

The Theological Foundations of Ecumenism

Notes from a lecture by Rev. Dr Erica Mathieson, Anglican Minister Hacket, ACT, on 20/6/16

The 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.” (Ernst Lange, quoted by Konrad Raiser in *To Be the Church: Challenges and Hopes for a New Millennium*, WCC, 1997, p. xvi)

oikos means family, house or household,

oikouménē means the whole inhabited world.

ecumenism is a sign for the rest of the community.

Definitions of Ecumenism

1. The visible unity of the church, including common worship, mission, service and renewal.
2. WCC definition: Anything that relates to the whole task of the whole church to bring the whole gospel to the whole world.
3. The search for unity in Christ.

Key Ecumenical Questions

1. What are the limits to acceptable unity?
2. What are the limits to acceptable diversity?

1 John speaks of unacceptable Christology and behaviour. John was agreeing with Paul, who in 2 Cor 6:17 said to “come out from them” (Isaiah 52:11; Ezek. 20:34,41).

What We Seek

Unity in Christ and in the truth of Christ.

Visible Unity might mean:-

1. Structural unity (not necessary)
2. Recognising in each other the marks of the one holy, catholic and apostolic church (the authentic church).
Ecclesia = the church universal
The local church is an expression of the universal church.
The WCC Assembly of 1991 in Canberra put forward the concept of mutual recognition, which was repeated at subsequent Assemblies.
3. Accepting the baptism, Eucharist and ministry of other churches.

Ecumenical Principles

1. Unity with diversity is the ecumenical principle. The church's unity in diversity is an image of the triune God's unity in the divine persons. The New Testament images of the church (body, flock, living stones of a building, vine) are of diversity in unity.
Jurgen Moltmann said “the great threat to unity in diversity is ... uniformity.”
Vatican II said to preserve unity in essentials but freedom in expression of Christianity, including theological diversity, but retain charity.

2. Unity as a gift and goal.
Hierarchy of truths suggests some doctrines are more essential than others, e.g. women's ordination, homosexuality.

Main Scriptural Passages:-

Eph 4:1-16

Ephesians 4:4-6 (NRSV)

⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

Note: Seven “ones”, a liturgical unity. Make every effort (vs 3) – it is not easy.

To be effective instruments we must be authentic signs.

John 17:11, 20-23

John 17:11 (NRSV)

¹¹ And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one.

John 17:20-23 (NRSV)

²⁰ "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Note: Church unity is a witness to the world. The unity in Christ is already there, but the calling is to be worked out.

Disunity Violates the Essence of the Church

The quest for unity is not only pragmatic or an optional extra.

Desmond Tutu in his speech at the 9th General Assembly of the World Council of churches in Porto Alegre, 20 February 2006 said:

“A united church is no optional extra [...] Rather it is indispensable for the salvation of God’s world [...] We can be prosperous only together. We can survive only together. We can be human only together.”

Nor should we give our allegiance to part of the church and not the whole (e.g. Paul's writings about acceptance of Jewish and not Gentile Christians).

Lambeth Conference of 1888, Resolution 11 was conceived as a foundation for ecumenical discussion, but has more recently been used to outline the basics of Anglican identity. (The Lambeth Quadrilateral):-

1. **The Holy Scriptures** of the Old and New Testaments, as “containing all things necessary to salvation,” and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith.
2. **The Apostles’ Creed**, as the Baptismal Symbol; and the Nicene Creed, as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith.

3. **The two Sacraments** ordained by Christ Himself—Baptism and the Supper of the Lord—ministered with unfailing use of Christ's words of Institution, and of the elements ordained by Him.
4. **The Historic Episcopate**, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the Unity of His Church.

God's transcendence/infinity and human finitude.

All human thought is conditioned by culture. We cannot arrive at ultimate truth. We have only one God but cannot make graven images.

Ecumenism is a refusal to absolutise our relative perspectives.

Common experience of grace

It is not good enough to accept division (even in the name of diversity).

[Vatican II](#) Decree On Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio* recognised that a change of heart is needed.