



Ministers' Fraternal Study Guides

Ecumenical Relations

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Introduction

Biblical ecumenism was the defining issue that brought the British Evangelical Council into being 50 years ago and it is still at the heart of Affinity's ethos. Hence this Study Guide makes several references to Affinity. We need to establish and apply a balanced Scriptural approach to worshipping, working and witnessing with other Christians. This will help and guide us when we face the issue from a number of perspectives:

- Personal fellowship or friendship
- The local church
- A denomination or group of churches
- Para-church organisations
- Promoting our understanding of biblical ecumenism beyond our comfort zone

Key Biblical Data

The Positive Dimension:

1. O.T.
The blessings of unity in fellowship and worship: Ps. 133, Eccles. 4:9-12, Amos 3:3, Mal 3:16-19, Ps. 122
A faithful remnant: 1 Ki. 19:18
2. N.T.
Jesus' command: Jn. 13:34-5
Jesus' prayer: Jn. 17:11-23
The young church in action: Acts 2:42-7 & 4:32-5
Paul's theology: Gal. 3:26-29
Paul's encouragement: Rom. 15:1 & 5-7, 1 Cor. 1:10-13 & 3:1-9, Eph. 4:2-6, Phil. 1:3-5 & 27 & 2:1-4
A reminder from Hebrews: 13:1

The Negative dimension:

1. O.T.
Idolatry and syncretism: Ex. 32:1-9, Ezra 9:1-2, 1 Ki. 18:16ff.
The dishonesty, greed and shallowness of religious leaders: Jer. 8:8-12
2. N.T.
Jesus' warnings about false teachers: Matt. 7:13-16 & 24:9-13, 24-25
And Paul's: Acts 20:26-31, 1 Tim. 4:1-7
And Peter's: 2 Peter 2

Paul confronts them in his ministry: 2 Cor. 11:1-15, Gal. 1:6-9
The need to refute error: 1 Tim. 1:3-4, 2 Tim. 4:1-5, Titus 1:9
The need for church discipline to deal with error and immorality: Rom. 16:17-18, 1 Cor. 5:1-5, 1 Tim. 1:18-20

Overview – some key issues

1. Affinity's concern for biblical ecumenism

Our mission statement begins 'we will declare and demonstrate the unity of Christ's church for the advancement of Christ's kingdom'. One way we endeavour to do this is by Theological Advocacy – 'clarifying and promoting the true basis of inter-church unity'. Our Doctrinal Basis affirms 'The spiritual unity of all who truly believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and their duty to maintain in themselves and in the Church a standard of life and doctrine that is in conformity with the teaching of God's Holy Word'. For further information on Affinity's position on ecumenical issues, please consult our statement which can be found on our website: www.affinity.org.uk under the section 'Introducing Affinity'.

Your church or church group probably has its own clearly identified position and hopefully the two complement each other.

2. Structural Confusion

The great majority of British churches, from Roman Catholic to Quaker, are involved in 'Churches Together in Great Britain & Ireland'. A considerable number of evangelical churches participate and this underlines the importance of a robust biblical grasp of ecumenical issues. We need to be aware that a small number of churches from some of our constituent bodies also identify with CT.

More positively, a significant number of churches in doctrinally-compromised denominations stand aside from CT and their own inter-church events. Some have looked in our direction for support and a few have joined Affinity whilst most of the newly established and emerging Gospel Partnerships have formal or informal links.

Structural confusion affects well-established ecclesiastical alignments and crosses formerly clearly defined boundaries. A generation ago the Christian Brethren were a fairly monolithic entity – with a distinctive pattern of worship and church government. Today the picture is infinitely more varied. At the opposite end of the spectrum the C of E and the Worldwide Anglican Communion are in turmoil over relatively new divisive issues: women ministers and bishops and acceptance of actively lesbian and gay clergy. Whilst the old theological differences remain between the catholic, liberal and evangelical wings, the last fifteen years have seen the profound disruption of even a veneer of unity. In Britain, and internationally, evangelicals are numerically ascendant and division is a present reality with more to come. This is seen most dramatically in the Episcopal Church in the USA which has suffered significant numerical decline under liberal leadership. Bishop John Spong was until recently the leading advocate of an aggressive and extreme agenda which in 2006 resulted in the election of a woman, Katharine Schori, as presiding bishop of ECUSA. Her references to God suggest a deity of both male and female gender and she strongly advocates the equal status of heterosexuals, gays and lesbians at every level of church life. Many ECUSA evangelicals are seeking Episcopal oversight from the Southern Hemisphere!

We may wonder why our brethren in Reform or Church Society remain Anglicans and wish that they would leave at least the Communion, if not an Anglican ethos. However let's acknowledge their integrity in denouncing error. William Taylor, Rector of St.Helen's Bishopsgate, preaching after the appointment of Archbishop Rowan Williams, said 'his teachings are idolatrous'.

On the home front, a few Anglican ministers are leaving with many of their old congregation to establish what are, to varying degrees, churches that retain something of their Anglican ethos (as at Christ Church Kidderminster and in Oct. 2006, as these notes are being written, the new independent Emmanuel Church in Nottingham). A considerably larger number of thriving evangelical Anglican churches are engaged in church planting across traditional parish boundaries – sometimes in the face of local and diocesan opposition (as with the Co-Mission initiative led by Richard Coekin in south and

central London and Grace Church, Dulwich – planted from St. Helen's and described by the Bishop of Southwark as a cult!). We have so much in common with these initiatives and should seek every opportunity to encourage them.

3. Theological Confusion

The points at which it most impacts us and presents issues that we need to wrestle with are the 'crossover' areas of theology where evangelicals are embracing positions that not long ago would have been the province of avowed liberalism.

We're clear enough on how we would tackle the David Jenkins' view of the physical resurrection of Jesus ('a conjuring trick with bones'). Hopefully we are also equipped to deal with Roman Catholic error.

However, we need to be clear how we react and respond to situations where evangelicals seem to have lost their way. The most recent high profile issue has been Steve Chalke's pronouncements on penal substitution. The EA has dealt with it ambiguously. John Benton's April '06 *Evangelicals Now* editorial indicated that the 2006 Spring Harvest/Word Alive Study Guide had been put together with assistance from Chalke and it's no surprise that the end result was a document based on studied ambiguity.

We need to promote a proper theological understanding of the unity for which Christ prayed. Jn.17:21, so often misused, describes unity based not on the Lowest Common Denominator (the vacuous, minimalist statements of so many 20th. and 21st. century endeavours for unity) but the Highest Common Factor (patterned on the perfect unity of the Father and the Son).

4. The Ecumenical Tightrope

We need to guard against compromise with error and ungodliness, while at the same time seeking to reach across necessary lines of demarcation to witness to biblical truths we believe to be crucial. In 2 Cor. 6:14-17 Paul establishes a line that cannot be crossed without appalling compromise and disaster. But the context is the black and white position of believer and unbeliever, light and darkness. When the contrast is between light and gloom, or cloudy overcast, or dusk, or better still glimmers of dawn, there will be good reason to see if we can lower the drawbridge. We have something precious to share – even if it can only start at the level of personal friendship. When approached to join ecumenical ventures I would have found compromising, I have tried to explain why I have to say 'no'. This has led to opportunities for witnessing to many right across the ecclesiastical spectrum.

Some of us may need to recall the Lord's frequent denunciation of OT religious leaders (kings, priests, false prophets) through his faithful servants; the substantial proportion of Christ's recorded words that are a devastating critique of the Jewish leaders of his day; followed by the equally severe and extensive criticism of ungodly early church leaders by Paul and other NT writers. We can confidently assert that Church history hasn't demonstrated any improvement!

Others may need to re-adjust in the opposite direction. Eph. 4:2-6 and Heb. 13:1 point us towards unity, peace and love wherever possible. The mindset that seeks every opportunity to denigrate and criticise those that differ on secondary issues is unbiblical, unhelpful and unattractive. I have attended the School of Theology at the *Metropolitan Tabernacle* just once – in 2005. Peter Masters' address on current trends was predominantly an attack on Affinity, the FIEC, Grace Baptists, Proclamation Trust and contemporary worship (which appeared to be defined in terms of musical accompaniment other than piano or organ and tunes with a 'beat').

Many from our reformed and separatist background rightly identify the deficiencies and excesses that concern us all with regard to Alpha. Why do they often do so in such negative and condemnatory fashion as to imply that no good results from it? No, we aren't to be complacent. No, it's not a good idea to use Alpha, especially when Christianity Explored is available. Doubtless many will have been put off or given false hope because of Alpha's defects, but thank God for those who have been saved and for the brilliant format that we have learnt from. In Phil. 1:15-18 Paul speaks of those who preach Christ out of envy and rivalry but because Christ is preached, he rejoices. Alpha certainly preaches

Christ and the motive is honourable (rather more so than those who criticise from their ivory towers of orthodox inertia!). If we hear the refrain 'Christianity Explored has been used to save thousands and Alpha tens of thousands' let's do better than throw our spiritual spears in the general direction of HTB!

5. An ecumenical modus operandi

Does it help to focus on:-

1. Being united in truth – with Bible-centred, gospel-motivated evangelicals.
2. Being united in love – with all who belong to Christ and with whom we shall share eternity. We need to show them the highest degree of love, even if we can't unite with them in any structured way, as we try to encourage them to re-focus biblically.
3. Not uniting at all – because their religion doesn't appear to have brought them, by God's grace, to repentance and faith. We must seek to show them God's love and his truth.

Further Reading

- *Towards evangelical church unity*, FIEC, 1965
- *Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the Fight of Faith 1939-1981*, Iain Murray, Banner of Truth, 1990
- *The church and its unity*, ed. Alan Gibson, IVP, 1992, (out of print)
- *The ecumenical century and evangelical responses*, Hywel Jones (1998 Evangelical Library Lecture)
- *Bible churches together*, Jonathan Stephen, 2000, available from Affinity
- *Evangelicalism divided*, Iain Murray, Banner of Truth, 2000
- *Statement on ecumenism (a brief summary of FIEC's current position)*

Questions for discussion

- What opportunities do you have, or could you create, to share our concern for biblical ecumenism and essential biblical truth with those who embrace a Churches Together position?
- When is ecumenical involvement a) good, b) neutral, c) risky – proceed with caution, d) unacceptable?
Look at situations like:
 - sharing a platform on ethical/life issues
 - theological debates with non-evangelicals
 - area missions where you can have some input for good but not total evangelical control
 - joining the board of a para-church organisation whose theological boundaries are wider than those of your church.
- What do you do when churches in your area or association, who ought to be clear on issues like CT involvement, are losing their way?
- How do you respond to mistreatment of unity texts, e.g. Jn. 17 and Gal. 3:28?
- You find yourself sitting opposite Steve Chalke on a train and no one else is too close. How will you use the opportunity?
- Ditto with a Roman Catholic priest
- If you haven't run out of time, invent some more train opportunities and discuss!