward Carothers, *The Paralysis of Mainstream Protestant Leadership* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990) 59.

¹¹Quoted in Thomas C. Reeves, *The Empty Church* (New York: The Free Press, 1996) 126.

¹²Carothers, *The Paralysis of Mainstream Protestant Leadership*, 59.

¹³On the *Time* essay, I have relied on the summary in *Forum Letter* 16 (25 April 1987) 1-2.

a direct threat to women's ordination in the Lutheran churches.¹⁴ The recent and bitter separation among Lutherans over the *Concordat* with the Episcopal Church has only served to exacerbate problems in the ELCA, a relatively young and fragile denominational organization that can ill afford controversy. Once again, the fight has been over the role of episcopal government.

III. DOES ECUMENISM HAVE A FUTURE?

Does this mean that ecumenism is a spent force? Certainly not. Recently, an exciting example of ecumenical agreement has appeared that puts aside the tired quest for structural reunification under episcopacy and considers the matter of what it means to belong to the one body of Christ in a fresh way. Beginning in September 1992, serious theological conversations were initiated in the United States between Roman Catholics and representatives of evangelical protestantism. These conversations resulted in a document entitled "Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium," published in 1994.¹⁵

That such a conversation took place is not surprising. These two Christian groups are the fastest growing segments of worldwide Christianity. It appears to many informed observers that the future of Christianity will belong to Catholics and evangelicals in the next century. The gathering that produced "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" was made up of influential people who either participated in the dialogue directly or endorsed the resulting document. Catholic representatives included Fr. Juan Diaz-Vilar of Catholic Hispanic Ministries, Fr. Avery Dulles of Fordham University, George Weigel of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, Michael Novak of the American Enterprise Institute and winner of the Templeton Prize in 1994, the former Lutheran Fr. Richard John Neuhaus of the Institute on Religion and Public Life, two bishops, an archbishop and, significantly, John Cardinal O'Connor of the Archdiocese of New York. Evangelicals included Chuck Colson of Prison Fellowship, Bill Bright of Campus Crusade, President Richard Mouw of Fuller Seminary, Nathan Hatch of Notre Dame, Mark Noll of Wheaton College, and Thomas Oden of Drew University. There were many others.

The document candidly recognizes the pluralism of Christian witness and does not try to get around it:

Among points of difference in doctrine, worship, practice, and piety that are frequently thought to divide us are these:

- The church as an integral part of the Gospel or the church as a communal consequence of the Gospel.
- The church as visible communion or invisible fellowship of true believers.
- The sole authority of Scripture (*sola scriptura*) or Scripture as authoritatively interpreted in the church.

¹⁴*Facing Unity: Models, Forms and Phases of Catholic-Lutheran Church Fellowship* (Lutheran World Federation, 1985).

¹⁵The text is available in *First Things* 43 (May 1994) 15-22.

- The “soul freedom” of the individual Christian or the Magisterium (teaching authority) of the community.
- The church as local congregation or universal communion.
- Ministry ordered in apostolic succession or the priesthood of all believers.
- Sacraments and ordinances as symbols of grace or means of grace.
- The Lord’s Supper as eucharistic sacrifice or memorial meal.
- Remembrance of Mary and the saints or devotion to Mary and the saints.
- Baptism as sacrament of regeneration or testimony to regeneration....

On these questions and other questions implied by them, Evangelicals hold the Catholic Church has gone beyond Scripture, adding teachings and practices that detract from or compromise the Gospel of God’s saving grace in Christ. Catholics, in turn, hold that such teachings and practices are grounded in Scripture and belong to the fullness of God’s revelation. Their rejection, Catholics say, results in a truncated and reduced understanding of the Christian reality.¹⁶

This type of no-nonsense account of differences in an ecumenical document is refreshing. It is also remarkable that on the Catholic side there was no effort to demand recognition of the primacy of episcopal government in the papacy. The Fries/Rahner approach to ecumenism was studiously ignored.

The confessional differences between Catholics and evangelicals did not prevent the participants in the dialogue from witnessing to a more important truth that bound them together. It is the exclusive truth of Christ, stated with a type of force and animation that can rarely be mustered in mainline denominations:

Jesus Christ is Lord. That is the first and final affirmation that Christians make about all of reality. He is the One sent by God to be Lord and Savior of all: “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4) Christians are people ahead of time, those who proclaim now what will one day be acknowledged by all, that Jesus Christ is Lord. (Philippians 2)

We affirm together that we are justified by grace through faith because of Christ. Living faith is active in love that is nothing less than the love of Christ, for we together say with Paul: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Galatians 2)

All who accept Christ as Lord and Savior are brothers and sisters in Christ. Evangelicals and Catholics are brothers and sisters in Christ. We have not chosen one another, just as we have not chosen Christ. He has chosen us, and he has chosen us to be his together. (John 15)¹⁷

The one mission of the church is to bring people to the acceptance of Jesus Christ. Catholics and evangelicals share in this one mission. This mission centers in the work of conversion: “It should be clearly understood between Catholics and Evangelicals that Christian witness is of necessity aimed at conversion. Authentic conversion is—in its beginning, in its end, and all along the way—conversion to God in Christ by the power of the Spirit.”¹⁸ Lest there be any doubt as to the place of the Bible in the life of the church, the document has this to say: “We affirm

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 17-18.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 21.

together that Christians are to teach and live in obedience to the divinely inspired Scriptures, which are the infallible Word of God.”¹⁹

Is “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” an important document? Yes, it is. Signed by a cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church, it has the blessing of the Pope. In three decades of Lutheran-Catholic dialogue in the United States, no such signature was ever obtained. And indeed, a decade ago, the National Council of Roman Catholic Bishops expressed strong criticism of the work of the Lutheran-Catholic dialogues—all of them.²⁰

To my mind, this ecumenical document exemplifies what it means to be dedicated to the understanding and following of the one truth of Christ, wherever it might lead. And in this case, it does not lead to ignoring, rejecting, or hiding the candid truth that Christians differ in doctrine and practice. These doctrinal differences are secondary, however, to the proclamation of Jesus Christ and the command to make disciples. Catholics and evangelicals have separate understandings of the church. But Jesus Christ makes them walk hand in hand. This is ecumenism with a future. It is in service to the missionary outreach of the body of Christ. ☩

¹⁹Ibid., 16.

²⁰See Committee on Doctrine of the National Council of Bishops, “Lutheran-Catholic Dialogues: Critique,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 1 (1987) 125-136; The Roman Catholic Bishops of the United States, “An Evaluation of the Lutheran-Catholic Statement, ‘Justification by Faith,’” *Lutheran Quarterly* 5 (1991) 63-71.