

Ecumenical Vision: An Evangelical Perspective

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What is Evangelicalism?

In an age of global challenges from different world religions and modern secularism, the common life and witness of the Church is an important element in building the Kingdom of God. The Gospel message will continuously challenge other faiths, world views and ideologies, and at the same time it will be constantly challenged by them. However important it may be to reflect upon the challenges the churches are facing, we should remember that, in reality, Christian faith is, or must be, first and foremost, a challenge to others.

Evangelicalism is calling Christians who had strayed from the historic Christianity back to classical Christian orthodox faith and practice. There are a number of orthodox Christian confessions. Evangelical movements often include older evangelical traditions such as Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed, Anabaptist, Methodist, Baptist, Wesleyan, Eastern Orthodox and Pentecostal. However, the growth of the Church in Asia has added to ever increasing brand names. What is happening is the worldwide Christian resurgence that appears to proceed without western organisational structures, and occurring amidst widespread political instability and the collapse of public institutions. Christian faith in Asia is often expressed through indigenous cultures, customs and traditions; without necessarily replicative Christian forms and patterns developed in Europe.

In accord with the early church councils, Evangelicals emphasize biblical teaching on the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus. Evangelical unity encompasses, in this sense, the fundamental core beliefs of all major Christian churches. On the other hand, the Evangelical movement proves that it is rooted in the Reformation of the 16th century. Christ alone is the Redeemer. He grants forgiveness by grace alone through faith. The doctrinal basis is the Scriptures (the Bible) alone. Unity is lived out and experienced in the relationship with Christ shared by all, which manifests itself in an encounter with Christ often termed as the experience of rebirth (conversion) and sanctification (a life of holiness) in daily life.

The unity of the Church is above every human and earthly institution, for it has been given from above as a perfect and divine gift. The members of the Church are united in Christ like vines, rooted in Him and gathered in one eternal and spiritual life. The unity of the Church overcomes all barriers including racial, linguistic and social differences. The message of salvation is to be proclaimed to all nations in order to bring them into one fold, to unite them by the power of faith and the grace of the Holy Spirit (Mt 28:19-20; Mk 16:15; Acts 1:8). In the Church, enmity and alienation are overcome, and humanity, divided by sin, is united in love in the image of the Trinity.

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Oneness is God's Signature

The Christian belief in the oneness of God implies God's universality and universality implies transcendence with respect to any given culture. Christians can never be first of all Asians, Africans, Europeans, Americans, Australians and then Christians. At the very foundation of evangelical identity lies an all encompassing change of loyalty, from a given culture with its gods to the God of all cultures. Belief in one God entails a belief in the unity of the human race as recipient of the blessings of this God, yet in order to enjoy the full blessings of this God a person has to be a member of a particular "tribe".

The solution to the tension created by God's universality and the cultural particularity of God's revelation is sought in a God who is both one and who is not hidden behind the concrete. Paul, in Galatians 3:1-4:11, narrates a solution. Paul embraces Christ: the crucified and resurrected Christ is the "seed" of Abraham in whom "there is no longer male and female" (Gal, 3:28). In Christ all families of the earth are blessed on equal terms by being brought into "the promised single family of Abraham." Paul's logic is simple: the oneness of God requires God's universality; God's universality entails human equality and human equality implies equal access by all to the blessings of the one God, none by right and all by grace.

The "One" in whom Paul seeks to locate the unity of all humanity is not disincarnate transcendence, but the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ. The "principle" of unity has a name, and the name designates a person with a body that has suffered on the cross. The grounding of unity and universality in the scandalous particularity of the suffering body of God's Messiah is what makes Paul's thought structurally and profoundly different from the kinds of beliefs in the all-importance of the undifferentiated universal spirit that would make "one ashamed of being in the body" and unable to "bear to talk about his race or his parents or his native country."

The foundation of Christian community is the cross. Christ unites different "bodies" into one body, not simply by virtue of the singleness of his person, but through his suffering. Jews and gentiles are made one body of God's Children without regard to ethnicity, nationality, gender, race, or class precisely in the cross of Christ. Cross is the self-giving of the one for many. Unity here is not the result of sacred violence which obliterates the particularities of bodies, but a fruit of Christ's self-sacrifice, which breaks down the enmity between them.

The self-giving of Christ created the body of Christ. "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptised into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and were made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:13). The resurrected Christ, in whom Jews and Greeks are united through baptism, is not a pure spiritual space into which only the undifferentiated sameness of a universal human essence is admitted. Rather, baptism into Christ creates a people as the differentiated body of Christ. The body of Christ lives as a complex interplay of differentiated bodies — Jews and gentiles, female and male, slave and free — of those who have partaken of Christ's self-sacrifice. There is one body in the Spirit with many discrete members. The Spirit creates equality by disregarding differences

when baptising people into the body of Christ or imparting spiritual gifts. The Spirit of God breaks through the self-enclosed world we inhabit; and Spirit re-creates and sets us on a journey toward becoming a catholic personality. The Spirit unlatches the doors of my heart saying: "You are not only you; others belong to you too."

The Church has taken root in many cultures, changing them as well as being profoundly shaped by them. Yet many churches in a given culture are one, just as the Triune God is one. All Churches together form the world-wide ecumenical community.

Leaving and Uniting

What then is the relation of churches to the cultures where they exist? We must develop an appropriate relation between leaving from and uniting with the culture. Distancing and uniting are parts of the Christian identity. Leaving something in order to follow Christ has a definite goal. For without a goal leaving could result in ceaseless roaming. We choose wisely when we select goals in accord with God's revealed values and purposes; we choose to be salt and light of the culture we dwell in, for this is our best.

Leaving open eyes to self-deception, injustice, and destructiveness enables us to fight against them. Those who wish to overcome evil must fight it first of all in their own selves and their own culture. The judgement must begin however "with the household of God" (1 Peter 4:17). The struggle against falsehood, injustice, and violence both in the self and the other is impossible without leaving. To fight against evil we need ecumenical community.

Our judgement of the self and the other should not be based on our own terms but in the light of God's new world – a world in which a great multitude "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" is gathered "before the throne and before the Lamb" (Revelation 7:9, 5:9). Churches in mission must seek to transform and enrich all cultures for the glory of God thereby fulfilling their mandate to be the salt and light of the world.

The Triune God: Foundation of Ecumenism

Self-centeredness is cured by looking deeply within the life of the Trinity. God exists as Father, Son, and Spirit in a community. The theological construct of *perichoresis* conveys the richness of mutuality, reciprocity and interconnectedness, which is discernible in the divine life of the Triune God of grace but also in all created reality, both human and non-human. *Perichoresis* is significant in expressing the relationship between God and human beings, who are invited to participate in the divine life. At the cosmological level, *perichoresis* may be viewed as a principle of cosmological unity and interconnectedness. Human persons are always external to one another as subjects. So the indwelling of other persons is an exclusive prerogative of God. However, *perichoresis* is constructive at the Church level.

At the human level there is similarity between the unity of life of the Church and the unity of the triune God. The Spirit of God makes this unity a concrete reality within the life of the local Church. Each person gives of himself or herself to others, and each person in a unique way takes up others into himself or herself. This is a process of the mutual internalisation of personal characteristics occurring in the church through the Holy Spirit indwelling Christians.

The Spirit opens them to one another and allows them to become ecumenical persons in their uniqueness. It is important to recognise that human beings are not interior to the Spirit in the same way that the Spirit is interior to human beings.

God is without Equal and Competitor

The sun, moon and stars are God's handiwork, not his rivals. The creation of the world out of nothing is something new even for God. Behind the extraordinary physical reality, of which we are a part, there is a God who wills it all into existence. As the creation of the love of God, the world is not an impersonal process, a machine or a self-developing organism – a cosmic collective into which echoes are to be found in recent scientific thought-freedom, relation and divine energy.

Dynamic loving relations constitute the inner being of God. Because these relations are relations of love they are therefore free. Freedom, or non-necessity, characterises not only the inner life of the Trinity, but also the created world because it is the product of the free creating act of God. Divine and human life is personal and intrinsically free, but the natural world is not. As a contingent creation, the universe is open, incomplete system, exhibiting a freedom that is limited by virtue of its dependence upon the free grace of God as creator. It is contingent in the sense that it is not self-sufficient or ultimately self-explaining but is given a rationality and reliability in its orderliness which depends on and reflects God's own eternal rationality and reliability.

The new decisive acts of God in creation, incarnation and Pentecost are indicative of the absolute and unlimited freedom of God to be other than what God always has been. In generous love, God is neither the 'unmoved mover' of classical Aristotelian theology, nor the 'moved unmover' of process theology, but the Self-moved God who is ever open to God's creation. God's immutability is expressed in terms of His freedom to love, not by virtue of the static, abstract attributes implicit in classical theism. In love God gave His creation a reality and freedom of its own, genuine yet dependent upon His own unlimited freedom.

The Triune God guides us to face today's complex cultural challenges; for indeed it is not easy to practice Christian life full of love, justice, reconciliation and joy. The world needs to encounter people who are witnesses of Christian life; that such a life is possible, and also reasonable and practicable. A life of love, justice, reconciliation and joy. Our encounter with Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit opens the door to knowledge and understanding. A common journey through life, a possibility of living in this way is of utmost importance.

The rapid growth of Pentecostal and Evangelical communities and their virtual non-involvement in the modern ecumenical movement has serious implications for the manifestation of Christian unity, and, up to now, has not been adequately addressed within the modern ecumenical movement. Many in those communities have reacted negatively against the modern ecumenical movement, and/or against churches and Christian communities which have traditionally taken part in the modern ecumenical movement.

The tragedy is that those who bear the name of Christ cannot witness together to the Gospel of Christ. According to the Gospel of John, "... for God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (3:16). But those who bear the Son's name are not able to witness together to this great act of God's love. According to the Gospel of John, "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (Jn 3:17). Yet today millions of those who bear the Son's name are still hostile and sometimes still condemn many others who bear the Son's name.