

ECUMENICAL ENCOUNTER

by
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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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During the last fifty years there has been increasing fraternisation and fellowship by Christians across denominational barriers. This is, of course, only as it ought to be, because denominations, in spite of the fact that they are known by the high sounding title of churches, are in fact simply groupings of churches, that is, congregations. Denominations have no basic theological significance and it is our duty as Christians to have fellowship with all our fellow Christians, even though the church in which they customarily worship on Sundays is associated with a different denomination to our own.

As Archbishop Loane said in his sermon at his enthronement, "We know well that all who confess with their mouth that Jesus is Lord and who believe in their heart that God raised Him from the dead are true brethren in Christ". This is the proper basis for ecumenical relationships. Church union

differ - but a better way is to witness to the truth while maintaining friendship. If as a consequence of this witness the other party breaks off friendship, that is that; but fellowship amongst those who name the name of Christ is in itself a good thing, indeed a duty, though it should never be at the cost of obscuring or denying fundamental truth.

This growing together in fellowship amongst Christian groups in the community imposes an obligation on all of us to have a clear knowledge of the truth, and also the grace to express it without being rude, for fellowship without a fundamental grasp of the truth is highly dangerous to ourselves and to our retention of the truth. A fellowship that is accompanied by ignorance simply means that we will become assimilated to the errors of those with whom we associate. So the modern Ecumenical Movement requires of all of us to know more accurately than before where

or denominational amalgamation to speak more accurately, is not necessarily an expression of Christian fellowship, and such expression of fellowship should not wait on denominational negotiations, and is really quite independent of them.

The Archbishop's enthronement which was so widely broadcast on television and radio as well as reported in the press, marked a landmark in Christian fellowship. Not only were the leaders of the protestant churches present, and also, as on recent occasions, the leader of the Greek Orthodox Church, but for the first time the head of the Roman Catholic church was present in the service. This is undoubtedly the result of the Second Vatican Council's emphasis on the duty of Roman Catholics to promote ecumenical relationships and was a natural consequence of Pope Paul's joining in a service of worship with the Archbishop of Canterbury at Rome recently. I notice that in some Australian

evangelical Christian newspapers a degree of puzzlement was expressed that a Roman Catholic cardinal should be present at an evangelical service such as Archbishop Loane's enthronement. I can sympathise with this puzzlement but I do not think it well based. The doctrinal differences between protestant Christianity and the Roman Catholic teaching remain as deep and vital as they ever have been. In the past this sense of difference was expressed by absence of contact one with the other, because the Church of Rome forbade such contact to her own members. We should welcome the fact that now the Church of Rome has abandoned this attitude and now encourages her members to take the initiative in establishing relations between Christians. It was an easier method, no doubt, to show that we differed from each other by refusing to have any fellowship together - and such refusal sometimes serves as a substitute for a thorough knowledge of where and why we

Commandments, which contains many things well said, concluded on p.15 with the statement "To observe the ten commandments to the best of our ability puts right our relationship with God". However, the fact is that we cannot put ourselves right with God. We cannot save ourselves by our own efforts. We are saved by Christ's death alone.

This leads directly to the third fundamental difference between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. Protestants believe with St. Augustine that the sacraments are witnesses to the Gospel. They point us to Christ. They are signs, or "visible words" to strengthen our faith and it is our faith in Christ that saves us. But the Roman Catholic Church teaches that the sacraments are good works, so that the performing of them gains us merit with God, and so helps on our salvation. The act of engaging in the sacraments in itself brings grace, by that mere fact, or ex opere

operato as it is called, Hence sacraments administered to persons in a state of insensibility are supposed to confer on them the grace of forgiveness of sins, and this quite apart from any faith or prayer on the part of the bystanders or even the church at large.

The difference between Protestants and Roman Catholics is focussed in the Roman Catholic doctrine of the mass which is the central rite of Romanism. In the mass the priest is said to offer Christ as really and truly as Christ offered Himself on Calvary. Thus the uniqueness of Christ's death is obliterated; and the priesthood, instead of being a ministry of the Word of Christ to the hearts of those who believe in Him, becomes an intermediary, standing between the worshipper and God. The doctrine of transubstantiation or the supposed changing of the bread and wine into the body of Christ follows from this doctrine of the sacrifice of the mass, and it requires

conscience, and it is taught that if a Roman Catholic disbelieves these things his soul is condemned by God to eternal damnation. However, these dogmas are not in Scripture. The Protestant churches teach that the Bible alone is the Word of God; the Church of Rome holds that the Bible and the church's teaching together are the Word of God. The Protestant view coincides with that of the early Christian church, for example with that of Cyril, Bishop of Jerusalem in the Fourth Century, who in his catechetical lectures (4.17) told the catechumens "Do not believe me because I tell you these things, unless you receive from Holy Scripture the proof of what is set forth". However, the modern Roman Catholic doctrine is that the teaching of the church is in itself the Word of God and so it puts the words of man alongside the Word of God as a source of Christian doctrine. It is not surprising then that many false doctrines follow from

this basic mistake.

Perhaps the most important false doctrine which the Roman Catholics teach as a consequence of their view of tradition being the Word of God has reference to how we are saved. Now, this again is a crucial doctrine, and it is on this question of how we are saved that Luther raised the trumpet blast for the truth. The Bible teaches clearly that all who call on the name of the Lord, that is those who confess Him with their mouth and believe in their heart that God raised Him from the dead, will be saved. We are saved then by our faith in Christ. But the Roman Catholic Church teaches that faith in Christ is only a preliminary and that the ultimate ground of our salvation is the sort of life we live, that is to say our good works. This doctrine of salvation by works was re-affirmed only last Sunday by the Roman Catholic Bishop of Australia who in a pastoral letter on the Ten

the worshipper to believe that Christ is as really present in the bread in the priest's hands as He was in Galilee, or as He now is in Heaven. The doctrine of the priesthood carries with it the doctrine of the confessional in which the Roman Catholic is required to tell the priest with minute detail his sins, all thoughts of shame being laid aside. This secret confession to the ear of a priest is quite unknown, of course, in Scripture or in the early church. The doctrines of purgatory and indulgences, the praying to saints, the veneration of images, and above all the teaching about the Virgin Mother of Jesus and infallibility of the Pope are further points of the greatest importance where Protestant Christianity differs from Roman Catholicism.

In welcoming ecumenical encounter we must realise the obligation of growing in knowledge, not only knowledge about what the Roman Catholic Church continues to teach, but more importantly, knowledge of what

the Bible teaches, and this will impose upon us a duty of witnessing to the truth that God made known to us in the Bible. Not only should we read the Bible ourselves regularly, and teach it in our own homes, but we should join in Bible discussions and our ministers should proclaim Bible doctrines in their sermons. It is always wrong to be ignorant of the Word of God, and it is highly dangerous in ecumenical times, and quite apart from this a clear knowledge of the mind of God, is the greatest asset and blessing.

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