CONSTRUCTING THE CHRISTIAN CENTER

Introduction

The *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* defines the Ecumenical Movement as "the movement in the Church towards the visible union of all believers in Christ. [1]" Typically, the term "ecumenical" refers to organizational or hierarchical unity in which all believers unite under one visible and universally recognized authority. Proponents of the ecumenical movement claim that such unity would provide the ultimate fulfillment of Jesus' prayer in John 17: that His followers "be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.[2]"

Such a goal, while laudable, has thus far proved impossible to achieve. Furthermore, ecumenism is impractical given the state of the church today. The 20th century witnessed a period of growth during which the church vastly outgrew any organization's ability to provide hierarchical leadership. Furthermore, there exists today too wide a diversity of worship styles and doctrinal emphases for any one existing Christian tradition to envelop all groups into a cohesive body.

Yet, Jesus' words still stand: "that they may be one." Is there an alternative to ecumenism? Can the various Christian bodies agree instead on basic doctrines around which all believers could gather while maintaining their distinctive identities?

Increasingly, many evangelicals believe such an alternative is essential, if not inevitable. Furthermore, these evangelicals — and those kindred souls in other traditions — have realized

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[1] E.A. Livingstone, ed., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), s.v. "Ecumenism"

[2] John 17:21, English Standard Version (Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

that any alternative must include Christians of all stripes, regardless of style and doctrine. The

alternative these believers suggest would form a center with which all denominations and

traditions could agree, even while agreeing to disagree about certain intractable issues.

Moving to the Center, Moving to Orthodoxy

Douglas Jacobsen and William Vance Trollinger, Jr. address the necessity of Protestant

agreement in the article "Evangelical and ecumenical: Re-forming a center." Jacobsen and

Trollinger focus on the conflict between liberal Protestantism and fundamentalist evangelicalism.

Jacobsen and Trollinger argue that Protestants must play a crucial role in forming the

center of the church. To do so, however, Protestants that perceive themselves "as divided neatly

into two antagonistic camps" of liberal Protestantism and evangelicalism must "jettison their

attachment to the two-party picture.[3]" Jacobsen and Trollinger believe the impetus for this

concession must come from the evangelical side, for it is among evangelical fundamentalism that

"dogma and judgmentalism" ruled for decades.[4] Modern evangelicalism arose in reaction to this

view and moved, as E.J. Carnell put it, "from fundamentalism to … orthodoxy.[5]" Unfortunately,

the authors claim, evangelicals have yet to abandon fully the "us vs. them" mentality so

pervasive in American fundamentalism.

Jaconbsen and Trollinger quote Stan Grenz , author of *Revisioning Evangelicalism*, to

articulate their goal for evangelically-based center. Grenz urged evangelicals to "throw off their

overly wooden and creedalistic understanding" by which they define the term "Christian" and

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[3] Douglas Jacobsen and William Vance Trollinger, Jr., "Evangelical and ecumenical: Re-forming a center," *The Christian Century* (July 13-20, 1994): 682.

[4] Ibid., 683.

[5] Ibid., 683.

instead present to the church a "distinctive kind of spirituality … they need to nurture and preserve on behalf of the church catholic.[6]"The authors conclude by calling for "evangelicals to join with other Christian groups in creating a middle ground" where all Protestants can feel at ease and safe from competition with each other.[7]

Moving to the Center: The Crisis of Identity

The move toward the center will require major shifts in evangelical thinking. For one thing, those to the right of the evangelical spectrum will inevitably undergo a crisis of identity. The question will arise, "can we cooperate with other groups without compromising our principles?" Opinions on social issues will prove a major test for any group seeking to form a center of cooperation. Several generations of evangelicals and fundamentalists have carried a "no retreat, no surrender" mindset into every discussion in which they participated. This mentality will not die easily. This is an important question. In forming the center, which issues — if any — should be open for compromise?

Dr. Richard Mouw answers this question in the article "Tolerance without Compromise: Christian Engagement in an Era of Political Rancor." Mouw reminds his readers that, in some sense, the necessary compromises have already begun.

Fundamentalists and evangelicals assumed new identities in the past twenty years. During this time, these groups moved away from a "remnant" mentality to engage society both culturally and politically. In doing so, according to Mouw, evangelicalism moved from the "remnant" mentality to the "other political theology deep within our collective unconscious: a 'chosen

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[6] Ibid., 683.

[7] Ibid., 684.

nation' triumphalism.'[8]" Unfortunately, "the dogma and judgmentalism" mentioned by Jacobsen and Trollinger came along as well. Mouw argues that the center so necessary to the church lies between the "remnant" and the "chosen nation" attitudes. Strong convictions come easy to evangelicals; tolerance of differences in doctrine and belief does not. Forming the center, however, will require both.

<div align="center">**Achieving the Center**</div>

Tolerance may prove difficult to practice, but it is not impossible. Today more than ever, believers throughout the church catholic realize the necessity of speaking with one voice and understand this necessity is impossible in the original ecumenical sense. Thus, the center will occur as the church joins to face the cultural and political conflicts of the 21st century.

First, building the center must begin within individual congregations. Our current model of congregational autonomy must expand to emphasize our dependence on other believers, even across denominational lines. Calvin says the church is united because "there could not be two or three churches unless Christ be torn asunder — which cannot happen![9]" In discussing Jesus' prayer for unity in *Thinking about God*, Fisher Humphries quotes Richard Baxter, who wrote, "God will own no church which is so independent, as not to be a member of the universal; nor any person who is so independent, as not to come to him as in communion with all the Christians in the world.[10]" Congregations must expand their teachings about the church to include the truths of church unity.

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[8] Richard Mouw, "Tolerance Without Compromise: Christian Engagement in an Era of Political Rancor," *Christianity Today* (July 15, 1996): 34.

[9] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*: Abridged Edition, Donald McKim, Editor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 125.

[10] Fisher Humphries, *Thinking about God: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (New Orleans: Insight Press, 1994), 210.

Secondly, the center must represent the entire church, with all her diversity. The center must not merely talk about diversity; the center must reflect its diversity into all corners of the church. Some will prefer C.S. Lewis' notion of the church as a "house" and insist the center remain in the "hall" while true work occurs in the "rooms." Lewis insisted, "the hall is a place … from which to try the various doors, not a place to live in.[11]" The center must influence the practices of the rooms by presenting the best from each room as traits other rooms will emulate.

Finally, those building the center must have the right motives, for otherwise they will neither succeed nor survive the attempt. T.S. Eliot wrote in *Murder in the Cathedral*, "martyrdom is never the design of man; for the true martyr is he who has become the instrument of God, who has lost his will in the will of God, … for he has found freedom in submission to God.[12]" Frankly, the center will not be the easiest place in which to reside. Physical martyrdom may not happen, but those in the center will prove easy targets from all sides. Those God places in the center must prepare for rejection by many and betrayal by some. Christ, however, prayed for our unity. The center must exist for the glorification of the church and Christ. God will build the center using those in complete submission to Him.

In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis said of Christian perfection, "when He said, 'be perfect,' he meant it.[13]" When Jesus prayed, "that they may be one," He meant it. An ecumenical church would be ideal if possible. Building the center will require sacrifice, patience, and humility, but the benefits to the church — and the world — will prove enormous and eternal.

This paper contains 1,296 words at the end of the last sentence.

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[11] C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers 2001), xv.

[12] T.S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral* (Rahway, NJ: Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc., 1935), 50.

[13] *Mere Christianity*, 198.

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