

To Unite or Not to Unite

Chapter 7 from *The New Evangelicalism* (1963)
by Ronald H. Nash

We have seen that the evangelical is adopting a different attitude toward the problem of separation. But what of his attitude toward cooperation with those of other theological persuasions? Many fundamentalists have jumped to the conclusion that the evangelical's dissatisfaction with hyper-separatism means that he is necessarily committed to full cooperation with liberals. This conclusion, however, is oversimplified and mistaken. In a consideration of evangelical cooperation with liberals, there are two especially important problem areas--that of ecumenicalism and that of cooperative evangelism.

I. PROBLEM AREA NUMBER ONE: ECUMENICALISM

An excellent example of the dual nature of the evangelical position can be seen in two editorials that Carl Henry wrote for the early issues of *Christianity Today*. He warned of both "the perils of independency" as well as "the perils of ecumenicity." Both of these, Henry argued, are extreme movements. The spirit of independency is best exemplified by the extreme right wing of orthodoxy, The American Council of Christian Churches and its offspring, The International Council of Christian Churches. The spirit of ecumenicity (or what Henry also calls the spirit of "organic church unity") is represented by the National and World Council of Churches. Henry believes that each of these two movements

has its own tensions and perils. Independency tends to be intolerant, Church Union to be tolerant. The former moves in the direction of exclusivism, the latter toward inclusivism. One holds a low view of the Church in its visible and historical aspects, and the other a high view. The one glorifies separateness, while the other reaches out toward ecclesiasticism. Independency remains highly creedal in minute detail, while Church Unionism becomes vague and ill-defined in theological basis. One can easily become Pharisaic, the other Sadducean.¹

What is the evangelical attitude toward ecumenicity? Does it view church unionism as an intrinsic evil, an intrinsic good, or neither? Is evangelicalism trying to walk a tightrope between independency and ecumenicity and, if so, for what reasons? And if it is, may evangelicalism be rightfully accused of possessing a spirit of compromise (in the bad sense of the word)? While there are naturally some disagreements among evangelicals on some points, I believe that most are agreed on the following issues:

A. The Need for Theological Dialogue

Evangelicals are more conscious than fundamentalists of the need to carry on an exchange of ideas with liberal and neo-orthodox theologians. Vernon Grounds has stated that an "evangelical can be organizationally separated from all Christ-denying fellowship and yet profitably engage in an exchange of ideas with men who are not evangelicals."² Indeed, unless the conservative does

¹ Carl Henry, "The Perils of Independency," *Christianity Today*, Nov. 12, 1956, p. 20.

² Quoted by Richard Curtis, *The New Evangelicalism* (unpublished paper), Bethel College and Seminary, Minneapolis,

this he is not fulfilling Christ's injunction to carry the Gospel to *all* men.

B. The Need for an Evangelical Definition of Ecumenicity

Advocates of ecumenicity are not always agreed about the nature of the unity they are purportedly seeking. Some give the impression that they will be satisfied with nothing less than a complete organizational unity. More moderate ecumenists believe that the best hope for success lies in the direction of a more spiritual unity. Because of this dichotomy, someone has remarked that ecumenicity is definitely going somewhere--it just doesn't know where.

Evangelicals must be actively engaged in making clear the true and biblical sense of ecumenicity. J. Marcellus Kik has given us an example of efforts along this line. He has written,

Ecumenism is the movement in the universal visible church upon earth by which, under the influence and guidance of the Holy Spirit, the church comes into the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.³

Furthermore it is up to the evangelical to protest against the equating of ecumenicity with the concept of a worldwide visible church organization. Biblically, at least, the two are not equivalent.

Before we leave this point, we should recognize that there is some conservative dissatisfaction with the evangelical position. Van Til, for example, has complained that beyond the evangelical's criticism of independency and ecumenism,

. . . there is little in Henry's writings that tells us something of the nature of the church. Presumably his own view of the church resembles that of the Reformed Confessions. But apparently for purposes of getting a hearing for the gospel today by means of a cooperative effort, the Reformed view of the church must not be pushed to the front.⁴

It is easy to understand Van Til's concern. But Henry suggests that perhaps the vagueness that has characterized the evangelical discussion is necessary. He points out that a mediating position

. . . is not so easily defined since the lines are not so sharply drawn. It subscribes to some concepts of each of the extremist groups, but opposes others, finding its rationale in a mediating view, or perhaps better described as a perspective above the extremes. Extreme positions are easier to perceive and less difficult to defend to the popular mind. Whether they are truer is a matter for debate.⁵

C. The Need for an Evangelical Critique of Ecumenicity

The evangelical must protest against what he believes to be doctrinal perversions and heterodox

Minn., p. 18.

3 J. Marcellus Kik, *Ecumenism and the Evangelical*, Philadelphia, Presbyterian and Reformed, 1958, p. 3.

4 Van Til, *New Evangelicalism*, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

5 Henry, "Perils of Independency," *op. cit.*, p. 21.

tendencies within existing ecumenical movements. At times the evangelical gets the impression that the organic unity sought by the advocates of ecumenicity can only be attained by a theological inclusivism so radical as to remove the distinctives of the Christian Faith. Evangelicals are unhappy with the "doctrinal laxity," "theological vagueness" and "doctrinal inclusivism" so prevalent in The National and World Council of Churches.

Carl Henry accuses ecumenicity of majoring on minors and minoring on majors, that is, it exalts "to a place of primacy what is not important, (while) relegating to a secondary position that which is basic and necessary to a full-robed Gospel."⁶

The evangelical wonders why the ecumenicist is so quick to appeal to the Bible in support of church unity and even quicker to ignore all the rest that Scripture teaches. Why use the Bible to defend the unity of the body of Christ and ignore what it says about the Virgin Birth or the bodily resurrection of Christ? "By what logic and authority, then, is there any justification for the isolation of one strand of the Biblical teaching from all else, elevating it to a position of supreme importance and degrading the other teachings to positions of relative inconsequence?"⁷

D. The Need for an Evangelical Alliance

Whatever the evangelical attitude is toward the National Council and the World Council of Churches, one thing remains clear. Conservatives (and by this I mean fundamentalists, evangelicals and the other branches of orthodoxy) ought to realize the importance of uniting among themselves so that they might speak with the authority and influence of a strong and united minority.

We are not necessarily advocating any mergers of orthodox denominations, although we believe the differences separating many such groups are often trivial and petty. Edward John Carnell (perhaps to counter the misunderstandings and criticisms of his position in *The Case*) has given a much more satisfactory treatment of evangelicalism and church union in his book *The Kingdom of Love and the Pride of Life*. He suggests that when denominational mergers can be effected among Christians *who agree doctrinally*, such mergers should be encouraged. But, he warns,

Merger is not the whole answer. For one thing, it may serve as a substitute for individual responsibility. Shrinking the number of denominations is no blessing *per se*. Christ prayed for unity, but not for organizational unity. He prayed that his followers might be one, even as the Father and the Son are one. This implies a *vital* unity, and vital unity implies fellowship. Thus, if organizational merger detracts Christians from their obligation to love another, it is a hindrance to unity, not an encouragement.⁸

Fundamentalists should notice that this hardly sounds like a plea for indiscriminate church unionism or "doctrinal indifferentism." Carnell goes on to make it clear that Christians will naturally disagree over such controversial items as church government, communion, baptism, sanctification and predestination. "We should not be ashamed of our theological differences. They are signs that we are taking the work of exegesis seriously. Furthermore, a genuine Christian fellowship can exist *within* the framework of denominational plurality. Love can hurdle

6 Henry, "Perils of Ecumenicity," *Christianity Today*, Nov. 26, 1956, p. 22.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

8 E. J. Carnell, *Kingdom of Love and the Pride of Life*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans (c. 1960), p. 118.

existing barriers."⁹

One of the more important factors that explains the growth and success of liberalism may be the fact that liberals have learned that united they stand and divided they fall. A long time ago Jesus warned that "Every city or house divided against itself shall not stand." While His remarks were meant for a different context, they apply equally as well to the present state of orthodox theology.

E. Conclusion

The evangelical attitude toward ecumenicity is not an easy thing to define. This is largely due to its being a mediating position that attempts to transcend the perspectives of both independency and church unionism. On the one hand evangelicalism wants freedom to converse with liberals, while on the other hand it maintains the right to criticize. On the one hand evangelicalism wants fellowship with other conservative brethren, but it also wants the right to warn against the dangers of the spirit of independency. Realizing that there ought to be a conservative voice within, e.g., The World Council of Churches, the evangelical is also aware of the primary need of uniting the many contending segments of orthodoxy. Unfortunately, the measures that evangelicals have adopted to accomplish these things have only widened the breach between them and, for example, the fundamentalists. Due to the mistakes of the evangelicals (for they have made many), the obstinacy of the fundamentalists, and the parochial opinions of other conservatives like Van Til, orthodoxy is a long way from any satisfactory answer to these problems.

II. PROBLEM AREA NUMBER TWO: COOPERATIVE EVANGELISM

Perhaps the most tragic example of the disagreement existing between evangelicalism and fundamentalism to be found in the varied attitudes toward the evangelistic ministry of Billy Graham. One of the strangest and saddest results of Graham's New York campaign was the criticism that came directly from the fundamentalists. *The Sword of the Lord*, a fundamentalist weekly, has accused Graham of being the "principal sparkplug of a great drift away from strict Bible fundamentalism. . . . The New York Crusade has set back the cause of evangelism for at least fifty years."¹⁰ Graham's "great heresy," according to the separatists, is that he preaches the Gospel in campaigns that are often supported by liberal pastors.

In a book entitled *Cooperative Evangelism*, Robert Ferm has attempted to offer evidence from both Scripture (he cites chiefly the methods of Jesus and Paul) and history that Graham's methods are neither unbiblical nor markedly different from those of other great evangelists such as Jonathan Edward, John Wesley, Charles Finney, D. L. Moody, and Billy Sunday. Recently, some of Ferm's conclusions have been challenged by Cornelius Van Til. Van Til is an example of those orthodox Christians outside of fundamentalism who also frown upon cooperative evangelism.

Van Til is not convinced that Jesus' methods were those of cooperative evangelism. He points to Jesus' condemnation of the apostate religious teachers of His day. The Pharisees and Sadducees wanted nothing to do with Jesus' ministry. And so, Van Til tells us, "As they did not invite Jesus

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹⁰ Quoted by Robert Ferm, *Cooperative Evangelism*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan (c. 1958), pp. 18, 15.

to cooperate in preaching *their* gospel with them so Jesus did not invite them to preach *his* gospel with him."¹¹

While Van Til's argument at first seems valid, a more careful reading of it will reveal that it is based upon a false analogy. Naturally, the Pharisees did not invite Jesus to preach *their* gospel-- Jesus would have refused! And naturally, Jesus did not invite the Pharisees to preach *His* Gospel--they would have refused! The proper analogy (and here there is no precedent in Jesus' ministry for Van Til to appeal to) would be found only if the Pharisees had asked Jesus to come and with their permission and cooperation still preach *His* Gospel! Evidently Van Til thinks that Jesus would have refused such an opportunity. I do not!

Van Til also refers to the conflict between Paul and the Judaizers as evidence that Paul would have frowned on cooperative evangelism. Van Til notes the bitter antipathy between Paul's preaching of grace and the Judaizers who preached salvation by ceremonial works. Between Paul and them, "It was a battle unto death. A church centered evangelism under the auspices of a committee, the membership of which was composed in part of the party of the Judaizers and in part of the party of Paul, would be all to the benefit of the Judaizers."¹²

No one can disagree with Van Til's remarks insofar as they apply to Paul. But is his analogy between the position of Paul and the situation in which the twentieth-century evangelist finds himself a proper one? If the situation in the church today is significantly different, then the analogy breaks down and Van Til is left without a scriptural objection to cooperative evangelism. We certainly do not wish to deny the similarity between the Judaizers and twentieth-century liberalism. Both represent autosoterism at its worst. But there *is* an important difference. In Paul's day the Church was still relatively small and relatively pure of doctrinal error. The line between Christians and pagans was still clearly drawn. But today, in America, the people the evangelist wishes to reach for Christ are often nominally within the church. In other words, while they may be members of a particular church or consider themselves as belonging to one religious group or another, many are not committed Christians. In many cases, it is entirely correct to picture the American evangelist as outside the pale of professing Christendom attempting to find an audience within for his message. The question now boils down to the best method for reaching the mass of professing Christians who may yet be estranged from God because of sin. John W. Sanderson seems to have clearly seen the alternatives here when he speaks of "purity of testimony--or opportunity?"¹³ But the evangelical believes that these are not exclusive disjuncts. Rather, he believes that it is possible to capitalize on the opportunities afforded by cooperative evangelism without sacrificing the purity of his message.

What message is Graham preaching? What message is it that liberals are sponsoring and that their church members are coming to hear? It is the old-fashioned Gospel of sin, judgment, and salvation by grace. Graham believes that--

The mission of the Church is to make the truth known, not just to preserve and protect it. Truth needs only to be proclaimed. But unless it is proclaimed to those whose need is greatest, the Church will have failed. It is for this reason that Billy Graham and his team have always accepted calls for leadership in evangelism, even

11 Van Til, *op. cit.*, p. 26 (italics mine).

12 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

13 See John W. Sanderson, "Purity of Testimony--or Opportunity?" *Sunday School Times*, Feb. 11, 1981.

though they realized that theological conformity can never be assured in advance.¹⁴

Cornelius Van Til himself makes an interesting admission when he writes,

Machen knew well enough that an *independent* board of missions was not a normal thing. He knew it was the task of the church to engage in evangelism and missions. But, when placed before the choice of a church-centered evangelism with modernism largely in control of the church or evangelism carried on by an independent board, he chose the latter.¹⁵

In other words, Van Til admits approvingly that Machen recognized that in order effectively to perform the task of evangelism and missions, one must sometimes do things that a conservative would not *normally* do. Difficult situations and demanding responsibilities call for desperate action. And so the evangelical admits (or ought to admit) that perhaps cooperative evangelism is not the *normal* thing. But when faced with a choice between an evangelism that reaches the masses and one that will not do it as effectively, the evangelical chooses cooperative evangelism.

To set the record straight, we should make it clear that while the separatists bemoan the "unscriptural" and "God-dishonoring tactics" of Graham's methods, their own critical attitudes and attacks against Graham betray these same characteristics. These hyper-separatists¹⁶ gloss over the fact that Graham has not changed his Bible-centered message; they gloss over the fruitful results of his campaigns. And in place of this, they often offer distorted half-truths that are frequently taken out of context.

There can be little doubt that this is one of the most serious issues within orthodoxy. But regardless of who is right, it is a sad testimony to an unbelieving world when Christians (and the participants in *this* dispute *are* committed Christians) cannot exhibit love toward one another. I believe that the following words by Robert Ferm are correct:

Hence, the genuinely Christian disposition is not one of self-justification, but of love. Separatists have attempted to prove that they are right, but in their attempt they have neglected a far more important Christian virtue. Love is first in the list of the fruits of the spirit. It is the outgoing love of the redeemed personality which is the manifestation of the love of God shed abroad in the heart of the believer.¹⁷

Separatists should remember that there are, for the Christian, two kinds of heresy! There is first of all theological heresy, i.e., the departure from basic and central doctrines of the Bible and Christianity. But there is also a practical heresy which is a departure from *all* that God demands of us in our personal lives. Some fundamentalists have been so busy denouncing others of theological heresy that they have overlooked their own sins of the spirit. Their pride and lack of Christian love are in sharp contrast to the words of the One they call their Master--"By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples--*if ye love one another.*"

14 Ferm, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

15 Van Til, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

16 It should be understood that we do not here have in mind such men as Machen and Van Til. Van Til's protests are carried out on a high level of scholarship and Christian courtesy. We are thinking instead of the more radical right wing elements of orthodoxy, the "hyper-separatists," who care little for the more basic elements of Christian charity or politeness.

17 Ferm, *op. cit.*, p. 92.