

*Why Not Join
the Ecumenical Movement?*

By Les Dennis

When Jesus was asked to name the greatest command, He answered by naming both the first and second greatest commands, which may be summarized as “love God and love others.” Since all of the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commands of God,¹ everything we say and everything we do should reflect our obedience to them. Jesus went on to say, “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching.”² How can we say that we love Jesus if we repeatedly and deliberately disobey His commands?

Teamwork

In the writings of Paul, Jesus gives us a very difficult command: “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers.”³ In biblical times, a yoke was placed on two oxen to create a team in order to make working on a common task more effective. That we are not to be yoked together (form a team) with unbelievers is underscored by a series of rhetorical questions that follow this command: “For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols?”⁴ Because believers and unbelievers do not have the common ground necessary to form a team (be yoked together), believers are commanded to “come out from among them [unbelievers] and be separate”.⁵

Believers and Unbelievers

Believers are those who trust completely in the death of Jesus Christ as payment for their sins. They have given up any attempt to earn their salvation and trust Christ alone to save them. Conversely, unbelievers have either rejected the work of Christ for salvation or feel they must add to the work of Christ in order to be saved.

Rejection of Basic Truth

The prohibition against forming a team with unbelievers is not referring to a mere difference of opinion regarding an interpretation of Scripture. It is a prohibition against forming a team with those who reject the very doctrines upon which our salvation rests, such doctrines as the divinity of Jesus Christ, the

value of Christ's death as our substitute, the resurrection of Christ, or salvation by faith alone apart from any human merit.

To reject any of these truths that are clearly taught in Scripture leaves a very deformed view of Christianity. No one who rejects the divinity of Christ is trusting God the Son for salvation. It is equally certain that those who reject the fact that Christ died in their place to pay for their sins are not born of God.

Heaven is Not for Sale

It is difficult to accept the fact that a person who has spent a lifetime doing good works through a church is an unbeliever, but Ephesians 2:8-9 says, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith -- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God -- not by works, so that no one can boast."⁶ Either one has been saved without reliance upon works or one has never been saved at all. Good works may be wonderful, but they can never be good enough to purchase salvation.

An Unclear Testimony

If we violate the command of God to separate from unbelievers, and if we form a team with those who are depending upon Jesus *plus* good works such as baptism for their salvation, we can never be sure of delivering the clear gospel message of salvation by grace alone, apart from human merit. If people sincerely believe that they have received salvation by *faith plus something else*, it is inevitable that they will promote salvation by works while they are ministering to unsaved people, even if they do so unintentionally.

The Example of Reverend Bill Phipps

For those of us who have spent our lives in evangelical circles, it is very difficult to understand how anyone could claim to serve God and reject such foundational teachings as the divinity of Jesus Christ and His resurrection, yet Reverend Bill Phipps, the former moderator of the United Church of Canada, does this very thing.

Phipps said, “I don’t believe Jesus was God...I don’t believe he rose from the dead as a scientific fact.” Phipps also said, “I don’t believe Jesus is the only way to God...I believe that Christ reveals to us as much of the nature of God as we can see in a human being...” When challenged, he said, “I believe that nothing I said is outside the broad mainstream of United Church belief.”⁷ Since he has been a recognized spokesman of the United Church of Canada, it is clear that his beliefs are either accepted or tolerated within the United Church.

How can we take the command of God to separate from unbelievers seriously if we work together with a denomination that is content to have a leader who holds the doctrine of Reverend Phipps? Although we must speak the truth in love, we must still speak the truth.

True Believers in the United Church of Canada

In fairness to those evangelical believers in the United Church, there are some individual churches within it that do take the foundational beliefs⁸ of Christianity seriously. In *Fellowship* magazine, we have read of their struggles against unbelief, and we respect them for having the courage to go against the tide, even within their own denomination.

The Roman Catholic Church

Catholic Answers, a Roman Catholic web site, says concerning Protestants, “[for] those who knowingly and deliberately (that is, not out of innocent ignorance) commit the sins of heresy (rejecting divinely revealed doctrine) or schism (separating from the Catholic Church and/or joining a schismatic church), no salvation would be possible until they repented and returned to live in Catholic unity.”⁹ Evangelical Protestants have “knowingly and deliberately” rejected the erroneous teaching of the Catholic Church that claims salvation is by faith plus works. According to *Catholic Answers* we evangelical Protestants have no hope unless we reject the basis of

our salvation, that is, faith alone. How can we work in cooperation with a Catholic church when their official position rejects the salvation that we proclaim? We repeat that although we must speak the truth in love, we must still speak the truth.

The Ecumenical Movement

The Ecumenical Movement is an attempt to unite belief and unbelief, light and darkness, sheep and wolves. Needless to say, such an attempt to join contradictory beliefs in a common ministry will not include these foundational beliefs of Christianity. Therefore, those who accept these foundational beliefs must compromise *their* faith if they are to be involved in the Ecumenical Movement. This movement cries for unity, but unity of believers exists already in the universal church, the body of Christ, while unity of believers with unbelievers is forbidden in Scripture.

Is It Loving?

If we obey the biblical command to separate from unbelievers, we may be made to look and even feel very unloving. However, if we truly love God, we will obey the commands of God, including the command to separate from unbelief. If we truly love others, we will not cooperate in their self-deception. Is it love to affirm an unsaved man's false hope that he is going to heaven, if he is not?

Abuse

Some religious leaders within the Ecumenical Movement commonly speak abusively of those who stand for the foundational beliefs of Christianity. They are offended because we believe *they* are wrong, although they are very ready to tell anyone who will listen that *we* are wrong. Such abuse has been and will continue to be heaped on anyone who believes the foundational doctrines of Christianity.

Purpose of the Church

Phipps sees the purpose of the church as “providing leadership on ethical issues, giving renewed vision to the social gospel, and bringing liveliness, compassion and justice whenever we can.”¹⁰ While these things may be admirable, they are not the purpose of the church. Jesus Christ stated the purpose of the church when He said, “...go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”¹¹

Good Works

Let us remember that good works *are a good thing*. Evangelicals have always been active in doing good works, since our love of others compels us to help with the challenges of those in need. However, the purpose of the church is the Great Commission stated above. As the church stays true to its mission of teaching obedience to everything Jesus has commanded, church members will be active in expressing love to others by meeting needs in a very practical way

Conclusion

Our purpose is to speak the truth in love regarding the Ecumenical Movement. It is never easy to tell very respectable people that we cannot work with them. We do not question the sincerity of those with whom we cannot work, but when the request to work together comes under the banner of the Ecumenical Movement, we must decline.

¹ Matthew 22:34-40 NIV

² John 14:23 NIV

³ II Corinthians 6:14 NIV

⁴ II Corinthians 6:14-16 NIV

⁵ II Corinthians 6:17 NIV

⁶ Ephesians 2:8-9

⁷ “Church Leader Holds Controversial Views,” The Ottawa Citizen, October 30, 1997.

⁸ The foundational beliefs of Christianity are as follows: verbal inerrancy of Scripture (original manuscripts), divinity of Christ, virgin birth of Jesus Christ, substitutionary atonement (including salvation by faith alone), and the physical resurrection and bodily return of Jesus Christ.

⁹ Catholic Answers Home Page, Inc., last modified May 25, 1996.

¹⁰ “Church Leader Holds Controversial Views,” The Ottawa Citizen, October 30, 1997.

¹¹ Matthew 28: 19-20 NIV

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