



The Ecumenical Movement: **Theological Foundations**

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There is an enormous breadth to the ecumenical vision, making it a vision that challenges us to work together not only for the unity and renewal of the church, but also for the unity and renewal of the whole human community and the entire earth. It has been expressed in countless places in many different ways, such as in a World Council of Churches (WCC) Faith & Order Paper:

[t]he divisions among the churches and the failure of their members to live in true koinonia ... affect and hinder the mission of the Church. Mission has as its ultimate goal the koinonia of all. The mission belongs to the essence of the nature and being of the Church as koinonia. This makes the restoration of unity between Christians and the renewal of their lives an urgent task.

Understood in this way, ecumenism confronts whatever works against unity and wholeness in every situation. It is fundamentally an attitude towards everything we do; it is a way of doing; it is a way of being Christian people engaged in the ministry of Christ. So, it confronts us at the points of division within and between the churches: the existence of those divisions ensures that the Church fails to be an authentic sign of God's purposes of unity and wholeness. It confronts us, also, at the points of division in our world, and it calls the Church to be an effective instrument of God's Spirit in seeking wholeness – peace through justice – in God's world. The ecumenical vision for today needs to recognise the world as God's creation, and the Church as God's creation, where the part played by the Church is to be open to the transformation that Christ brings and, at the same time, to transform and serve the world.

The ecumenical movement is about nothing less than the renewal of the church in its mission, God's mission, to bring everything, in all the richness of the diversity of God's creation, "together in Christ".

One ecumenical theologian, Ernst Lange, said, "today there is only one way for the church to be the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, and that is the ecumenical way".

The Ecumenical Way

That sounds good, but the question is: what is the ecumenical way? What exactly is the ecumenical vision and what drives it? How does ecumenism fit into broader questions of theology? Indeed, what are the biblical and theological foundations for ecumenism?

Ecumenism, as we generally understand it, refers to the visible unity of the church. The word 'ecumenism'/'ecumenical' comes from the Greek word *oikoumene*, meaning 'the whole inhabited world', which itself comes from *oikos*, meaning 'house', 'household'. It is an inclusive word for human community. For that reason, the meaning of 'ecumenism' can be taken to reflect that universal vision, and we can broaden the ecumenical agenda to include inter-religious dialogue. Certainly, in our multi-faith and multi-cultural societies there is great need for interfaith understanding and respect – but there are different questions involved in interfaith dialogue and a different methodology; and that is beyond the scope of this paper.

The usual way we understand ecumenism is about Christian unity, and the modern ecumenical movement generally refers to the movement that began in 1910 in Edinburgh with the World Missionary Conference. So, 'Ecumenism', as we use the term today, refers to a movement of churches and Christians with the goal of the visible unity of the churches, and it touches all dimensions of church life including common worship, mission, service and renewal. It can be said that ecumenism is 'anything that relates to the whole task of the whole church to bring the whole gospel to the whole world'. Another way people define ecumenism is to think of it as the churches' 'search for unity in the truth found in Christ', with the idea that the closer the churches come to Christ, the closer they come to each other - and putting that the other way around, seeking unity is a way of coming closer to revealed truth – to Christ, and that is the way of renewal for all the churches. The closer we come to Christ, the closer we come to each other; and coming closer to each other is a way of coming closer to Christ. Ecumenism offers a way of renewal.

That definition that links unity with truth raises one of the key questions in ecumenical dialogue: are there limits to unity? Put differently: are there limits to acceptable diversity?

Is there a unity that is not acceptable? Is there a diversity that is so broad that error is embraced? Are there untruths that cause legitimate division? And if there are, what are they?

In the very early church, divisions happened over different understandings of the nature of Christ: The Docetists who thought Jesus was not really human but only appeared to be; the Monophysites and the Duophysites who argued about whether Jesus had one or two natures; and there were the Arians, and then the great split over the use of icons; then the Reformation. There have been many times when Christians felt others were in such significant error they could no longer stay together. In the New Testament, the First Letter of John deals with just such a situation – an unacceptable Christology and unacceptable morality – and it endorses separation. Visible unity was seen to be not an end in itself. It must be unity with Christ, in Christ, in the truth.

That is easy to say! Working out what that means is the tricky bit. Much of the ecumenical work over the last 100 years has tried to overcome old divisions in the church by seeking greater convergence in understanding in regard to the issues that caused those divisions in the past. But more recently, new divisions have been emerging. There are tensions in many churches over issues relating to sexual orientation. Or, we only have to think back a few decades to see how some churches adopted different stands over apartheid in South Africa. Some suggest that it is the failure to love that is the great untruth that cannot be tolerated.

The point to make out of this is that ecumenism has to do with visible unity, but not unity for its own sake. What we seek is unity in Christ and in the truth of Christ.

That is the goal; that is the ideal. But practically what would it look like? In talking about and striving for the visible unity of the Church, there have been different ideas about what exactly that means.

There was a time in the 20th Century when great unions took place, bringing about a unity at the level of ecclesial structures, such as in the churches of north and south India, or the Uniting Church in Australia, where the Methodist, some Presbyterian and some Congregational churches came together in unity. Many expected that such unions would keep on happening and would become more inclusive, and that this would be the path to the visible unity of the Church.

But that did not happen, and so people began to think of visible unity as the churches recognising in each other the marks of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church of Christ. This has its basis in the New Testament. There, *ekklesia*, meaning 'meeting', 'assembly', 'church', refers both to the local congregation and to the church universal, with the sense that each congregation is the expression, in that place and time, of the one church of Jesus Christ. Can we apply that New Testament concept to the ecumenical goal of the visible unity of the church? To do so means that unity consists in us recognising in each other, in our various churches, the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. That is the idea put forward in the statement from WCC Canberra Assembly in 1991, and re-affirmed at subsequent Assemblies in Porto Alegre in 2006, and Busan in 2013 – that visible unity consists in us recognising in each other the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church and so sharing a common sacramental life, entered by one baptism, celebrating one Eucharist, sharing a common life, recognising one another's ministries, and engaging in common witness and service – all held together by conciliar forms of co-operation.

Unity in Diversity

But there is an important note here – an important ecumenical principle – about visible unity. The unity the churches seek has never been thought of as uniformity, with all worshipping the same way and expressing faith in the same way. The ecumenical principle is unity in diversity, reflecting God's complex unity as Trinity and the wondrous complexity of God's creation. And it is one of the significant features of the statement from the Porto Alegre Assembly that it states, the church's unity in diversity "is an image of the triune God", and it goes on to speak of diversity as essential for wholeness. Christian unity, to be catholic, must be able to include human diversity in all its racial, cultural, theological and liturgical richness. Indeed, the great threat to the unity and catholicity of the church is not diversity but uniformity.

The New Testament images of the church are mostly images of a complex unity, a unity in diversity:

a body (1 Corinthians 12: 12-28)

a building (1 Peter 2:4f)

a vine (John 15)

a flock (John 10)

Theologians recognise that the Scriptures, which are the source of our unity, are also the source of our diversity. The New Testament canonises our differences, our different ecclesiologies. The Second Vatican Council, in the Decree on Ecumenism, says "While preserving unity in essentials, let everyone in the church preserve a proper freedom in the various forms of spiritual life and discipline, in the variety of liturgical rites and even in the theological elaborations of revealed truth. In all things let charity prevail". The 'unity we seek' is a unity in diversity, for diversity is essential to wholeness.

Vatican II spoke of "unity in essentials". The problem, of course, arises in working out and agreeing on what constitutes the essentials: what are the limits to acceptable diversity? Churches cannot agree on what constitutes the essentials. Maybe the concept of a hierarchy of truths can help, that is, the idea that some doctrines are more central, some less central when it comes to disclosing God in Jesus Christ – a hierarchy of truths that maybe puts the doctrine of the Trinity and the baptism of babies on different levels of importance. Yet, infant baptism is a communion-dividing issue for some. So too is the exercise of episcopacy in the person of a bishop.

One limit to acceptable diversity in our current situation that seems to be leading to new divisions is over the nature of human sexuality. But behind that issue are different understandings about the authority of Scripture and about biblical hermeneutics.

There is a great complexity in determining 'the essentials'.

Nevertheless, the ecumenical quest goes on!

Unity with diversity remains the ecumenical principle.

Unity as Gift and Goal

Ecumenists speak about the unity of the church having two aspects. Unity is both a gift of God already given and a goal towards which the church is to strive. So, the language about visible unity reflects these two truths: the churches already have unity because of God's action in Christ, but the ecumenical task is allowing that unity to become visible, removing the barriers we place in the way.

This basic conviction about unity as both gift and goal comes from the Scriptures.

Consider, for example: Ephesians 4:1-16.

What stands out for you in that passage?

unity of the Spirit as a common life that all believers share

unity that has to be maintained by working zealously for it – through humility, gentleness, forbearance, love and peace, that is, through relational life

seven statements of unity in vv.4-6

the priority to truth – growing into Christ

the centrality of Christ v.15 – Christ is undivided; the closer we come to him, the closer we are to each other

there must be vigorous effort to maintain what is already given but can easily be lost.

Mission is strongly linked to unity

Look at another passage: John 17: 11, 20-23.

What stands out for you when you read this passage?

unity of the church is grounded in the life of the Trinity – “I in them and you in me, may they also be in us”. Our unity is to reflect that between Father and Son. Rudolph Schackengurg, a German theologian, said our unity is a “sign and expression of the divine being”.

Christian unity is the goal and fulfilment of Christ's mission – with a further purpose, the acknowledgement of Christ by the world.

again, there is the link between unity with mission - unity between Christians is a witness to an unbelieving and broken world – our love reflects God's love.

What gospel do we proclaim by our dividedness?

Unity is of the Essence of the Church

Unity is not just a pragmatic thing. Ecumenism is not an appendix to the Church's mission. It belongs to the nature of the church. It is of the essence of the Church.

We can think about it in parallel with thinking about the eucharist.

From the beginning of the Church, the eucharist has been intrinsic to its identity. So too, from its beginning, unity that makes for authentic mission has been intrinsic to the Church's identity.

The eucharist, celebrated in response to the command, “Do this”, draws us into relationship with the one who commands this to be done in memory of him. But while this dominical command is found in the three synoptic gospels and in Paul (1 Corinthians 11), it is not found in the fourth gospel. This does not mean the author of John's gospel plays down the significance of the eucharist, as chapter 6 makes clear. But what happens in that gospel's account of the Last Supper is that there is a different action – a foot-washing; and there is another imperative: the new commandment, ‘love one another!’ Both the action and the accompanying imperative put the focus on the quality of the relationships within the community, and this community-building theme reaches its climax in the prayer of Jesus in chapter 17, which is a prayer for their unity in love and truth that ‘the world might believe’ (17.20).

So, the synoptic and Pauline accounts of the Last Supper give us the command, ‘Do this!’, making the eucharist intrinsic to the Church's identity from the beginning. On the other hand, the Johannine account of the Last Supper gives us the new commandment, ‘love one another!’, and gives us the prayer of Jesus that ‘they may be one’, making love and unity intrinsic to the Church's identity from the beginning.

Unity is of the essence of the Church. It is a given. It is a God-given gift. The challenge is for the churches to live it, to make it a visible reality.

Deep down, we know that visible unity is Christ's will for his people and that division itself is a scandal. That is why we know that the Last Supper imperative, 'love one another!', and the Last Supper prayer, 'that they may be one', make love and unity intrinsic to the Church's identity. That is why we know that the ecumenical task is crucial to who we are as Church, the Body of Christ.

An Alternative Reality

In terms of unity being our goal, there are so many admonitions to unity in the New Testament that tell us unity was almost as elusive in the first century as it is now. In the small Christian community in Corinth some could be heard saying: "I belong to Apollos, I to Paul, I to Cephas" (1 Corinthians 1:12); or we can be heard saying, "I belong to the Anglicans, I to the Catholics". But giving our fundamental allegiance to what is a part rather than the whole is not something Paul could tolerate. Furthermore, Ephesians chapter 2 is particularly directed towards maintaining unity, as are Acts 15 (the Council of Jerusalem), Galatians 2 and 5, Romans 4 and 11, in the context of the early Christians grappling with the question of the inclusion of Gentile Christians with Jewish Christians in the church.

Now, all our traditions would agree that unity is a gift and goal of church but, given the nature of ecumenical realities, what our traditions do with these passages differs. Some of our churches identify themselves with the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, and maybe, if we are being very honest, all our churches do secretly, in their institutional hearts. We hope everyone will see the light and become like us. But for any church to identify itself exclusively as the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, it necessarily excludes others. Traditionally churches have labelled others 'heretical' or given them a lesser status such as 'ecclesial communities'. Some churches recognise in other churches some of the marks of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, but maybe not all, maybe not enough for full communion. So, we think of unity as a gift and goal for the church, but who do we include in the definition of church.

There are two other broader theological considerations to ponder in thinking about the theology of ecumenism.

The first has to do with the nature of God and particularly God's transcendence, God's infinity and our finitude. It says two things: first, God is beyond all our explanations and projects; and second, all our human claims to truth are partial at best. We need each other to come closer to fullness of understanding. Frequently in Scripture there is the question, "to what will you liken me? I am God and there is no other" (Isaiah 46:5,9), and the divine affirmation, "my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways" (Isaiah 55:8). This is about the utter otherness of God. It says, all our language, our metaphors, our points of comparison are limited and partial before the reality of God. It ties in with the fact that all human thought is conditioned by culture so that by our very nature we are incapable of reaching absolute truth. The first two commandments convey this insight: "You shall have no other gods but me", so God is and there is ultimate truth; but furthermore, "you shall make no graven image", our grasp of the truth is never final. Seen this way, we can think of ecumenism as a rejection of idolatry – as an alternative to graven image theology. Ecumenism is the refusal to absolutize our relative perspectives. This should make us humble and willing to listen to different voices in theological debate: across all differences of gender, race, culture.

2. The Second broad theological perspective is about where we start the discussion of ecumenism, and already there have been hints about this. What distinguishes us as Christians is our confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and our experience of God's grace through faith in him, and with this as our bottom line, all our confessional differences pale into insignificance – at least less significance beside the unity we share in Christ. And this is where ecumenical dialogue must begin.

It is not enough just to accept diversity and have our churches settle in the good relationships we now enjoy but acquiesce in our dividedness. By and large this is the point we have reached now in the ecumenical journey. But it is a weak doctrine of the koinonia the gospel calls us to. It is also a weak understanding of the nature of the unity in truth we seek.

The reality is that while there have been wonderful signs of the ecumenical journey continuing, overall ecumenism occupies a lesser place in the life of the churches (it “is no longer in the bones of church leaders”, as it has been said). There is no longer the same commitment to strive for the visible unity of the Body of Christ that gave rise to this movement throughout most of the twentieth century. It now seems true to say that to be ecumenical, to be guided by the vision of the *oikoumenē*, is to be counter to the prevailing mindset within much of the Church and in the wider society.

This reality has to be recognised. But the problem also must be named: it leaves us content with the status quo unchallenged and unchanged. Consequently, the visible disunity of the Church remains – we are not living the unity we have in Christ – and the divisions among the churches block wholehearted pursuit together of an ecumenical vision for humankind. Paradoxically, in this globalised world where the individual and the local has become the focus, the ‘big picture’ of ecumenism, of the *oikoumenē*, seems to be discarded. Indeed, ecumenical enthusiasm does seem to be at a low ebb, but Christians working towards unity are reminders that unity – the alternative – is not an option, but a command from Jesus himself.

However, for an alternative to be realised, the 1964 Vatican II Decree on Ecumenism recognised:

There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without a change of heart. For it is from newness of attitudes (cf. Eph. 4:23), from self-denial and unstinted love, that yearnings for unity take their rise and grow toward maturity.

It is only when there is such a ‘conversion’ within each person, and within our churches as institutions, that ecumenism will truly be possible. It is only when ecumenism, which calls us into more visible expressions of the unity that we have through our being incorporated into Christ, is seen as essential to our being Church, that it releases energy and frees us for mission.

Alongside our diversity, alongside our different perspectives of God's truth, we need dialogue, growth in insight, so that “speaking the truth in love we may grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Ephesians 4:15).

This is the ecumenical task, the ecumenical alternative. But it is no just a task. It is a movement inspired by a vision. That vision embraces the unity of the Church; but it is an all-encompassing vision of reconciliation and peace. It embraces the struggle for a more truly human society, human dignity and genuine stewardship of the environment. God's dream for God's world! It is a vision that confronts whatever works against unity and wholeness in every situation. It is fundamentally an attitude towards everything we do; it is a way of being Christian people engaged in the ministry of Christ.

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Unitatis Redintegratio, Op.cit., p. 351.