

3. Can you give a biblical or ecumenical rationale for the various ministries of evangelism to, dialogue with, and cooperation among persons of other faiths?

4. In which areas of interfaith relations do you personally feel most gifted – evangelism, dialogue, or cooperation? What do you think is the value in other gifts for interfaith relations?

5. Do you think that it is necessary, or even preferable, that diverse Christians have a unified vision for how to engage in interfaith relations?

6. What do you think might be the consequence for the mission of God if the Church cannot answer its ecumenical challenge?

7. Do you think that the love of Christ should motivate us to seek loving relations with other Christians and with those of other faiths?



Interfaith Relations and the Church

THE ECUMENICAL CHALLENGE

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Interfaith Relations and the Church: The Ecumenical Challenge

Committing to interfaith relations presents churches with an ecumenical challenge because of the diverse emphases and commitments of different Christian communions. Christian unity and interfaith relations may at times stand in real tension. Regrettably, if we are not careful, we can allow our differences to separate us and threaten our Christian harmony and unity.

We could say that the ecumenical challenge is intra-religious (between Christians) while forging relationships among various faiths is interreligious (between those of unique faiths). Our drawing together diverse strands of Christian traditions is a rich source of strength (cf. Eccl 4:12). The truly great benefits of ecumenical Christian engagement with other faiths are so tremendous as to make the challenges genuinely worthwhile. There is a great need both for a movement that seeks to manifest the unity of the Church as a sign of God's intention for the world (ecumenical movement) and for a movement that seeks deeper cooperation among religions in a pluralistic but fragmented age (interfaith movement.)

Authentic Christian unity is a goal and a gift that Christ himself has held out for us (Eph 4:7). The promise of ecumenism can therefore only be genuinely fulfilled when participants trust each other completely. By building authentic relationships, based on respect for and not fear of the other, legitimate differences can be respected and dealt with constructively, and trust can flourish. We are optimistic that, by God's grace, we may work together in good faith to attain a reasonable, though

century theologian, is "See how they love one another!" Interestingly, Tertullian claimed that a culture characterized by religious plurality was most impressed with the love Christians displayed toward each other, particularly during times of duress. Might it be so today too?

Prayer

God, we are beginning to understand that we cannot bear authentic witness in a world of many faiths when we are unable to stand in unity even with those of different traditions within our own faith. Therefore, we confess that we have frequently been guilty of factionalism, pride, and disunity. We admit that it is so easy for us to think in terms of us and them. We recognize that we can tend to feel competitive or to judge other Christian leaders or groups. Please, forgive us for sinning in this way. Remind us that Jesus was generous and kind. Help us—even in our appropriate zeal for our own traditions—to be more accepting of those who are different, to celebrate their distinctiveness, and to work with them rather than against them. Teach us to unite our spirits and our best efforts, so that your kingdom may grow more quickly through our cooperation and mutual regard. And, dear Lord, out of the strength of our own increasing unity with one another, help us also share your love with those of other faiths. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Questions for Reflection

1. Why do you think partnering with others is so often a perplexing aspect of God's mission on earth?
2. How might the unity of the whole be threatened when each individual part begins to think that its function is the most important or only correct way?

In reality, the dimensions of Christian unity are multifaceted; at the same time they are all part of one gospel and one calling. It was said of Jesus that "he did all things well" (Mark 7:37). The life and ministry of Jesus were holistic and integrated. He was concerned for the whole person. He calls us to holistic, integrative living as well. The four scriptural passages above emphasize (1) openness to that which is not directly opposed to Christ, (2) humility concerning our own role in God's mission, (3) gifts and contributions that vary from person to person, and (4) cooperation for the sake of a common purpose. However, we underscore that Christian unity is only fully understood when we take into account all of these various aspects of the biblical message.

How Does Christian Unity Affect Interfaith Relations?

Division among Christ's disciples may make our divided communions appear fragmented, even contradictory, to adherents of other faiths. Although other religions also have internal differences, the unique claims of Christianity for Christ's divinity and unity with God make division among God's disciples especially problematic. A lack of Christian unity certainly affects interfaith relations.

When Christians from different communities are able to work with one another in unity as we interact with religious others, it demonstrates the deeper, underlying harmony and unity of our faith in Christ. If we love one another, then others will more readily recognize us as Christ's true disciples (John 13:35). That genuine affection, in itself, contributes to our witness and enriches everyone involved. Possibly it helps remove some of the confusion that can arise in interfaith conversation as well, as our friends from other faiths likely do not understand our differences anyway or may be uncomfortable trying to navigate them in mixed groups. A saying often attributed to Tertullian, a second

admittedly imperfect, obedience to Christ's calling to be one in his name.

This call to unity is made for the sake of the world, a sign and foretaste of the wider unity that God intends for all things (Eph 1:10). How important then is our common witness when it comes to matters of peace and justice. In our war-torn world and poverty-stricken society, the pursuit of peace and justice is absolutely imperative. Given the influence of the world's religions on the majority of human beings sharing this planet, any kind of binding and lasting peace or justice apart from cooperation among the leading religions will be difficult if not impossible to achieve. And, how can Christians work with those of other religions to address pressing concerns for a just society, if they cannot work constructively with one another?

What's Ecumenism All About Anyway?

The words "ecumenism" and "ecumenical" derive from the New Testament Greek *oikoumene*, typically used during the days of the Roman Empire to refer to the whole inhabited world (e.g., Lk 2:1 and Acts 11:28). In recent times these terms have most commonly come to signify a movement dedicated to renewing the unity of the Church. Common fellowship, shared service, and types of witness are prevalent themes. New Testament passages such as John 17:20-23 give a sense of purpose to the ecumenical movement. Here Christ teaches that our unity flows out of his own unity with God. In prayer he says, "I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (17:23). Therefore, Christian unity is not merely a good idea or a sentimental aspiration but an imperative of the highest order. The words, "making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph 4:3), are just as relevant today as when first written.

The ecumenical movement, though focusing on Christian unity, has always recognized the importance of Christian relations with people of other living faiths. In fact, the word “ecumenism” is sometimes understood to refer ultimately to the unity of all humankind. However, ecumenism is regularly understood as a movement among Christian groups seeking and working for the unity that draws us together as Christians. In this study, this more focused definition of ecumenism will be used.

How did the Ecumenical Movement Gain International Support?

A central landmark in modern ecumenism was the historic world missionary conference in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1910. At that conference, Christian unity and cooperation were chief concerns. Forces were set in motion that eventually led to the formation of groups specifically dedicated to encouraging ecumenism around the world.

The World Council of Churches (WCC), a fellowship of Anglican, Orthodox, and Protestant churches founded in 1948 and headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, has long been a leading proponent of ecumenism. Member churches of the WCC have developed guidelines which a diversity of ecumenical partners could embrace, even when engaging in interfaith dialogue. The WCC, including the national level partners such as the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA (NCCC), bases the practice of interreligious dialogue on our common humanity.

Protestant churches have been part of ecumenical engagement from the beginning. Many mainline traditions, mostly from Europe, were the churches that first came together

function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us. . . .” God has not gifted all of us with the same spiritual gifts and callings. Some of us are gifted and called to a ministry of proclamation and evangelism; others of us are gifted and called to a ministry of teaching and dialogue; and there are those of us who are gifted and called to a ministry of compassion and cooperation. With these diverse giftings and callings the Body of Christ will make itself incarnate in the world. No communion or individual Christian has any more right to judge another than an arm has the right to judge a foot or an eye. God relies upon each member of the Body not only to accept his or her own role and function but also to affirm and even celebrate the place and contribution of each other member of the Body.

Finally, a scriptural teaching that addresses the ecumenical challenge is 1 Corinthians 3:5-9: “What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. For we are God’s servants, working together. . . .” This passage is a reminder that no one can accomplish all the work in God’s vineyard. God relies upon all of us to do our part—whether it is through ministries of evangelism, dialogue, or cooperation. Who are we when we evangelize? Who are we when we dialogue? Who are we when we cooperate? Servants through whom God fulfills God’s work in the world. We all have a common Lord of the Vineyard, from whom we will all receive the reward for our labors, but until then we are to work together for the common purpose.

found in Mark 9:38-40: "John said to him, 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.' But Jesus said, 'Do not stop him; for . . . [w]hoever is not against us is for us.'" Across the ecumenical spectrum, Christians may be tempted to judge others who are stressing different understandings of the way we do Christian missions, especially if some appear to approach persons of other faiths uncritically. Yet the admonition that Jesus gave to the Apostle John speaks directly to us. We ought not judge nor attempt to censure believers who perform ministry in the name of the Christ, even if their way seems alien and suspect to us because it is not our way. If Jesus could deem those who were not against him as being for him, then we also should be able to accept those who are not against him—even when their methods put them in opposition to us.

Another biblical injunction that might help Christians meet this ecumenical challenge is Romans 12:3: "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned." This passage is the Apostle Paul's advice about being humble. We can be encouraged, then, by Paul's insight that relating to others humbly is the way we all should "walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:4). Perhaps if Christians in our churches would adopt a more humble, tentative but not necessarily timid way of stating their views, then we could avoid the arrogance that an absolute certainty about one's interpretation may sometimes communicate. This humility applies not only to our interfaith relations but to our intra-religious, or ecumenical, affiliation with other Christians.

A passage that helps explain differences across denominational lines is Romans 12:4-6a: "For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same

to forge what would become a global movement toward church unity, for the sake of proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ and establishing justice and peace. These churches included those of Lutheran, Reformed, Free Church, Methodist, Anglican, and Historic Peace Church traditions.

Orthodox Christians in the world have long participated in ecumenical exchanges, becoming a growing presence since formative meetings for ecumenism in Stockholm (1925) and Lausanne (1927). "Unto the Churches of Christ Everywhere," an Encyclical of the Ecumenical Patriarch (1920), is widely recognized as an unprecedented ecumenical classic. The Orthodox have been members of the WCC since its inception, with some of their clergy even serving as presidents. A host of consultations, studies, and commissions have explored the relationship of Orthodoxy with other Christians and with non-Christian religions such as Judaism. Orthodox churches offer many important insights to other Christians during an age of religious pluralism. For instance, some Orthodox churches offer insight drawn from their long history of living side-by-side with Muslim neighbors in the Middle East.

When Roman Catholics trace their ecumenical spirit, they look to an important council convened by Pope John XXIII (1962) and closed by Pope Paul VI (1965). Called Vatican II, this council established Catholicism as a vital force in ecumenism. More recently, in 1991, the document on "Dialogue and Proclamation" sought to find a balance between who dialogues and what is proclaimed. Theologically, the document affirms interreligious dialogue on the basis of shared humanity. It reminds the reader that all people, regardless of religion, are created in God's image and worthy of honor and respect. It affirms a common human destiny in the fullness of life in God, and in the Holy Spirit's presence in other religious traditions. At the same time, it affirms the importance of the evangelistic proclamation of Jesus Christ.

Recently Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians have become more involved in the ecumenical enterprise. Cooperative alliances and para-church organizations are common today. Churches can no longer understand themselves as isolated or self-sufficient entities. Evangelicals and Pentecostals increasingly stress the spiritual relationship of all believers in Christ and affirm unity in the midst of diversity. The rise of the Charismatic Renewal movement within Roman Catholicism and Protestantism has steadily contributed to increasing openness. Of course, some remain more cautious; but, a certain dynamic unity appears evident in many cases and interest seems to be increasing.

What Is the Ecumenical Challenge?

The ecumenical challenge arises both from differences in theological interpretations of the gospel, as well as from different methods and purposes in building relationship with persons of other faiths. Some emphasize evangelism by planning mission projects and outreach activities which focus upon winning converts to faith in Jesus Christ. Others organize and structure times to meet persons of other faiths formally or casually to build friendships and engage in dialogue as a means to increase mutual understanding. Still others seek avenues of mutual cooperation with persons of other faiths in order to address common social problems that plague American communities and all our families. The ecumenical challenge may become apparent as Christians judge other Christian believers for doing something completely different from themselves and which they consider misguided in emphasis or purpose. How, then, can ecumenically-minded Christians stay united across theological and methodological chasms? Can we differ on style and approach, yet still maintain our commitment to unity in Christ?

Ecumenical relationships may reflect different Christian understandings of our unity in Christ (or lack of unity.) And this, in turn, affects how we will relate to other Christians in the development of interfaith relations. One framework for how we work with other Christians in relating to people of other faiths includes five types of engagement between Christians: Competition, Co-existence, Cooperation, Commitment, and Communion.

When Christians see ourselves as competing with other Christians we might believe in our own self-sufficiency and not value the perspectives of those who differ from us. We might totally discount the interfaith efforts of other Christians as misguided. In the mode of co-existence we might acknowledge the validity of other Christian traditions, but make no effort to engage with or learn from them. Cooperation implies that we actively work with persons of differing communions to undertake shared projects. Cooperation can be beneficial insofar as works for the common good can be more easily achieved and diverse Christians more actively be brought into contact with one another. In interfaith efforts we might cooperate with other Christians along with those of other faiths. However, commitment goes a step further than mere cooperation. When we are committed to one another, we don't just work side by side but actively engage difficult topics and explore differences so that we can all learn and enhance our own understandings of faith. Finally, communion would be an experience of our unified wholeness as the body of Christ. We have yet to discover what real unity would look like, at least in its full expression.

What are Some Biblical Insights for Ecumenical Engagement?

Several biblical teachings suggest a way to meet this ecumenical challenge. A helpful teaching from the gospels is