

Toward a More Inclusive Ecumenism

Richard J. Mouw

My own “conversion” to a more inclusive ecumenism took place one summer in the late 1970s at the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research in Collegeville, Minnesota. I was on the faculty at Calvin College at the time and had represented the Christian Reformed denomination for five years on the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Churches, as one of the representatives of non-member denominations. I had approached that involvement with some cynicism, and my experience on the Commission did not completely cure me of that attitude. So it was with some trepidation that I journeyed to Collegeville for a weeklong discussion of “The Meaning of Ecumenism.”

I was pleasantly surprised by the tone of the Collegeville discussion, but I also experienced some initial discomfort. Two people in particular frustrated me. One was a very serious Catholic theologian who regularly expressed her amazement—even her shock—at some of my theological formulations. The other was a Russian Orthodox layman, later to become a priest, who seemed to be coming from a totally different religious universe than the one that I inhabited. I can still remember feeling eager to get back to Grand Rapids where I could tell my fellow Dutch Calvinists about all of the strange things I had heard from these two individuals.

A funny thing happened to me over the next several months, however. From time to time, one of my fellow Calvinists—a faculty colleague, or a preacher—would refer to something related to either Catholicism or Orthodoxy that I knew was not a fair representation of the views I had heard from these two individuals in Collegeville. When I agreed to return to the Institute the next summer for another round of discussions, it was with a new kind of eagerness: I could not wait to tell my two new-found friends about the misinformed things I had heard some Grand Rapids people say about their two traditions. Those two Collegeville participants, Margaret O’Gara and Anthony Ugolnik, were to become close Christian friends from whom I have learned much. Over the years I have been able to build on this and other Collegeville experiences, engaging very freely and extensively in both intra-Christian and inter-religious dialogues.

This account that I have given of my ecumenical formation displays some key evangelical themes. For one thing, I put it in terms of a “conversion” experience, which is a favorite evangelical motif. But I also linked the emergence of my ecumenical consciousness to very personal encounters. This too is an important evangelical emphasis. Evangelicalism is best seen as a loose coalition of groups and ministries that have their origins in various pietist and pietist-type movements. Pietism, as good Lutherans know, places a strong emphasis on an experienced personal relationship with God. But it also emphasizes the personal in its understanding of church life, placing a value on intimate fellowships in addition to—and sometimes to the exclusion of—the more formal worshiping life of the institutional church. And the insistence on the personal carries over into the understanding of the church’s mission, where a central emphasis is given to inviting people into a personal relationship with God.

These classical pietist themes are given clear expression by Bill Hybels, the pastor of Willow Creek Church, whose favorite slogan is “The local church is the hope of the world.” Willow Creek is an evangelical “mega-church,” but “small group ministries”—not unlike the “house church” meetings of European pietism—are an important element in the Willow Creek strategy for spiritual formation.

All of this has important implications for understanding typical evangelical attitudes toward conciliar ecumenism. We evangelicals tend to be somewhat cynical about initiatives that aim at a macro-type “structural unity.” And we are distrustful of theological perspectives that downplay the importance of bringing the Gospel message to those who have not experienced salvation in Jesus Christ.

This is not to say, though, that we are not ecumenical. Several years ago a representative of conciliar ecumenism visited my office at Fuller Theological Seminary. “You have an impressive seminary here,” he said, “but I wish you were doing more to promote ecumenism.” He was a bit taken aback when I told him that our Pasadena campus had students from over sixty nations representing well over a hundred denominations. “That seems quite ecumenical to me,” I remarked. He thought for a minute and replied, “Well, I was talking about our kind of ecumenism.”

This last remark, contained an important concession. Dividing the church up into “ecumenicals” and “evangelicals” is not very helpful labeling. The issue is not whether we are for or against ecumenism. Rather, the distinction should be spelled out in terms of different ways of being ecumenical. In our own

manner, we evangelicals have been very ecumenical in our eagerness to form liaisons across denominational lines. In this sense, we too have been a people who love the whole oikos, the entire household of the faithful..

For all of that, though, there are some serious weaknesses in the evangelical version of ecumenism. I can only list three of them here with a few brief comments, but I hope that naming the weaknesses can promote some beneficial dialogue on what a more inclusive ecumenism would look like.

First weakness: a highly selective approach to fellowships and partnerships. My Collegeville experience forced me to stick with a conversation with folks—Catholics and Orthodox—that evangelicals have typically not seriously engaged in theological discussion. Our evangelical selectivity of conversation partners allows us to maintain our caricatures and stereotypes. By resisting engagement with others in more inclusive settings for dialogue, we miss out on opportunities for better understanding of other Christians—and even worse, we promote the conditions in which we continually commit the sin of bearing false witness against our Christian neighbors. What the Collegeville experience also exemplifies, of course, is that more intimate face-to-face sustained discussions accomplish more in correcting these sinful tendencies than do large “official” discussions among church leaders. A healthier ecumenism will foster this more sustained face-to-face mode of exchange.

Second weakness: lack of serious attention to ecclesiological topics. The Anglican evangelical Alister McGrath has observed that evangelicalism’s critics often accuse us of “having an ‘under-developed ecclesiology’.” To which he responds: “[P]erhaps it might be suggested that it is others who have over-developed ecclesiologies?” He is making a legitimate point. Many evangelicals approach ecclesiological discussions with clear memories of harsh voices from our collective past—and for those of us in mainline denominations, in our collective present!—that seeks to silence our pleas for renewal by calling us to “respect the structures,” “follow due process,” and “submit to the Body.” If we evangelicals are suspicious of “strong” ecclesiologies, then, it is due at least in part to our experiences at the hands of those who have used ecclesiology as an instrument of control. But none of this excuses inattention to ecclesiological detail. Especially regrettable in this regard is a kind of historical theological amnesia among evangelicals—a failure to grapple seriously with the Christian past. Our evangelical tendency—as

seen today in many (but not all) celebrations of “the emerging church”— to dismiss the past experience of the Christian community as irrelevant to our “post”-this-or-that context is a case in point. Mainline denominations, along with the deliberations of conciliar movements, are in an important sense repositories of the collective wisdom of the past. Evangelicals must find ways of drawing upon this wisdom.

Third weakness: an ineptness at genuine dialogue. In one of my Beliefnet columns I complained about the failures of evangelicals in engaging the issues of public life because of our inability to work for compromises and temporary negotiated settlements. These same defects show up in our churchly relationships. Stanley Fish argued in a recent op ed column that people of strong religious convictions are incapable of serious dialogue with those with whom they disagree. I reject that assessment. But I have to admit that evangelicals provide strong empirical evidence in favor of Professor Fish’s thesis. My hope is that we can foster the kinds of ecumenical encounters that will offer evangelicals the opportunity to work at learning how to engage in serious dialogue with other Christians. Several years ago I wrote a book on Christian civility that was inspired in good part by a marvelous comment made by Martin Marty. People with strong convictions, Marty observed, are usually not very civil; and people who are civil usually do not have very strong convictions. What we need, said Marty, is convicted civility. The structured ecumenism of the conciliar variety provides wonderful opportunities for all of us to practice convicted civility.

My guess is that non-evangelical ecumenists who reflect on these weaknesses, as I have described them briefly here, can think of some parallel weaknesses in their own ranks. I will leave that exercise to others. But I do hope for a new day in ecumenical relations, one that will allow all of us to learn from each other about what it means to provide a more unified witness to the power of the Gospel in a broken world.