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THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT IN PRESENT DAY PROFESSING CHRISTENDOM

Revelation 17:5

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The ecumenical situation today is accurately described as a jigsaw puzzle. Its vast dimensions, its multiplied details, its complex doctrines, its strange divisions, its subtle devices, its motivating dynamics, and its intertwining and interlocking relationships reach beyond that point where any unaided human being is quite able to comprehend the total situation. Apart from the floodlight of the Word of God the ecumenical movement would continue to remain a jigsaw puzzle.

The ecumenical situation today is manifestly displaying itself in remarkable progression. At the turn of the century no right minded person could have envisioned what we see on the horizon today. Men dreamed of an ideal situation in which the segments of Christendom would be brought together in one gigantic organization. But this was placed in the far distant future. The doctrinal frame of reference forbade imagining this within the near future. But at last, developments in every sphere have moved forward with such amazing speed that we witness today something that frightens every Bible believing Christian.

The ecumenical situation today is gradually fulfilling the Scriptural prediction. As never before in the history of the Church over the past 1900 years, the woman clothed in purple and scarlet is taking shape before our eyes. This is a clear indication that the closing days of the age are upon us. With indomitable purpose the segments of professing Christendom are pushing toward the achievement of one ecclesiastical organization. Almost every conference is surcharged with message and meditation on this theme. Merging and super-merging of communions, organizations, and mission are the order of the day.

The ecumenical situation today is essentially composed of many oddly-shaped pieces. And we must be interested in the pieces. The first reaction is to assign this statement to three great segments of professing Christendom: Catholicism, Liberalism, Neo-Evangelicalism. But why should we exclude Fundamentalism, Judaism, Cultism, and Paganism? But more important, why should we imagine that the pieces of Ecumenism are to be restricted to structure? Do not the pieces of Ecumenism also include doctrine, ethic, and nature? Do not philosophy, psychology, sociology, and science also constitute a part of the jigsaw puzzle?

The ecumenical situation today is spiritually comprehended only by Scripturally-taught people. "He that is spiritual judgeth all things" (I Cor. 2:15), "not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual" (I Cor. 2:13). Depending upon the power of the Spirit of God as exercised through the words of Scripture, we now turn to the task of putting together the pieces of this jigsaw puzzle.

Within the brief span of this presentation I shall call your attention to three leading lines of thought.

I. THE CONTROLLING FORCES ARE ALREADY RESIDENT IN THE NATURE AND CONSTITUTION OF PROFESSING CHRISTENDOM.

There is of necessity a pattern of procedure that exists in the very nature of things. This pattern begins with nature, issues in ethic, produces doctrine, creates structure and culminates in action. The ecumenical situation is following this pattern.

It begins with the constituency of nature in mankind itself. "Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them" (Matt. 7:20). In this statement Christ is saying that nature is basic. From nature there proceeds the fruit. Character will produce conduct that corresponds with it. "Every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit" (Matt. 7: 17-18).

Because of the fallen nature of mankind, it has ever been Christ's purpose to change nature by regeneration in order to prepare men for membership in the true Church, the organism of which Christ is the head. In this Christ has not failed at any point along the way.

But there is the local or visible organization, which at the beginning was coextensive with the true Church, and all of us could wish were still coextensive with the true Church. With this we must reckon. Into this visible organization, in spite of the best efforts of the few, but with the aid of the many, the counterfeits of saved people have been inducted over the centuries.

In the last one hundred years, and especially since the turn of the century, as a result of the dilution of the Biblical message and the introduction of the social gospel, the membership of professing Christendom is in large part made up of unregenerated people. Here is a force with which we must reckon.

Unregenerate nature issues in conformation of life. Remember the words of the Lord Jesus. "A corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit" (Matt. 7:17). It cannot bring forth good fruit. This means that nature will produce itself. External restraints may curb and control it temporarily and within limits. But eventually there will be full and free expression.

Prevailing laws, customs, mores, philosophy, and doctrine exercise certain control and give direction to the expression of nature in conduct. But nature is bound to break over the boundaries in ever increasing fashion. This explains Paul's word of wisdom to Timothy. "But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived" (2 Tim. 3:13).

This explains the so-called "new morality" that has recently projected itself into public consideration. It is not new. It is simply the old nature now on public exhibition. This nature has at last reached such predominance that it now dares to defy all the moral restraints imposed by purity and holiness. Though this is being featured for society in general, it is very clear that this revolution is also taking place within the professing Church.

Evil nature and conduct are bound to produce a confession of principle to rationalize themselves. This is the point of Paul's prediction to Timothy, "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned into fables" (2 Tim. 4:3-4).

Since men are rational creatures, it is a foregone conclusion that they must produce a creed that will rationalize their conduct. Man cannot live in contradiction with all that he believes without experiencing frustrations, tension, psychoses, neuroses, maladjustments that drive him to desperation. Since men within the church will not live in conformity with sound doctrine, then there is only one other recourse; that is the development of false doctrine that will rationalize conduct and ease the conscience.

This explains the changing philosophies in the world and the changing doctrine within the church. The motivation is moral. Men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved (John 3:19-20).

But a compendium of doctrine is powerless outside a confederation in pattern. It is inevitable, therefore, that doctrine will seek a superstructure within which it can promote itself. Men are social creatures whose operations depend upon communication and agreement. The true Church is the ideal in this area because it is a divinely created organism. That is the reason it is called the body of Christ, "from whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love" (Eph. 4:16).

Recognizing the ideal in the true Church, the purveyors of false doctrine seek to use this structure for the promotion of their own schemes. Any one of the segments of Christendom would hardly be sufficient to bring ultimate satisfaction and give universal approval to false doctrine, so the effort is under way to remove the external fragmentation and bring together the various segments of professing Christendom in one universal organization. For justification the words of Christ are cited, "that they may be one, even as we are one" (John 17:22). But these words are misused, for they refer to spiritual unity and not to external union.

When at last there is external union in structure, then there will be cooperation in performance. This last is the ultimate end and goal of the whole ecumenical movement. And in the development of things this is always the course it takes. United we stand. "Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand" (Matt. 12:25). In union there is strength. Principle cannot issue in performance with perfection and permanence unless there is protection for it. Where there is union, it will be possible to compel performance, and unity of performance assures permanence.

This is not new. Men thought of this at Babel. They said, "Go to, let us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth . . . And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and

they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do" (Gen. 11:4, 6).

II. THE CONDITIONING FACTORS ARE ALREADY AT WORK IN THE THINKING OF MANKIND ACROSS THE WORLD.

The conditioning atmosphere of mental, moral, and spiritual material is absolutely essential to prepare men for ecumenism. Things do not happen in a vacuum. There must be the dreaming before there can be the doing. As a man thinketh in his heart so is he. So it is required that the atmosphere which men breathe be surcharged with the very matter for the moulding of their thinking and the preparing of them for action. Unregenerate nature is already possessed by the majority of the population and the membership of the Church. Unholy living is already well on its way across the world, without and within the professing church. There is only one other thing needed and that is an atmosphere to make reasonable and desirable and urgent the formation of one religious structure.

Catching the spirit of the world has been the peril of the Church from its inception. Correcting the spirit of the world has been its problem. The Church is in the world as God intended it should be during this age, but when the world gets into the Church then danger lies ahead. It is this that prepares the way for the progress of ecumenism.

The conditioning atmosphere of the world is far reaching in its effect. In the areas of science, psychology, and philosophy to mention just three, there has been developing an atmosphere that the rank and file of humanity is breathing.

Science has developed its principles and then has dared to build a philosophy upon the facts it discovered. The theory of scientific determinism has been expanded and applied beyond its legitimate proportions. This incorporates the whole system of biological evolution, which has been expanded to cover the physical, the mental, the moral, and the spiritual. It has reduced the area of reality to the level of the natural and the human, and has removed the need for God by identifying Him with this natural process.

Psychology in its explorations of the nature and constitution of human nature has reduced man to the sphere of the mental and the physical. In this respect there is a purely mechanistic explanation. The abrogation of the spirit has in effect removed the necessity for God, who is spirit. In this respect it has been possible for men to exclude the moral and the spiritual and the supernatural. Once again in this discipline it has been possible to reduce the area of reality to the level of the natural, and God, if there be a God, must be identified with the natural.

Philosophy is the capstone of all the disciplines. It takes the facts of other disciplines and attempts to weave them into a consistent system. Probably there is no period in history when philosophy has fallen to such a low ebb. It is entirely atheistic, mechanistic, and pantheistic. It is like the blind man in a dark room, looking for a black hat that isn't there. Having reduced the area of reality to the level of the natural, there is no other conclusion but that God is all, and all is God, and man being a part of the all things is therefore perfectly just-

fied in regarding himself as sovereign in his own right, and he is therefore the measure of his own morality, and the final arbiter of his own destiny.

In this composite atmosphere mankind is being conditioned from the cradle to the grave. This sort of atmosphere is being breathed in every area of society. Youngsters begin to hear it as soon as they are able to listen to the radio or watch the television. It is woven into all the textbooks from the primary grades through college. It is featured in the newspapers, the magazines, the periodicals, the movies, the museums, the college campuses, the parks, all across the world. There is no possible way to escape this atmosphere. No matter what protective influences are brought to bear, this pantheistic atmosphere is breathed, unknown to the millions, and it is gradually molding the minds and hearts of men into the pattern of thinking that is necessary for ecumenism.

The conditioning atmosphere within the Church is likewise confirming the conclusions of the world. This only makes the molding effect upon the thinking of men more powerful. Within the various segments of professing Christendom where ecumenism is gathering momentum it now appears that nothing short of a crisis can interrupt the present trend. The Church itself in large part has yielded and is yielding to the conditioning influences of the world, and in turn conditioning its own membership. This is in part what Christ had in mind in the parable of the leaven. "The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened" (Matt. 13:33).

III. THE CONVERGING FRAGMENTS ARE ALREADY APPEARING ON THE SCENE IN PROFESSING CHRISTENDOM.

There is first of all the convergence in theology. "Can two walk together except they be agreed?" (Amos 3:3). The answer to this is obvious. Until the theological substratum is reduced to a common denominator, it can never be expected that the fragmentation in professing Christendom will be removed. But it is being removed, and this is basically due to the convergence in theological beliefs. Agreement precedes alignment, and this agreement centers in matters of fundamental importance. In three areas of doctrine this is prominent: the doctrine of Scripture, the doctrine of Supernaturalism, and the Doctrine of Eschatology.

The doctrine of the Scriptures is essentially a controversy centering in the source of authority, whether it is divine or human. And the trend is overwhelmingly for the rejection of the divine in preference for the human.

Catholicism, whether you are considering Roman, Russian, or Greek, has for centuries had a very convenient casuistry for disposing of divine authority. It has placed tradition on a par with Scripture. When examined more closely it will be observed that it is on a level above Scripture. Moreover, tradition is derived from the Church, and the authority of the Church is vested in the hierarchy. In this way the authority of the Scriptures vanishes into thin air, and the human leadership of the Church is free to chart its course as circumstances dictate.

Liberalism, though not nearly so subtle, has blatantly disposed of divine authority in the

Scriptures. It denies its inspiration, infallibility, and inerrancy, and then in higher criticism with endless cobweb spinning continues to play with the Scriptures in voluble discussions concerning its relevance to the times. More recently a more subtle form of liberalism has appeared on the scene purporting to be a return to orthodoxy. It is called neo-orthodoxy, but it is the same old aversion to divine authority as in pure liberalism. To the Neo-orthodox the Bible is not a revelation of God, only as it penetrates the veil of the flesh in human experience, and by that time everything of any value has been screened out.

Evangelicalism is the one remaining segment of professing Christendom. And when one tries to draw the line of demarcation between the neo and the hard core he has taken on an almost impossible task. There is a line of difference. But it needs to be said that all evangelicalism is breathing the same atmosphere today and is being affected by it, some in one area, and others in another area. And at those points where there is a deviation from Biblical standards, it will be seen that human authority has been exalted above the authority of the Scriptures. If there is any one area of theology today that is more in question within the ranks of Evangelicalism than the inspiration of the Scriptures, I do not know it. It is true that men are paying lip service to it, but in their substantial discussions, it is quite evident that this doctrine is being questioned, though tolerated. And mere toleration is the first step in the direction of scuttling it.

The doctrine of supernaturalism is the teaching of the Scriptures. But once the doctrine of the Scriptures is scuttled, then men are free to place their own mental inventions alongside those of the Scriptures with equal authority. In fact, with feigned condescension, men are admitting that in the day when the Scriptures were written, the explanations were the best that could be made. But now, in a day of enlightenment and increased knowledge, the same Scriptures must be made relevant. This requires interpretations based on science. As a result, a transcendent God is fast fading from the scene, and pure pantheism is appearing on the horizon of all theological discussion.

Catholicism is gradually yielding to the conditioning influences of the world. Desiring to take its place in the world as a power with which to be reckoned, Catholicism has broken out of its cloistered protection, and has entered every phase of intellectual pursuit. Now breathing a new atmosphere, it is gradually being changed by it. The theological discussions of the recent Ecumenical Congress bear witness to this fact. Except for the moderating and restraining authority of the Pope and the hierarchy, that congress would have gone farther and faster than it did. Recently I was permitted to hear a noted Catholic leader in the field of Education address a large gathering of educators. There was no mistaking the fact that the area of reality had been reduced to the level of the natural and the human, and that his philosophy was pure pantheism.

Liberalism has long since committed itself to the pantheistic philosophy. Its open denial of the supernatural in the life and ministry of Christ, the explanation of the events in the history of Israel, and the theory of evolution as the explanation for creation put it a long way in that direction. Neo-orthodoxy has not changed that course. It has merely dressed it up with a new system of semantics.

Evangelicalism, thank God, is in large part still holding to its position of a transcendent God. Here and there the leavening influences of anti-Biblical attitudes have been introduced, which in time and left to themselves, will leaven the whole lump. The question mark over the Scriptures opens the door. The powerful urge to make the evangelical message palatable in an age of intellectualism is a motivating influence. Then there is the imperceptible conditioning influence of the atmosphere in which we live. All things being equal, the trend is toward pantheism.

Finally, there is the doctrine of eschatology. Most specifically, Ecumenism falls in this area. Unfortunately, at that point in the Bible where there is a major emphasis, doctrinal development has been negligent on the part of the Church, and confusion reigns. The ignorance has had its blighting effect in other areas of theology and at last we are seeing the culmination in the superchurch of the endtime.

Catholicism, from the days of Augustine has been a-millennial, and has insisted that the Church is the kingdom. Moreover, it has insisted that the one kingdom was the one Church. In this way Catholicism blasted all hopes for the future and centered them in the present Church. This set the stage for every conceivable human maneuvering to accomplish these hopes for mankind in the one organization purporting to be of divine origin. Hence, it is clear that Catholicism has a perfect background for the ecumenical movement.

Liberalism is a growth largely within the confines of Protestantism. It must not be forgotten that the Protestant Reformation did not change the eschatology of the Church. It continued in large part to be a-millennial. A seeming progress in human affairs changed eschatology in the direction of post-millennialism, the church was bringing in the kingdom. But then a reversal in human fortunes turned the bent of theologians in another direction in order for the Church to accomplish the hopes of men. This was in the direction of the social gospel. Out of this has grown the ecumenical movement of today.

Evangelicalism is playing into the hands of the ecumenicists. Reverting in large areas to the so-called classical position in the doctrine of the Church, which is basically a-millennial, the ground work is therefore for the eventual emergence of ecumenicalism. Evangelicals decry the fragmentation in Christendom. They feel that there is a definite need for social emphasis. They long for a united image before the world. All this leads in one direction, toward ecumenicism. But are not these longings due to the feeling that God is not accomplishing His purpose in this age? However, if God is accomplishing His purpose in this age, then why worry about fragmentation, the social chaos, the loss of image before the world. God has just one purpose during this age, and that is to take out a people for His name. After that He will rebuild Israel, establish His Kingdom, and usher in the golden age of civilization (Acts 15:14-17).

There is finally the convergence of the fragments in professing Christendom. This is the logical effect of the convergence in theology. The movement has begun and is moving with ever greater acceleration. Its speed is in direct proportion to the philosophical and theological conditioning of the minds and hearts of men.

What began as a mere trickle at the turn of the century has in recent days turned into a tide. The National Council of Churches involving Protestant denominations within the United States has given birth to the World Council of Churches. Into this organization the Russian and Greek Catholics have been welcomed, so that their communicants now far outnumber the Protestants.

Merging and supermerging continues within Protestant circles. In every case almost, it will be seen that the theological areas of importance have been surrendered in order to realize present, worldly benefit and prestige. Closer examination will reveal that these denominations were already bankrupt theologically, and so they were casting about for other fields of endeavor more attractive to the flesh. The recent debacle of the United Presbyterian Church in Columbus is just the prelude to the next merger in its career.

Roman Catholicism is aroused by the ecumenical spirit. The months on end spent in theological and ecclesiastical discussion is not without purpose. This gigantic organization intends to make the most out of her position to incorporate other segments of Christendom, if possible, without losing her temporal position in society.

Paganism too is ripe for merger in this final super-religious organization of the endtime. When at last all Christian doctrine has been reduced to the level of paganism, there will be no good reason why this merger cannot be effected with little protest.

Conclusion

If this leaves you with a sense of dread and despair, it should not. "When ye see these things begin to come to pass then look up for your redemption draweth nigh." God is not failing in this age. It is still our business to witness that precious message of life. For by so doing we join hands with Him in the accomplishment of His purpose (Luke 21:28ff).