
Promoting Evangelical Church Unity

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This article is the substance of an address given to the Westminster Fellowship of ministers in May 1991. It looks beyond fellowship between pastors to the British Evangelical Council's vision of inter-church co-operation.

'Recognising the urgency of the times, we desire to express our evangelical unity by meeting in fellowship and to discuss prayerfully together the principles upon which our unity may be expressed at church level, moving in the direction of a fellowship of evangelical churches.' So reads paragraph 6 of the Statement of Principles agreed by the re-constituted Westminster Fellowship on 23 January 1967.

From time to time fresh consideration has been given to this subject in the Fellowship and in 1984 the Rev Hywel Jones addressed the issue of 'Evangelical Unity, Separation and the Gospel'. In March 1991 further proposals were considered, based on the historical example found in the 'Worcestershire Association' of churches promoted by Richard Baxter in the 1650's.

Despite having sympathy with this 17th Century precedent, some present were not convinced that it adequately related to our contemporary needs. Although Scripture principles have not changed in 300 years, the church scene in Britain certainly has. At that time there was a far greater community of ideas accepted by evangelical ministers of all denominations. This is not so today. They had not seen the rise of liberalism, democratic individualism, ecclesiastical bureaucracy, theological (if not philosophical) pluralism and the charismatic culture which are all so dramatically influential at the close of the 20th century. What they then did was no doubt relevant to their age. What we today need is help in identifying the appropriate biblical principles and then to consider how these may be applied to the age in which we live. That will be my procedure.

Biblical Principles

1. Commitment to the true gospel is essential for unity. There is only one saving message, distinct and clear in every aspect (Acts 4:12). It unites all those genuinely joined to Christ (1 Cor 12:12-13). It separates them from all who are not joined to Christ (Gal 1:9). This fact must determine our approach to doctrine and to our spiritual life. Although we are committed to *Christian* unity, ie, of those who are 'all one in Christ Jesus', in reality we are limited to *evangelical* unity, ie, with those who share these gospel convictions. This is the ground for our reluctant but necessary separation from those churches not holding to these essentials. Separation is the consequence of our primary commitment to the gospel itself.
2. There can still be diversity with unity. Our Lord Jesus Christ uses the Trinity as our model, in which there is not an identity of persons but there is the closest interdependency between those persons (Jn 17:11,21,22). The differences between Jew and Gentile did not entirely disappear from the New Testament churches but neither did they divide them (Acts 15:19-21). The Council of Jerusalem urged, 'We should not make it difficult for the Gentiles'. Nor should our cultural differences divide churches today (eg a diversity of national cultures or of music cultures). Differences of theological perception over matters 'not essential to salvation' are more difficult

to handle. Local churches willing to recognise that there is such a category of issues (eg eldership, eschatology) can co-operate without having to agree about *everything* else. The FIEC have proved that to be the case in church planting.

3. There really is such a body as 'the church universal'. Theologically it is called 'the church catholic'. We are born-again into it even before we join a local church (Lk 23:43). It should have some visible dimension in society in every generation (1 Cor 1:2-3). Our duties and privileges in that body should find practical expression in inter-church fellowship (Phil 2:1-4). Those who today refuse to countenance any church body other than the local church fail to take account of this biblical obligation. We must have some means of knowing and recognising the other local churches in close enough proximity for us to demonstrate the reality of the church universal. These means represent a temporary scaffolding for the building of Christ's church, ultimately dispensable but currently indispensable to its growth and well-being.
4. Denominations as we know them are not found in the New Testament. They are a later development. That is not to say, however, that the Bible has nothing to say to us about them. We must, for example, take seriously what the first century churches did (1 Cor 16:1-3, 17-20) and did not do (Acts 15:28) as we attempt to work out a pattern of church relationships appropriate for us now. The dangers of denomination-ism are in interference with local church accountability to Christ as sole Head, in loyalty to the institution rather than to the gospel and in the diversion of resources to non-evangelical churches. Even groups of evangelical churches today must be aware of these dangers. We need to balance this with the church universal concept shown above. Other evangelicals in other groups may, in all sincere conscience, come to different conclusions about how they hold both in balance. In this case we must recognise that their consciences are answerable not firstly to us but to the Head of their church.
5. Christians are called to give priority to others (Phil 2:4), to be concerned for 'the brother for whom Christ died' (1 Cor 8:11). Our motivation in co-operation must not be selfish (What do we get out of all this?) but we must be ready to give to the weaker as well as to receive from the stronger. We must relate sensitively to Christians who, on the ground of Scripture, sincerely hold views different from ours. Not least is this necessary with those whose ecclesiology and view of ecumenism are different from ours. Our concern for their good may need to be expressed in cultivating such a fellowship that we are able to 'explain the way of God more adequately' to them (Acts 18:26). We shall, however, also be willing to learn from them in areas where they may be better instructed, equipped or advanced than ourselves.

What This Means For Today

The British Evangelical Council seeks to apply these principles in two distinct spheres. Our vision involves churches already committed to the Council and also those evangelical churches which are not at present in the BEC. The BEC includes 11 church groups and some 35 churches in no other body, altogether 1,200 congregations. Its Executive is made up of representatives of these Constituent Bodies and two men caring for the interests of the local churches not otherwise represented.

(This 'federal' structure has occasionally been questioned. One alternative proposed would be to disband the present BEC and invite every local church to re-apply for direct association with a new body. This, however, would not be acceptable to the presbyterian churches which were among the founder members of the BEC. Furthermore, the church bodies would wish to retain some form of national consultation for representative functions. As not all local churches in the present BEC would wish to join the new body this would also result in further division over issues not essential to salvation.)

Unity Within The BEC

1. **Biblical unity is one dimension of holiness and is promoted by spiritual means. Our priority must be prayer**, beseeching God for renewal and for revival wherever his people are. We must begin with the churches already in the BEC. Without sacrificing any distinctive belief, these must be encouraged to realise that they are part of a greater whole. A proposal for Christians to visit the prayer meetings of neighbouring churches has recently been made in the BEC newsletter. **Our second priority is the ministry of the Word.** A teaching obligation is involved, as both public conferences and smaller Study Conferences together with publications, such as **FOUNDATIONS**, commend our principles to a new generation. Unless, however, we begin with prayer then nothing will command the motivation needed to carry it through.
2. Prayer will deepen our concern for others and stimulate us to look for ways of co-operating with them. The more the BEC can promote joint ventures the more useful we will be. The principle of *networking* does not mean the BEC as such putting on its own activities but enabling one church group to benefit from the activities of another, eg Youth Camps (FCOS), Family Conferences (FIEC), Ministers' Conferences (EMW). A commitment to the BEC will not restrict a church in what it does but it can facilitate and promote co-operative activities with integrity. (It is not even necessary for the BEC's name to be attached to something for it to serve the ends we are committed to, eg The North of England Conference at Whitby, or a book soon to be published by the IVP and edited by the BEC General Secretary entitled, **THE CHURCH AND ITS UNITY.**) Sharing the same gospel means sharing the burden to spread it in evangelism. There is room for much more creative fellowship here. The BEC is not an abstraction with hidden resources; the churches themselves are the BEC and, humanly speaking, it has no resources other than its member churches.
3. To be meaningful such activities must be localised. We envisage a number of men in their own regions promoting activities consistent with the Basis of Faith and Aims of the BEC. This has already led to a regional committee being set up in Northern Ireland. We are also promoting the idea of a National Committee for Scotland. Ten ministers have already attended an initial meeting to discuss the de-centralisation of BEC activities in the various regions in England. (This is being pursued in liaison with the FIEC who are currently revising arrangements for their churches to relate together in groups and in regions.)
4. Whilst respecting differences of principle among Constituent Bodies, the BEC is a catalyst for closer relationships between them, leading to wider loyalties and better stewardships of resources. For some bodies this could lead to discussions about their merging. Despite some legal questions there are positive signs of closer links between the FIEC and the UEC. Already Grace Baptist churches have one common magazine. Although not actually a BEC project, supports for the London Theological Seminary came originally from those committed to BEC ideals as an indication that ministerial training is an urgent priority among us all.

Unity Beyond The BEC

1. Experiencing co-operation within the BEC enriches member churches and moderates the exclusivist tendencies to which all those with strongly held convictions are prone. By discovering faithful evangelicals outside our accustomed circle in other BEC churches we are then encouraged to reach out to genuine Christians beyond the BEC. The BEC has held regular Consultations with The Church Society, a conserva-

tive Anglican body. Our conferences in Ireland are regularly supported by some Irish Baptists. The character of the Evangelical Movement of Wales, with its strong emphasis on local fraternals, has been an example of this principle. Even if others ever had a 'negative image' of the BEC, that is no longer an accurate picture of our position. We are positive about evangelical ecumenism.

2. Without diminishing our commitment to separation from false gospels and unbiblical ecumenicity, the BEC maintains a link with other evangelical bodies in the interests of Christian witness. For example, coalitions on social issues (on Sunday Trading, Religious Broadcasting etc) contribute towards the visible unity of the church universal. Such mutual activities create opportunities for that better understanding which must precede any closer formal relationships between evangelicals.
3. Personal fellowship with Christians, of whichever church, and local contact with evangelical churches, whichever group they belong to, are positively encouraged. Bridges are being built as Christians from BEC shared in the Consultation for Evangelical Relations (now discontinued) and a private theological study group called The Forum for Evangelical Discussion. Who knows how these may enrich us? As others become convinced of the BEC vision we will urge them to join us. Even if they do not, we must be seen to be taking the initiative and not persisting in isolation. Our improved personal relationships may be one step to closer church links.

We Must Be Men of Vision

Salesmen have their *targets* and sportsmen their *goals* but Christians have *visions*, God-given insights into the purposes to which he calls us. One day God will bring his whole church into perfect harmony, when the varied hues of our differences will combine to show his multi-coloured glory. We are encouraged by glimpses of this vision in the Bible and we must take every opportunity to restate our distinctive understanding of how that vision should unite Christians of our generation in Britain.

This Vision is Distinctive

The vision is essentially different from that of the *modern Ecumenical Movement*, where the unique gospel of Scripture is not seen as essential for church unity. We recognise that some genuine evangelical churches are represented within the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland. Nevertheless, we believe that by identifying with a church body which grants equal status to false gospels their own testimony is distorted.

Our vision also differs from that of the *Evangelical Alliance* which has personal, group and local church membership. We recognise the integrity of those working in this body and the fact that its Council declined an invitation to participate in the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland. Local churches, however, may belong to the Alliance irrespective of the ecumenical involvement of their denomination. By contrast, the BEC accepts only churches which cannot, on grounds of conscience, identify with that ecumenicity which lacks an evangelical basis.

The BEC does stand for something distinctive but it is more concerned with principles than with 'paper membership'. It is the outworking of consistent gospel unity which matters far more than the name of the BEC. The scaffolding must not be mistaken for the building itself. If we promote the right vision then whether a church joins this or that body, whether the BEC grows or something else one day replaces it, is of less importance. What matters is that we all 'make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit'.

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