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Unity and spiritual ecumenism.

A retrospective vision of god's moving in the last 50 years

History of Christianity

In the 19th century Christianity was geographically disseminated over a larger area than ever before, and more than any other faith. This extension was verified in connection with the expansion of the European peoples.

Hundreds of languages for the first time had a written form; the Bible was translated into many languages, either partially or completely. Other Christian literature was prepared and Western-style schools were opened and frequently they were the initiators of the education that would prevail.

In the 19th century Christians were congregating outside the denominational barriers and achieving a unity in ways that were essentially new.

It seemed that Christianity, rapidly becoming worldwide in its extension more than other religions, due to its greater emphasis on the love of God and love for one's neighbor, would be the source and hope of greater unity. However, the Christian church was divided, apparently, beyond remedy. Attempts at unity only gave way to further divisions.

Among the first methods used to achieve unity was one that persisted with growing manifestations and ramifications: cooperation, with planning and actions along denominational lines, both by individuals and groups, but without official participation from the ecclesiastical leadership. Originally, organizations and conferences of this type were composed of elements primarily dedicated to an evangelical awakening, occurring within related groups, such as the pietists on the European continent and in the United States of America who sympathized with the revival movements. Eventually, some of these movements attracted individuals of other traditions, including Anglo-Catholics, Roman Catholics, Orthodox and other oriental churches.

The cooperation between individuals, rather than on the part of official ecclesiastical groups, had such a variety of expressions that we must limit ourselves to mentioning a few examples. Among the earliest we find the London Missionary Society, formed in 1795; the Religious Tract Society, which began its work in 1799; the British and Foreign Bible Society, founded in 1804; and the American Bible Society, organized in 1816. Sunday Schools were focused in a similar movement. Following several world assemblies, in 1907 the World

Association of Sunday Schools was formally organized. The Young Men's (and Women's) Christian Association belonged to the same category. From its humble beginning in 1844 they rapidly multiplied and in 1855 the World Alliance of Young People's Christian Associations was organized.

In 1895 the World Union of Christian Endeavor was formed, in part from the Young Men's (and Women's) Christian Associations and the Student Volunteer Movement for foreign missions.

What was known as the Evangelical Alliance made important contributions to Christian unity. The Alliance had a partial beginning in 1845. The most noteworthy of the series of world meetings of the Evangelical Alliance met in New York in 1873.

Another approximation to Christian unity came as a result of proposals from the federation or effective union of churches. The declaration proposed a procedure and structure for the formation of churches known as the Apostolic Protestant Union. The program suggested was not adopted by the churches, but was useful in preparing the way for later cooperation.

There began to appear in the latter part of the century a cooperation which included a larger number of denominations. Several movements, among them the National Federation of Christian Churches and Workers, officially formed in 1901, culminated in 1908 in the organization of the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America, for the purpose of expressing "the universal fellowship and unity of the Christian church" and exercising "a greater combined influence for the churches of Christ in all matters affecting the moral and social conditions of the people".

The greatest developments toward Christian unity through Protestantism came through the missionary expansion of the churches. This is not surprising. In the regions where Christianity was being introduced, the divisions perpetuated by the countries where the faith had been established for a longer time, seemed anachronistic, inapplicable and an impediment to the extension of the gospel. In the new framework the impulse toward a united approach was strong, even though obstacles frequently appeared. Moreover, in the countries and sections from which the missionaries came, a joint consultation seemed imperative.

In China the missionaries united in the translation of the Bible in 1843, and the first general missionary conference met in 1877. This was followed by others in 1890 and 1907, each of them larger than its predecessor. The meeting in 1907 gave much attention to the promotion of a continuing and visible unity.

In the missionary-sending countries, consultations and regular and continuing cooperation were soon projected.

The World Missionary Conference was celebrated in Edinburgh in 1910. This gathering became a historical marker for the ecumenical movement.

In 1914 the faith was more widely extended geographically than ever before.

Our history: Divisions and attempts at unity

We all know that after the Reformation, the Protestant churches began to suffer constant divisions for a variety of reasons. However, the numerical growth and expansion of the church in many regions was extraordinary.

During the period of the greatest missionary expansion to the ends of the earth in the 18th and 19th centuries, the drawing together of missionaries from different denominations arose out of both personal needs and those encountered in their fields of labor.

The Pentecostal revival

Although there was a coming together between the different denominations because of their mission work and the need to join forces in the battle against humanism and the various rationalistic currents that undermined the faith of the Christians, threatening to close the doors of salvation to those who were being converted to the Lord, the state of the church in general toward the end of the 19th century was marked by indifference and spiritual decadence. Religious formalism prevailed, as well as liberalism and worldliness.

In spite of the spiritual decadence there were also signs of revival, indicating that not everyone had bowed their knees to Baal. In the conferences and prayer meetings there was a call to repentance and a search for God, with the frequent repetition of Jeremiah 33:3: "Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know" (NIV).

There was also an expectation of the coming of the "latter rain", based on Joel's prophecy of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the latter days.

The baptism in the Holy Spirit, with the manifestation of speaking in tongues and the gifts of prophecy and healing, became the characteristic of those days at the end of the 19th and the early 20th centuries. The renewal of the churches, the freshness of the Spirit, holiness, consecration, the manifestation of God's power and evangelism were the consequences of the Spirit's outpouring.

Although that was glorious and fulfilled a need in the Lord's church, it also provoked a great division between the traditional denominations and the Pentecostal movement. But that was not the end of it; later great divisions were experienced among the Pentecostals themselves. Those who had received the baptism in the Holy Spirit, spoke in new tongues and grew rapidly became fragmented amongst themselves, creating new divisions and greater suffering in the church, especially in Latin America.

The World Council of Churches

The World Council of Churches exerted great efforts to promote unity among the Christians. Today it is the largest and most representative of the many organized

expressions of the modern ecumenical movement, whose principal objective is unity among Christians. Churches and denominations from a hundred countries represent some 400 million Christians in the Council.

Vatican II

In Vatican II the Apostolic Roman Catholic Church exerted great effort to draw Christians together from the various confessions. Public recognition was made of their errors and forgiveness was requested, seeking to mend the evils of the past so as to pave the way for ecumenism.

Renewal movement

In the 1960s, in the midst of spiritual drought and the many divisions, a fresh wind of the Spirit began to blow, producing an authentic renewal movement, mostly among the non Pentecostal churches. It was dubbed Neo Pentecostalism or the Charismatic Movement. With the passing of time all the denominations, including the Pentecostals and the Catholics, began to experience the Lord's sovereign breath and the living presence of the Holy Spirit of God. Worship of the blessed Lord and love among the brethren captivated thousands of Christians in all the world.

The books and writings of Watchman Nee contributed greatly to this new spirituality. His book *The Normal Christian Life* contributed spiritual perception concerning the unity of the church. When the Lord gave light and revelation on this subject and there was preaching and proclamation that this was going to happen, the opposite occurred. Although the spiritual renewal movement was characterized by the fullness of the Spirit and light concerning the unity of the church, at the outset, as an unexpected side effect, it provoked greater division. All these spiritual realities and abundant revelation on God's part, although they were precious to us –and continue to be–, did not produce the unity of the church.

What unites us

- It is not missionary work that unites the church.
- It is not the persecution of Christians.
- Nor even the conflicts and humanistic pressures.
- A spiritual awakening alone, no matter how glorious, did not produce the long-expected unity.
- Nor did it come through an outpouring of the Spirit with gifts, miracles and manifestations of power.
- Neither is it the product of ecumenical encounters, nor the good will of men, nor an agreement concerning doctrines and practices.

THAT WHICH UNITES US IS THE REVELATION OF THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH.
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GOD HAS DETERMINED TO REVEAL HIS SON IN THE MIDST OF HIS PEOPLE AND MAKE KNOWN TO US THE ETERNAL PURPOSE OF HIS WILL.

When the Lord began to make known his purpose for the church, the denominational walls began to come down and the theological frontiers that had long kept us separated began to disappear. This began to occur first between:

- Pentecostals and non Pentecostales, recognizing each other as brothers in Christ and working together to extend the kingdom of God.
- Charismatics and other denominations, conducting them toward reconciliation.
- Historical and evangelical churches.
- Protestants and Catholics.

Unity is the fruit and result of the revelation of Christ and his purpose. There is no greater example of unity than that of the triune God. In order to reconcile all things in himself, Christ emptied himself of the eternal glories, took on the burden of all humanity with its uncleanness and sins, and died in our place. To obtain unity and reconciliation of all things—both things in heaven and on earth—the Father remained on the throne and Jesus Christ went to the cross. It is the revelation of Christ and his church that leads Christians to give everything and to lose everything because of their love for the Lord and for his church.

Meetings between Catholics and evangelicals

In 1977, in Kansas City (USA), an international and interconfessional charismatic encounter was celebrated with 45,000 participants (25,000 evangelicals and 20,000 Catholics). It was a manifestation of spiritual unity which the Lord had begun to produce in his church. Today the charismatic-pentecostal movement involves many millions of Christians in the world.

In the 1960s we were surprised by something outside every agenda and human expectation: the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Catholics and traditional evangelicals. This new infusion of the Spirit generated a movement of charismatic renewal in both sectors, as well as a common spirituality. Those common characteristics include: a personal experience with the Holy Spirit, the transformation of lives, spontaneous prayer, praise, worship, speaking in new tongues, prophecies, spiritual songs, love for the holy Scriptures and, above all, a new commitment to Christian living.

In our country, that new visitation of the Spirit was initiated in 1967, a short time after it had begun in the USA. In those early years there was a good spiritual relationship between charismatic Catholics and evangelicals.

For the first time an encounter was celebrated in Argentina between Catholics and evangelicals named: Fraternal Encounter of Catholics and Evangelicals in the Holy Spirit, which occurred in July, 2004.

Unity in Latin America

In many countries of Latin America the pastors are grouped in pastoral associations or councils that bring together the different denominations.

In Paraguay there is only one Association of Pastors of Paraguay (A.P.P.), that brings together all the pastors in the country. In each city, town or region there is a council of pastors from the different denominations. Occasionally, they celebrate a national pastors' retreat.

In Argentina

In the 1960s the church was fragmented in denominations divided by impenetrable walls. Not even the Pentecostals could reach agreement among themselves and they continued with more divisions. The renewal movement which began in that decade did not contribute to the healing of those relations; on the contrary more divisions were produced between those who were renewed and those who were not, and within the denominations there continued to be break-aways.

The ministry and revelation of John chapter 17 helped to change our minds, hearts and attitudes. God healed us. Toward the beginning of the 1980s we saw the opportunity to heal relationships with several Pentecostal organizations, by confessing our spiritual pride and putting right situations between us, while washing each others' feet. This spirit of reconciliation was extended throughout the body of Christ in Argentina. Today the relationships are excellent between most of the denominations and pastors. We began to get together and the Lord poured out his Spirit. When Ezequiel prophesied, first the dry bones came together and then the Spirit came. If we take the road of obedience to God, the Spirit of God will come.

Something spiritual happened in the nation

As pastors we see each other in a different way, without reservations, with appreciation, seeking each other's good.

There is friendship, genuine concern, love, even among the different denominations.

There is recognition of the grace and place of our brother. It is a new and glorious day.

The pastors are sought by the national authorities who request their counsel and help in matters of security and distribution of social help. They ask us to pray for them and for their administrative responsibilities.

Some churches have removed their denominational name from the front of their meeting place. Some call themselves only by the name of the locality where they reside. They are the church of the city. For instance, the Central Baptist Church in Buenos Aires is now the Central Church.

Three organizations bring together almost all the denominations.

FAIE includes most of the historical churches.

FACIERA is the largest grouping that includes Pentecostals and non Pentecostals.

FECEP are all Pentecostals.

Between them they form a national council: CNCE, National Evangelical Christian Council.

This Council is the voice that represents us before the civic authorities.

At this time there are about 300 councils of pastors in the country.

Conclusion

In our generation a point of inflexion has been produced.

The diverging lines that come from the Reformation have been broken and today they are becoming converging lines.

Spiritual experiences and God's blessings are not a guarantee nor a heavenly approval indicating that we are all right. History proves that.

Jacob escaped from his brother and had a glorious spiritual experience. He saw a ladder that reached to heaven with angels going up and down on it. The glory of heaven had come down. Jacob could say: "God is with me", and therefore guided him and was at his side. But when the time came for the encounter with his brother, God himself appeared with him in Peniel. He changed him, transformed him and fulfilled the Father's purpose in the earth. May the blessing that God gives us in his goodness not keep us from seeing his supreme purpose.

The future is promising, requiring faith, love and patience in the Lord. As the apostle Paul said, let us not find peace in our spirit until we are united with our brother (2 Corinthians 2:13).

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