SIGNs OF HOPE

Lincoln Park Baptist Church, West Newton, Massachusetts
January 24, 1965

Scripture – 1 Corinthians 12

Introduction:

One of the great facts of our day is the Ecumenical Movement. At the beginning of the century it was mainly a Protestant concern. Later the Greek Orthodox Church joined the movement. Today the Roman Catholic Church has entered into the movement in full swing. Just recently the Roman Catholic diocese of New Mexico joined the Council of Churches of that state. What will happen next, nobody knows. However, there is an air of expectancy in the midst of the Christian people.

Briefly stated, the Ecumenical Movement endeavors to bring about Christian unity, that is, to break down the barriers that separate Christian groups and to build up a community of faith and hope which is grounded on the gospel and is not torn by senseless and meaningless divisions.

To my own way of thinking, the Ecumenical Movement does not intend to create one church, that is, a monolithic structure of power in which a man or a group of men control the whole organization.

Rather, the aim of the Ecumenical Movement is to let the gospel message, the Holy Spirit Himself speaking anew to the churches, to bring about the unity that is compatible with love, faith and hope. It is not a pushing together of unwilling followers, but rather a bringing together of Christian people who realize that God’s purpose in human history is to reconcile humanity to Himself and human beings to each other. Given this theological perspective, the Christian churches are compelled to consider the question of Christian unity as a matter of inner logic.

There are several factors or forces that have brought into being the ecumenical movement.

I. The Missionary Endeavor and the Quest for Christian Unity

It was the missionary efforts of the Protestant churches in foreign countries that first brought the problem of Christian unity into their consciousness.

What sense does it make to be a Methodist Christian, a Baptist Christian, a Lutheran Christian, an Episcopalian Christian in India, where there are close to half a billion people, the majority of whom are non-Christian. I do not think that more than 2% of the population of India is Christian. What message do we have for the people of India? Do we really intend to carry the divisions of Christianity into India and produce there not 250 sects, but perhaps 500 or a thousand? How can we cope with the real issues that Indian life and culture present to Christianity, if we have so much division among ourselves? Is God
divided? Is Jesus Christ divided? Where is God’s reconciling purpose being realized? Through the divided and competing churches?

This problem, then, of the missionary witness of the churches in a non-Christian world has thrust to the fore the question of Christian unity. This problem produced comity agreements and eventually councils of churches on the mission field to create a certain degree of cooperation in given areas:

-- institutional work
-- publications
-- theological dialogue

II. The Impact of Biblical Studies - what the Bible meant and what it means

What it meant – This is the prior and basic question from the point of view of scientific studies. We have often found that what the Bible and the N.T. meant is not exactly what we mean. Ex. the question of church polity.

The autonomy of the local church is not a N.T. doctrine but a church polity which came into being within the context of the rise of democracy and individualism in the western world. What can we do in the field of church polity, when the concept of the autonomy of the local church is found to be wanting from the point of view of the N.T. ecclesiology and the situation that the church confronts in the modern world with its power structures and massive organizations?

What can the individual Baptist Church do in such a context? Both the N.T. and the modern world thrust upon us the question of unity, in respect to other Baptist and Protestant groups and in respect to non-Protestant groups.

Ex. Women (I Cor. 14:35b,ff.) “As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silence in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is a shameful thing for a woman to speak in church.

III. The Catholic Church and the Quest for Christian Unity.

Every informed person knows that great and significant changes are taking place within the Catholic Church. These changes, to a great extent, are due to the impact the modern world and culture have made on that church and to no less a degree, to the effect of modern biblical studies. I shall not concern myself this morning with the work of the Second Vatican Council. I shall limit myself to quoting a statement made by a Catholic teacher in a recent issue of the Catholic Quarterly Review (1964) 413-422. Father John L. McKenzie speaks of “Authority and Power in the New Testament”.

Church community of love

“I suggest that we locate authority and power in the Church within the controlling theme of
the N.T. idea of community. ... This controlling theme is love, and the Church in the N.T. is a community of love before it is anything else. If the Church should arrive at a point where its nature as a community of love is no longer perceptible, then it would lose continuity with the Church of the N.T. ... Quite clearly the Church has had members and does have members, some of them in official positions, to whom the idea of a community of love comes as a surprise and perhaps an unpleasant surprise; the existence of such members does not destroy continuity. The Church maintains her identity in spite of her failures to achieve the perfection of love; but we must be concerned with maintaining the primacy of love.”

Authority commands in love

“Unless authority commands in love and the subject obeys in love, we are not dealing with a Christian obedience. At this point one must risk being banal by recalling that love is directed towards persons, not ideas nor objects. Christian obedience is intelligible only as a work of love, not as a substitute for love.”

Power base of the N.T. is love and service

“Authority reposes on power; and the power base of the N.T. must be clearly recognized.”

Church authority is to serve. (Mk. 9:33-37) – “And they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, ‘What were you discussing on the way?’ But they were silent, for on the way they had discussed with one another who was the greatest. And he sat down and called the twelve; and he said to them ‘If anyone would be first, he must be last and servant of all’.”

(Mk. 10:42-45) – “And Jesus called them to him and said to them, ‘You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant and whoever would be the first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Service and love are, then, the power base of authority. Where there is no love, there is no authority. This is pretty strong language, coming from a Roman Catholic, who usually has placed a lot of emphasis on the power structure in the church and blind obedience.

Conclusion:

What are the signs of hope for Christian unity:

(1) The missionary challenge
(2) The study of Christian origins (Needham School of Religion)
(3) The real reformation going on in the Catholic Church.

Let us not despair. Our future is in God’s hand.

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