

# Christian Unity—and Ecumenism Today

*"Neither pray I for these alone. . .that they all may be one as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us. . .that the world may believe. . ." John 17:20,21*

**Is this prayer of Jesus finally being answered?** The Christian church since its beginning seems far from being united or "one" in Christ. In the sixteenth century the formal split of Protestantism seemed to forever divide the church. But even earlier after the first millennium of Christianity, the Great Schism between Rome and Constantinople—divided Christians....

Today Christians face a world whose liveliest faiths are materialism and Islam. Although it is true that Evangelical membership has grown significantly, mainline membership has drastically declined (CHRISTIANITY TODAY, 8/11/97). In his book, THE SECOND COMING OF THE CHURCH, the author laments America's churches and their need for revival. He observes that church attendance and personal Bible study have gone down. People are too busy. "If we are ever going to be an effective and positive influence in American society, we must begin by taking steps to restore the Church." What he proposes is "influence via vision." *The question is, what is the true "vision" of the church's mission in this world? Is it the transforming of society? What is the oneness Jesus prayed for "that the world may believe"?*

**For over 100 years now, cautious, painful steps have been taken to achieve a unity of Christian churches.** In 1846 the Evangelical Alliance was organized in London principally to effectively cooperate in the effort to "repulse common enemies and dangers" (MCCLINTOCK & STRONG'S, Vol. 3) What were the dangers at that time? ...Probably not materialism and the spread of Islam. But at that time new sects were arising and individual thinking on the Bible abounded. Why? Since 1803 Bible Societies were distributing a flood of cheap Bibles to the common man. In any case, the older denominations were alarmed wondering where it would all lead. This union of Christians decided to establish some "fundamental doctrines" as membership criteria to control this trend towards division—and individualism.

Since then, in 1867 an American branch was formed, which later in 1944 dissolved and transferred its funds to the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America (FCCCA). Meanwhile, concern over the religion of secularism prompted delegates from the ecumenical commissions, "Life and Work" and "Faith and Order," to draft proposals for a "World Council of Churches." World War II interrupted the progress of ecumenism. But

in 1948 an international organization of more than 320 Protestant, Anglican and Orthodox churches established the World Council of Churches. That was fifty years ago.

Interestingly, the Federal Council (FCCCA)—which evolved from the original Evangelical Alliance—merged with other interdenominational bodies to form the National Council of Churches in 1950. That body later became a full member of the World Council of Churches! Is this the way God is answering Jesus' prayer for oneness of the body?

The International Council of Christian Churches (ICCC)—which also came into existence fifty years ago - doesn't think so. Intent on bringing Christ to the world in obedience to the "Great Commission," they accuse the WCC of being too worldly and too liberal itself (CHRISTIAN NEWS, 1/25/93). Then there's the Consultation on Church Union (COCU)—the multi-denomination organization formed in the United States in the 1960s which redefined "unity" as allowing for diversity, but recognizing ordinations of member denominations only (COCU, 8/18/98).

**The Catholic Church has come a long way too.** In 1928 "Pope Pius XI condemned unequivocally the ecumenical developments taking shape among Protestants....By 1964, with Vatican Council II's decree on ecumenism (Unitatis redintegratio), the Church embarked on an almost 180-degree turn by acknowledging the authenticity of non-Catholic Christian churches...with whom the Roman Church should seek to achieve unity. In 1967, the Holy See appointed fifteen official observers to the Fourth Assembly of the World Council of Churches...." (VATICAN POLITICS: STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION, F. Murphy)

However, the current mistrust between Catholics and Orthodox seems almost insurmountable. **"One particularly thorny issue must be resolved** before the Holy See and the Russian Patriarchate in Moscow can normalize their relations...the Russian Orthodox accusations against Greek Catholics." However, "the Holy See is cautiously optimistic concerning...improved relations with the Russian Orthodox Church" (INSIDE THE VATICAN, 5/98). Also, this year the Lutheran World Federation, representing over 57 million Lutherans in 69 countries, unanimously approved the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" with the Roman Catholic Church (NEW YORK TIMES, 6/26/98).

Yes, in this tumultuous world of unprecedented trouble, both Catholics and Protestants feel a sense of urgency for achieving unity by the new millennium year 2000. *But what exactly is the "vision" Jesus gave to his disciples, his church?*

The Bible's language of symbols and prophecies tell another story. **The "Great Commission" of Jesus was not a vision to make all nations his disciples**, but to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt.28:19 NAS). Quite a difference! The "witness to all nations" was to find a Bride for Christ, a "little flock." James reminded the church that God would *first* "take from among the Gentiles a people for His name. . .that the *residue* of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles" (Acts 15:14-17). God has been first selecting a "people for His name" from "every kindred and tongue and people and nation" to be "kings and priests on the earth" (Rev.5:9,10). Then they would be used to *bless* the "residue of men"—the vast majority of man in the Kingdom of Christ. Now is *not* the time for Christianizing the world—or even America.

According to a report released this year by the "Global Evangelization Movement," only 33% of the world is Christian. If Jesus Christ "died for all," isn't "all" somewhat of an exaggeration? (And 33% may be too generous.) Does this mean that God's Plan for reaching man is only one third successful? Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world." He did not say, Please set up my Kingdom before I come. So, whose "world" is this? Apostle Paul's tells us Satan is "the god of this world [who] hath blinded the minds of them which believe not..." (2 Cor. 4:4). The whole purpose of Jesus' return is to bless "all the families of the earth" (Gen.22:17,18; Gal.3:29) while Satan is bound for a thousand years "that he should deceive the nations no more" (Rev.20:3).

**So all the councils, synods and associations of Christians should not be alarmed that the numbers of dedicated Christians are dwindling.** Nor should they be dismayed in the battle to win over society—"Satan's "world." Christians should not fear. Now is not God's time for converting the whole world.

What these councils and alliances should be alarmed at are the prophecies that indicate their alliances are unlawful and that they will come to nothing. In one prophecy, Isaiah, using symbolic language with a double application, admonished both apostate Israel and apostate Christianity: "Say ye not, A confederacy, to all them to whom this people shall say, A confederacy; neither fear ye their fear, nor be afraid. Sanctify the LORD of hosts himself; and let him be your fear...And he shall be for a sanctuary: but for a stone of stumbling and for a rock of offense to *both the houses of Israel*" (Isa.8:12-14).

The same Prophet talks about what is happening in the ecclesiastical "heavens" of Christendom ("Edom," Isa.63:1-4) Of course, Jesus is the one to fulfill the prophecy against "Edom" as he who "treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God" (Rev.19:11-15). What happens *before* the symbolic "heavens" are dissolved is that "the heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll" (Isaiah 34:4-6). A scroll

has two ends, but can be *rolled together*. And so the opposing ends of Christendom—Catholicism and Protestantism—are now rolling together. They are uniting. But it is uncomfortable, thorny. It is also flammable: "While they be folden together as thorns [for Protestantism and the Papacy can never perfectly assimilate; each will be a thorn in the other's side], and while they are drunken as drunkards [intoxicated with the spirit of the world], they shall be devoured [they shall be overwhelmed in the great tribulation, and as religious systems, be utterly destroyed] as stubble fully dry" (Nahum 1:9).

**What Christians should really watch for is that church coalition** will eventually impose restrictions on any who oppose them. Much like the Papacy of the "Dark Ages," anyone not agreeing would be a "heretic." And the Papacy—or have we forgotten history?—used the arm of the state to implement its program of persecution. This brings us to the prophecy in Revelation about the "beast" the "image" and the number 666.

First, Revelation is a book of symbols (Rev.1:1). "Beasts" symbolize governments. The "little horn" that grew on the "terrible beast" of Imperial Rome was the Papacy which "made war with the saints" (Dan. 7:7,8,21). Now in Revelation this "little horn" is identified as a beast in its own right (Rev.13:1-5). The Roman church became a beastly government itself. We know it is the same as the "little horn" because both are described as oppressing the saints for the same amount of time (Dan 7:25; Rev.13:5-7).

At the close of the age, we are warned that an "image"—a likeness—will be made of the Papal beast. A Protestant federation to act like its Papal counterpart. Daughters like mother! It will impose restrictions. The image of the beast will "both speak and cause that as many as would not worship the image of the beast should be killed." A requirement will be made that all "receive a mark...that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark or the name of the beast or the number of his name" (Rev.13:15-18). Either the "mark" of the "image" *OR* the "mark" of the "beast" will be acceptable. That is because they will have unity. This alliance, however, will soon be destroyed (Rev.19:20).

**The true oneness of Christians is based on truth, not compromise. Jesus also prayed, "Sanctify [set apart] them through thy truth" (John 17:17). When the true church is complete, then the world will believe—and be saved. Then Jesus' prayer will be fully answered.**