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# Holding Out a Hand in the Light!

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*Peter Milsom*

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*The new Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland prompts the BEC Executive Chairman to consider the challenge this represents to genuine Christians.*

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On 1st September 1990 the Inter-Church Process came to fruition with the establishment of new ecumenical bodies in England, Scotland and Wales. Some denominations and some local churches have decided not to seek membership of the new bodies. However, the major step forward for advocates of the ecumenical movement is that, for the first time, the Roman Catholic Church will be in full membership. These new bodies have agreed to 'hold hands together' but the details of the relationship have still to be worked out.

The BEC has taken a clear stand against unscriptural ecumenicity and sought to promote a true evangelical unity at church level. Yet we also have a sincere desire to remain in personal fellowship with all who are truly Christ's, whatever their present ecumenical views. Whilst feeling compelled to communicate our convictions to our fellow-Christians who do not at present agree with us, we wish to do so in love. This is not least because we know from personal experience the cost and heart-searching of applying Scriptural principles to ecumenical issues and because it is our deep conviction that reformation according to God's Word seems so often to be the biblical prerequisite for a visitation of the Holy Spirit in revival which is our greatest need today.

The emergence of the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland raises important questions for Christians, both within churches involved in the new bodies and those outside. Why have some true Christians chosen to belong to an ecumenical body embracing the Roman Catholic Church which denies the gospel? Why is there not more meaningful contact and fellowship between Christians within, for example, the Church of England, Baptist Union or Presbyterian Church of Scotland and those in BEC churches? How can we present more persuasively our conviction that the nature of the gospel is determinative for church relations? How can we address together the increasing number of issues which are dividing Christians and churches in our evangelical constituency?

## **Why have Christians agreed to join the new ecumenical bodies?**

The answer may seem simple — they are guilty of inexcusable compromise and have betrayed the gospel. But, for some, their action may have been governed by principle. They believe in the oneness of the Church of Jesus Christ and view schism very seriously, a truth that some evangelicals need to take more seriously. They have a sincere desire to win others in their denomination, even as Paul longed passionately for the conversion of his fellow Jews. We do not agree with the

conclusions they have arrived at, but we should hesitate before impugning the conscientiousness of their actions. It would be good to hear from Christians involved in the new ecumenical bodies the reasons why they have remained within.

For nearly 25 years there has been little dialogue between Christians within the denominations and those outside. Sitting together under the Word of God and the process of 'iron sharpening iron' moulds and shapes our convictions. **Isolation and extreme independency can blur and distort our spiritual vision.** I remember the formative influence of evangelical conferences I attended whilst still serving a denominational pastorate. I was conscious of being welcomed by those who had already seceded and my mind was stimulated by biblical principles and their application to my church situation. Without that fellowship I might not have seen some issues clearly.

This is not to imply that insights into truth belong exclusively to those outside the ecumenical movement. Our evangelical church life has been impoverished by the loss of wider fellowship. To say this does not call into question the rightness of past actions, but acknowledges that there have been losses as well as gains. The fact that Dr Lloyd-Jones' 'call' in 1966 led to the division of evangelicals was a matter of regret, no doubt, for him, since his burden was that if we allow our denominational differences to keep us apart we are guilty of the sin of schism.

### **How are we perceived by other Christians?**

It can be a painful thing to face up to the image we have with others. Many of our fondly-held notions can be destroyed. Is there something attractive about the BEC and evangelical churches to Christians in the denominations? Have we communicated clearly the fact that we regard them as brethren? Do we appear approachable and encouraging or severe and self-righteous? Are we Christlike in our dealings with our fellow believers whom we consider to be mistaken?

This is of great importance for those who have not experienced the kind of fellowship which existed prior to 1966. The division that occurred then was between those who knew each other, and this made some mutual understanding possible. Since that time there has been less contact between Christians within the ecumenically involved denominations and those in the BEC.

### **How will we face the challenge of a new generation?**

The spiritual condition of some of the denominations who have joined the new ecumenical bodies is nothing short of tragic. The new bodies will not change that and are no doubt seen by some as a useful diversion from the spiritual crisis. Many congregations are small and elderly, and the number of ministers has dwindled. In short, there is no new generation arising. This can be demoralizing for Christians in such churches, both ministers and church members, and they can become very discouraged. They will also be under increasing pressure to become involved in local ecumenical activities with those who deny the gospel.

We thank God that he has raised a new generation in our own midst, though we have no cause for complacency and long to see greater blessing on our churches. But have we faced the challenge of the generation now with us which 'knew not

1966'? We have been called to face the 1990's and to apply the same principles to a new situation. We must have an eye on the present and the future, as well as the past. The fact that difficulties were not resolved in the past does not mean they will never be resolved in the future. The first generation Reformers had long and passionate debates over the Lord's Supper and failed to resolve their differences. When the second generation Reformers came Luther acknowledged that Calvin's teaching might well have helped them resolve the earlier differences more amicably. We dare not assume that the last word has been spoken on church relationships.

There is a tendency for some of us to assume that any further attempts to improve relationships between Christians inside and outside the ecumenical bodies is futile. This 'give up' mentality is not biblical or spiritual, but temperamental and sociologically conditioned. We live in a 'throw-away' society. Not only are things thrown away, but so are personal relationships, with tragic consequences. This is seen in relationships within churches and between churches. Often little attempt is made to bring reconciliation, assuming that 'nothing can be done'. Such an attitude cannot be justified biblically. The new generation may be forgiven for being puzzled that this issue should be regarded as so intractable.

### **What are the Scriptural injunctions?**

We must face the challenge of our Lord's prayer in John 17:20-23 fairly and squarely. In 1964 the late Professor John Murray speaking at the Leicester Conference said:

'While spurious unity is to be condemned, the lack of unity among churches of Christ which profess the faith in its purity is a patent violation of the unity of the body of Christ, and of that unity which the prayer of our Lord requires us to promote. We cannot escape from the implications for us by resorting to the notion of the invisible church. The body of Christ is not an invisible entity, and the prayer of Jesus was directed to the end that the world might believe. The unity prayed for was one that would bear witness to the world, and therefore belonged to the realm of the observable. The implications for visible confession and witness are unavoidable.

It is to be admitted that the fragmentation and lack of co-ordination and solidarity which we find within strictly evangelical and Reformed Churches create a difficult situation, and how this disunity is to be remedied 'in the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace' is a task not easily accomplished. But what needs to be indicted, and indicted with vehemence, is the complacency so widespread, and the failure to be aware that this is an evil, dishonouring to Christ, destructive to the edification defined by the apostle as 'the increase of the body into building up of itself in love' (Eph 4:16), and prejudicial to the evangelistic outreach to the world. If we are once convinced of this evil, the evil of schism in the body of Christ, the evil of disruption in the communion of saints, then we have made great progress. We shall then be constrained to preach the evil, to bring conviction to the hearts of others also, to implore God's grace and wisdom in remedying the evil, and to devise ways and means of healing these ruptures, to the promotion of united witness to the faith of Jesus and the whole counsel of God.' (*Works, Vol 2, p 335*)

We need to address this challenge urgently. Whilst we are thankful for that measure of fellowship which we do know, we cannot but be conscious that there is much that still remains to be done. We must exemplify 'the most excellent way'.

There is a relationship between the doctrine of the Church and our sanctification. As Christians we work out our salvation in the rough and tumble of the life of the local church. There are differences of temperament and personality. Sometimes there are strong disagreements, but we seek to work out our Christian calling and service together and are the richer for it. Church life requires 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control'. In this way we become, in the words of Wong Ming-Dao, 'a stone made smooth'. The same is true of interchurch relationships. If we avoid the challenge and frustration of working them out with our fellow Christians we lose the sanctifying benefit of them, and there is a lack of development and maturity in our Christian character.

There are things we can learn from ecumenism. **We should be more willing to talk with Christians who are different from us and with whom we may disagree.** We should gladly acknowledge them as fellow believers and be willing to sit together under God's Word. It is a humbling experience for our beliefs and practices to be exposed to scrutiny by fellow believers.

We believe that we and all true Christians are 'in the light'. We have been brought to a saving knowledge of Christ and the truth. We are 'in Christ' and one with Him and all who belong to Him. All we do must be consistent with these spiritual realities. Are we willing to 'hold hands together' with those who are also 'in the light', but who differ from us in some ways? Holding hands is a very preliminary and tentative stage of relationship. **Holding out a hand is even more preliminary. Are we prepared to do even this** to those who, though in our view mistaken, are, by God's grace, living and walking in the same light as we are? Our Lord's words teach us that the future of the Church and the gospel is intimately bound up with our response to this question!

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## **Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland**

Although the UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN CHURCHES have not yet joined CCBI, the BEC leaflet, **The Price of Ecumenism's New Package**, stated that they had 'agreed to join'. Here is the statement they issued on July 5 1989:

*'Having regard to both the historic place that the Unitarian movement occupies within Christianity in this country and our association with the British Council of Churches and its predecessors since early this century, the General Assembly welcomes the initiative "Churches Together in Pilgrimage" and wishes to associate itself with it and to work in the spirit of the proposed new organisation. The Council of the General Assembly has agreed that the General Assembly, being a body which on principle has no credal statements in its tradition, would wish to apply for the 'alternative' form of full membership when the new ecumenical body is set up.'*

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