

Critical Issues Commentary

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Why Ecumenism Cannot Produce the Unity of the Faith

by Bob DeWaay

“. . . being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” (Ephesians 4:3)

“And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fulness of Christ.” (Ephesians 4:11-13)

In Ephesians 4, Paul calls us to preserve unity while we seek a perfect unity that does not yet exist. How we are to go about this is very confusing to many Christians. Do we seek to unify all organizations calling themselves “Christian?” Did Paul envision a visible, universal church which was highly efficient, world-wide, hierarchical and headed by one man? Does the fact that numerous “Christian” organizations exist negate the possibility that the unity of which Paul wrote will come to pass? To answer these questions we must have a Biblical definition for the word “church” and a Biblical understanding of how its head, Jesus Christ, intends to perfect its unity.

What is the “Church”?

The Greek word in the New Testament translated “church” is “*ekklēsia*” and denotes “those called out of the world to come together in Christ.” The church was born on Pentecost when God poured out His Holy Spirit and

began to bring people into fellowship with Himself. Luke writes, “*And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved*” (Acts 2:47b). God places people in His church through the regeneration of the Holy Spirit. Paul describes this process as follows: “*He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that being justified by His grace we might be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life*” (Titus 3:5-7).

When a person is thus saved, he or she is added to the church whether or not the person even knows there is such a thing as a church. Paul says, “*Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, ‘The Lord knows those who are His,’ and, ‘Let*

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everyone who names the name of the Lord abstain from wickedness” (2Timothy 2:19). He said this in the context of warning about Hymenaeus and Philetus who claimed that the resurrection had already happened and thus departed from the truth (2Timothy 2:17,18). Many claim to be Christian, just as many claim to be speaking for Christ when in fact they lie. Invoking the name of Christ on a person or teaching does not make a “Christian.” If we really are the Lord’s, we will speak the truth and live accordingly.

Things were becoming muddled in Paul’s day and they are worse today. There are even more false teachers claiming to be Christian. Many world-

wide organizations with unbiblical teachings and practices now call themselves “Christian.” Yet only the Lord knows all people who are His. In its fullest sense the church consists of all those who are the Lord’s by grace through faith, including the Old Testament believers and those throughout history who have come to the Lord and all who will come to the faith. The book of Hebrews speaks of “*the general assembly and church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven*” (Hebrews 12:23a). The church in this sense obviously cannot be unified by human action. Its fulness of unity will ultimately be displayed throughout eternity to the glory of God.

In another sense the term “church” can signify all Christians living at any given time on the face of the earth. This is often called “the church militant,” to signify that we are a part of the battle for the faith in the arena of the fallen world system. Paul used the term in this sense in 1Corinthians 10:32: “*Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God.*” He recognized three categories of people: the Jewish people, the pagans (what Paul meant by “Greeks” in this context) and Christians.

In this sense the church is “visible” in that it consists of people currently living all over the world. Yet it is not easily defined organizationally since these individuals are found in so many places and circumstances. One might find members of this universal church scattered in remote societies or hidden within larger cultures or people groups. God knows all those who are His, but we can know individual Christians and enjoy real fellowship with them.

The term “church” is used in a yet more restricted sense to mean, “a community of Christian believers existing in a particular place.” For example, Paul wrote to “the church of God which is at Corinth. . .” (1Corinthians 1:2a). This meant a local fellowship of believers that existed at the city of Corinth. When a larger geographical area was referenced, Paul

used the plural, such as “. . . the churches of Macedonia” (2Corinthians 8:1). The geo-political entities that then existed did not define the church nor establish churches, they merely served as a way of identifying particular fellowships of Christians.¹ That there was a Corinthian church did not mean that the political structure of the city of Corinth established or influenced the church there. The New Testament knows nothing of churches established by cities, states or nations.

The most restricted use of the word “church” in the New Testament is when it describes a group of believers assembled in one place. Consider the following passage: “Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea and also Nympha and the church that is in her house” (Colossians 4:15). Paul is speaking of a larger, scattered group of Christians, and a “church” that meets in a person’s home. Here the meaning is a small group gathered for worship. When the Book of Revelation addresses the Laodicean church, it is probably concerned with the “brethren who are in Laodicea” in general and not just that portion of them that met in one house. Clearly the context must determine the meaning each time the word “church” is found in the Bible.

Modern readers of the Bible often make the mistake of reading patterns that did not exist until centuries later back into the Bible. For example, they may think of the church of Ephesus to which Paul wrote as a huge cathedral headed by a bishop. Yet cathedrals did not exist during the time that the New Testament was written nor did “bishops” of the type people might have in mind. In the New Testament, the terms for bishops and elders were used interchangeably. The New Testament church was not a hierarchical organization with an elaborate chain of command and headed by a pontiff.

Historical Considerations

Discussing the unity of the church is complicated by the events of history. Some have looked at the New Testament and concluded that since churches were generally addressed by city, there is to be only one church in each city. One group decided to solve the discrepancy between the New Testament situation and our

own by calling themselves “The Church of . . .”(whatever city they were in). Of course, taking on such a title did not make them either Christians or the only true church of any given city. If God has joined people to Himself by the Holy Spirit, then those people are His, and a part of the church even if they have never heard of the group claiming to be the only true church in a given city. Like it or not, we cannot create reality with our words.

Whatever description is chosen for a given religious organization, it will not be the only true church! Some have chosen long, ostentatious names like, “The Only True Holy Ghost Apostolic Church Of Jesus Christ” (I made that up with apologies to any who may be using it). No matter how great a name is, there is someone in the locality who truly belongs to the Lord and His church who is not a part of one’s group. Conversely, no matter how tightly churches screen people and no matter how strict a statement of faith people are made to sign, someone who is not regenerate might make his or her way into the organization. No human organization is co-extensive with the church as defined in the New Testament. The Lord knows those who are His and we can judge teachings by the Scriptures and lives by their fruits; but we will never be able to be sure that we have identified only true Christians and gotten all of them into our organization.

If no organization that can be defined politically or geographically is either the true church militant or the only, true local church, then one might ask why such organizations exist. Why not go back to the New Testament situation and just have the church that is in Jerusalem, etc

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is that it is impossible to re-create the same historical situation. There was no church before Pentecost. As the church spread from Jerusalem to the rest of the Mediterranean basin, the first believers knew each other because they met the Lord through the preaching of the same

Apostles, and had other shared beginnings. Naturally they all knew each other. But even before the closing of the New Testament canon at the end of the first century there were disputes and schisms. The Epistles were written mostly to correct errors. False apostles were already circulating and finding followers, some from the ranks of the previously orthodox. Paul worked during his life-time to keep unity between Jewish and Gentile believers who already had developed rather diverse practices.

Given nearly 2,000 years of history since that time, is it any surprise that Christian fellowships are a diverse lot? The so-called Roman Catholic (meaning “universal”) Church never was co-extensive with the Church. No hierarchical, authoritarian organization can stop the Holy Spirit from regenerating individuals and adding them to the Lord’s body outside of its auspices. Human organizations are never the church as defined in the New Testament. That does not mean that they have no purpose. We organize for the purpose of working together for agreed upon objectives. But we need not conclude that our organization is the Lord’s church. If we understand that organizations are not identical to the New Testament church, this will help us see why ecumenism cannot bring about the type of unity Paul wrote of in Ephesians 4.

Preserving the Unity of the Spirit

Paul wrote, “With all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love,

being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:2,3). Since it is the Holy Spirit who regenerates us and

places us in the church, Christians begin their walk with a unity to be preserved. We are united to the Lord and one another by having been born again and adopted into the family of God. This spiritual unity exists because of God’s supernatural work and indwelling Spirit.

However, Paul urges us to be diligent to preserve it. He knew all too well how fleshly motivations, self-centeredness, pride, callousness toward the needs of others and many other sins work to disrupt the unity of Spirit who by His work has made us one body. Humility, gentleness, and the other spiritual virtues that must be developed as we grow in the Lord are the means by which the unity of the Spirit is preserved.

These matters are worked out in local fellowship, the basic unit of the church. The term “church” in the New Testament never refers to a building, but to a group of people joined to their head, Jesus Christ, and to one another by the Holy Spirit. Mutual encouragement, burden bearing, exhortation, forgiveness, etc. only happen in the context of real relationships nurtured over a period of time. We need to “*show forbearance to one another*” because working closely together in the type of relationships the New Testament envisions happening in local fellowship brings out the problems, difficulties, idiosyncracies, and needs for correction and growth that we all begin our Christian lives with.

The process of sanctification happens as a work of grace through faith, but it is also a practical, daily process. One wonders how much it is being thwarted by the anonymity and sterility that so often passes for “church” in our modern day. Preserving the unity of the Spirit does not happen by slipping quietly into the back pew of a huge mega-church and slipping out again just before the service is over to avoid the parking lot rush like people do after athletic events. Where in that process is one: “*speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.*” (**Ephesians 4:15,16**)?

The church in the New Testament is not a corporation with a CEO, highly proficient, professional staff to solve all problems, and programs to make religious consumers comfortable and happily served. It is the living body of Christ that consists of individuals who

are a part of it because of the power of the Holy Spirit and the call of God. Every one of these individuals is called to take up their crosses and lay down their self-centered lives for the sake of God’s purposes. Every individual member must be working to preserve the unity of the Spirit that God created in His act of joining them to His body.

Sending a high-level, denominational emissary to an ecumenical council has nothing whatsoever to do with what Paul wrote of in Ephesians 4. Nor does attending a huge rally with thousands of people one will never know and applauding a few generalized slogans that most people would agree on. The preservation of the unity of the Spirit costs much more than that. It costs our self-centered lives that must be crucified with Christ. It costs a willingness to build real relationships with flesh and blood people who know us so well that they cannot be impressed with a superficial veneer of religiosity. They are fellow members of Christ’s body who as our brothers and sisters live in real relationships with us that endure through the difficult process of **really** becoming more like Christ.

Attaining to the Unity of the Faith

After urging the Ephesians to preserve the unity of the Spirit because there is, after all, only one Spirit, one Lord, one baptism, etc. (see **Ephesians 4:4-6**), Paul goes on to describe God’s ministry gifts to the church. These gifts have the purpose of: “. . . *equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fulness of Christ*” (**Ephesians 4:12,13**). The gifts are people with particular callings: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers (or pastor-teachers). Their purpose is to help the whole body be equipped for doing the work of service (Gr. “*diaconias*” also translated “ministry”). The purpose of this ministry is to build up the body of Christ. The body must be built up so that we might “*attain to the unity of the faith.*” In contrast to the unity of the Spirit that

already existed and needed preservation, this unity is set forth as a goal to be yet realized.

What is “the faith,” to which we must attain unity? Elsewhere, “the faith” is the content of our belief. Paul wrote to Timothy, “*But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons*” (**1 Timothy 4:1**). It is not that people will fail to believe anything, but that they will believe false teachings inspired by demons rather than the content of the faith. Jude also mentions the faith, “*Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints*” (**Jude 1:3**). This faith, the content of which was settled once for all with the completion of the New Testament, is the teaching of Christ.

Further evidence that the truth as it is revealed in Christ is the unity of the faith which is our goal is found in **Ephesians 4:14**: “*As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming.*” The result of attaining to the unity of the faith, knowing Christ more fully and attaining mature stature is that we are not deceived by false teaching and deceitful teachers. Clearly Paul was concerned about growing in our knowledge of Christ’s revealed truth as well as maturing in Christ-like character. False teaching hinders both.

Attaining to the unity of the faith is a lifetime process that is enabled by godly ministries that truly equip the saints (all Christians) for the ministry of serving the whole church. How are the saints equipped? Paul wrote to Timothy and told him how any man of God is so equipped: “*All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work*” (**2 Timothy 3:16,17**). We are equipped by being taught and trained in Scripture! This is true for every saint, not just “professional clergy.” How else are

we going to attain to the unity of the faith if not by the learning and practice of “the faith once for all delivered to the saints”? How sad that so many other things go forth under the guise of training people for the ministry that have nothing to do with the faith. We need to be lifetime students of Scripture.

Those who are serious about unity as described in Ephesians 4 must be serious about contending for the faith. They must be willing to correct, rebuke and stand against every wind of doctrine that does not measure up to the Biblical revelation. The whole body must be enabled to mature in Christ through becoming His disciples. Jesus told us what is necessary for this: *“If you abide in My word [‘teaching,’ NIV; Greek ‘logos’] then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:31b,32)*. If the whole church is not given the whole counsel of God, then we cannot expect that the result will be the unity of the faith or a mature man. People teach everything from pop psychology to New Age mysticism under the banner of promoting Christian unity. Ironically, what they are doing is creating the winds of doctrine that true unity must resist.

Ecumenism is not Biblical Unity

This underscores the root of the problem. Ecumenism commonly assumes that the enemy of unity is strongly held beliefs. By minimizing doctrines, and agreeing only upon a few broadly defined facts, those who promote ecumenism hope that a visible, unified church can be produced. H. George Anderson in an article describing the ecumenical movement gives this definition of it: “The ecumenical movement is conceived as a gradually widening series of organizational links encompassing increasingly diverse traditions in a single structure, until at last all Christian denominations will be united in one visible church.”² Yet many of the old line denominations that are involved in such bodies as the World Council of Churches have long ago abandoned beliefs such as the inerrancy of Scripture. Some have called such ecumenism, “lowest common denominator theology.”³ Anderson’s article traces the

recent history of the ecumenical movement.

The difference between **Ephesians 4:13** and modern ecumenism is the difference between the unity of the faith and organizational unity between denominations. This difference is huge, especially since none of these organizations are the church as defined in the New Testament. John Ankerberg recently pointed out that over fifty percent of the ministers in certain large, old line denominations admit that they do not believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. Merging large, multi-faceted organizations that have practically if not officially denied most of the truths of the New Testament cannot be construed by any twist of reason or language to constitute coming to, *“the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fulness of Christ.”*

John E. Dahlin wrote in 1967, Evangelicals are being continually stigmatized as schismatics who are uninterested in the welfare of the church as a whole. We have every reason to expect that the ecumenical pressure in this regard will be intensified as the National and World Council of Churches gather up additional momentum. In other words, we will witness a stepped-up drive in smearing Bible-believing Christians as being obstinate and obstructionists by operating outside the so-called mainstream of Christianity.⁴

Ironically, much of the pressure to get with it ecumenically is now coming from evangelicals themselves. It was evangelical leaders who recently signed the controversial “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” document and some evangelical movements seek unity through massive rallies attended by people of all denominations, including Catholics.

At issue is whether this public, visible hoopla has anything to do with the unity of the faith. Human organizations are not the church, no matter how well structured and how necessary they may be. Therefore,

unifying them or merging them is not creating the unity of the faith. Some conservatives have asserted that the next visible, unified, world-wide, all-encompassing “church” will be the great harlot of the book of Revelation. John Dahlin made that point in his above mentioned article: “Without a doubt, the ongoing acceleration of the present ecumenical drive will lead to the emergence of the super church, and this is precisely what the New Testament prophecy sets forth. It is clearly portrayed in the Book of Revelation Chapters 17 and 18. There you have identified the great ‘whore’ or ‘harlot’ of the end-time.”⁵ Whether or not the anti-christ church will soon arise in its fulness, I agree that it will be the next universal, politically unified “church” that will encompass the whole world.

Conclusion

In contrast, the bride of Christ will be comprised of all true believers who have been apprehended by God and saved from this wicked world system. The church of which Christ is the head is not the religious, world system, but a remnant of faith (see **Romans 9:27 & Romans 11:5**) delivered from the religious idolatry of the world. They are “salt and light” in relationship to the decay and darkness of the world but are scattered throughout the world where they gather in small or large groups under diverse circumstances to seek and worship their living head, Jesus Christ. Those who are a part of the church as defined in the New Testament are satisfied with no sin, error, nor non-Biblical standard, though they humbly admit they have not yet attained to the high calling to which they strive. The Apostle Paul saw his life this way: *“Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 3:13,14)*.

Like sanctification in general, those who have been apprehended by Christ press toward the goal of the unity of the faith though its full realization will not come this side of the resurrection. Let us not be waylaid in this Biblical call to

unity by a false, man-made unity based on compromise of the truth and superficial relationships. Only by holding fast to the Head, Jesus Christ and continuing in His word, all of it, will we make progress toward our goal of the unity of the faith.

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End Notes

1. G. A. Jacobs, The Ecclesiastical Polity of the New Testament, (London: Strahan & Co., 1871) 9. This is the best book on the topic of the church I have ever found and has been of much help to me in writing this article.

2. H. George Anderson, "Ecumenical Movements" in Altered Landscapes, David W. Lotz ed., (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1989) 93.

3. Ibid. 97.

4. Prof. John E Dahlin, "Ecumenical Pressures of our Time," in The Discerner vol.16, #3 (July - Aug. - Sept, 1996) 7. reprinted from Oct.-Dec. 1967 issue.

5. Ibid. 6.

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