

United Methodist Evangelicals and Ecumenism

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In this paper I want to explore what it will take to get United Methodist Evangelicals to take ecumenism seriously. En route to dealing with this query I need to set the scene by making some preliminary remarks about the nature and ethos of evangelicalism within United Methodism and by noting why this stream of the contemporary church has been so lukewarm about ecumenism. Perhaps I should also note straight away that by ecumenism I mean here the intention to work aggressively for the full organic unity of Christians in one universal body of faith.¹

Like evangelicalism in the wider Christian world evangelicalism within the United Methodist Church is a complex, diverse movement.² To be sure, we can discern an immediate network of platitudes that are the mark of the evangelical tradition. Characteristically evangelicals are committed to the authority of scripture, to a robust body of traditional doctrine, to conversion, to evangelism at home and abroad, to ministry among the needy, and so on. However, the embodiment of these primary commitments is thoroughly diverse with differences of emphasis making a significant difference to the overall picture presented. Thus the tradition is internally contested and dynamic rather than fixed and static.

There are two ways to plot the diversity: one diachronic and the other synchronic.

On the diachronic front evangelicals in The United Methodist Church bear traces of the three massive expressions of the evangelical tradition that have cropped up within Protestantism. First, with the Reformation The United Methodist evangelicals are staunchly committed to scriptural authority. This represents a strong epistemological bent towards foundationalism in theology, namely, the aim to ground everything in scripture construed as the bearer of special revelation. To be sure, within Methodism evangelicals generally receive scripture either as the warrant and carrier of the great doctrines of the tradition or, more recently, they receive

¹ I have in mind the vision mapped out at New Delhi in 1961.

² I have given my own analysis of the evangelical tradition as a whole in *The Coming Great Revival* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984). For a recent and refreshing theological interpretation of evangelicalism see Gary J. Dorrien, *The Remaking of Evangelical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998).

scripture within the context of the great doctrines of the tradition often seen as securing the narrative of the bible as a whole.³ Either way, they are not at all opposed to the great Tradition of the Church and have no quarrel with the doctrines of the Trinity, Incarnation, and the like, enshrined in the ecumenical creeds. Indeed evangelicals generally lament the loss of material doctrine within Methodism over the years.

Second, evangelicals in United Methodism bear the marks of the Evangelical Awakening that took place in the eighteenth century. This is absolutely critical for understanding evangelicals within The United Methodist Church. The great hero here, of course, is John Wesley and the model for current practice is the work of early Methodism. For United Methodist evangelicals John Wesley represents the best of the evangelical tradition. They see him as a mentor, a brilliant evangelist, a social reformer, a remarkable organizer, and an astute thinker. Above all they see him as championing the critical significance of living piety over against dead orthodoxy, institutional religion, social activism, and intellectual abstraction. More particularly they gravitate to several features of his life and work that they wish to emulate, namely, his conversion at Aldersgate, his remaining within the church of his day to reform and renew it, and his combining of personal piety with social activism. Overall evangelicals see themselves as the true bearers of the early Methodist tradition as developed and implemented by Wesley. They are best understood as mainline Pietists.

Third, evangelicals within The United Methodist Church bear the marks of the Fundamentalist-Modernist disputes of twentieth century Christianity in the United States. Interestingly, United Methodist evangelicals were not seduced into the fundamentalist vision of scripture, even though many may *de facto* be inerrantists. The issues to note here are more sociological and historical. Thus evangelicals in The United Methodist Church have found themselves gravitating towards Conservative Evangelicalism as a distinct grouping within twentieth century Christianity.⁴ This is in part because they felt alienated from the leadership of their own church and looked elsewhere for friendship and support. Effectively shut out of the corridors of theological education, they founded Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky. Its leaders immediately sought collegiality within the wider network of post-fundamentalist institutions like Fuller Theological Seminary, the Consortium of Evangelical Colleges, the National Association of Evangelicals, the Lausanne

³ The latter vision has been championed with great élan by Joel Green in his commentaries and writings.

⁴ This is one reason why they have such a high regard for English Evangelicals like Bishop Tom Wright, F.F. Bruce, I. Howard Marshall, J. I. Packer, and John Stott.

Movement, and the like. This sociological development dovetails with another development, namely the tendency to see the enemy as any and all kinds of Liberal Protestantism. Thus United Methodist evangelicals, while they have been uneasy with this dichotomy here and there, have readily reached for the standard polarity between Conservative and Liberal forms of American Christianity both as a means of analysis and as a polemical weapon to be used when needed against their critics and opponents. Not surprisingly they tend to see forms of Liberation theology as an extension of Liberal Protestantism.

These observations are intended to bring to light various tensions and differences that lie below the surface within the tradition as a whole. Evangelicals are not a monolithic tradition; they differ over how best to express the tradition even while they recognize that they operate within determinate boundaries. The tensions and differences within the tradition are also manifest in the plethora of organizations that evangelicals have formed within The United Methodist Church. At this point we shift to the synchronic.

Generally speaking these organizations take the form of renewal organizations. The best-known, best-organized, and oldest organization is that of the Good News Movement.⁵ But there are many others: The Mission Society for United Methodists,⁶ Lifewatch,⁷ The Confessing Movement within The United Methodist Church,⁸ A Foundation for Theological Education,⁹ Transforming Congregations,¹⁰ the Coalition for United Methodist Accountability,¹¹ and the United Methodist unit of the Institute on Religion and Democracy.¹² These represent the formally identified groups that have emerged over the last forty years. However, it would be a serious mistake to ignore the more fluid forms of renewal that United Methodist evangelicals have taken to heart. Thus many evangelicals in The United Methodist Church have been deeply involved in the Church Growth Movement and in the Charismatic Movement. The point to register at this juncture is not that we have here a well-organized army of evangelicals, drunk with power, and funded by right wing conservative politicians; rather

⁵ The Good News Movement really acts as a clearing house for most of the renewal movements in The United Methodist Church.

⁶ The concern in this case is the planting of local churches outside the United States.

⁷ This group is committed to the right to life of the unborn.

⁸ Here the interest is the doctrinal renewal of The United Methodist Church.

⁹ This group funds evangelical scholarship, nurturing students through to the Ph.D. level.

¹⁰ In this instance a positive ministry is developed for persons struggling with homosexuality.

¹¹ This is effectively a legal watchdog and advisory body.

¹² Here the concern is the relation between faith and politics.

what we have is a volatile, energetic, amorphous, semi-organized network of believers who are serious about Christianity, committed to scripture, funded by personal piety, and intent on evangelism.¹³

Coming now more closely to the topic of ecumenism, the crucial observation to make at this stage is that overall evangelicals in The United Methodist Church have not really had a heart for ecumenism. This is a stark statement, but I think that any realistic assessment of the commitment of evangelicals to ecumenism must begin there. Clearly the next step is to track why this is the case. Why have United Methodist evangelicals been so hesitant about, if not hostile to, ecumenism? I think of many reasons why this is the case.

First, evangelicals within United Methodism have felt themselves to be a beleaguered minority, opposed by mainline leaders whose identity was in part constituted by a commitment to ecumenism. Thus, for many evangelicals the enemy has been, in fact, ecumenists who treated them with disdain. Evangelicals were sent off to Kentucky, to the backwoods where they belonged, that is, to a rural world of fundamentalism and conservative politics.¹⁴ They had no hope that they would ever be accepted or treated respectfully by the ecumenical leaders of the denomination. Second, given their minority status their first concern was survival. Enormous amounts of energy had to be mustered to organize, to work out strategies of ministry, to sustain their parachurch institutions, to articulate their concerns, to fend off criticism, and so on. What is now part of the wider mainline situation, namely, concern with survival, has always been integral to the life of evangelicalism; in both cases the energy left over for ecumenism is minimal.

Going deeper in our analysis, a third factor inhibiting commitment to ecumenism is lack of faith in the instrumentalities of ecumenism as represented, say, by the World Council of Churches and its national counterparts. By the time the modern evangelical movement in The United Methodist Church was formed, I think it is fair to say that the commitment to evangelism as understood by evangelicals within mainstream ecumenism was lukewarm at best and non-existent at worst. Donald McGavran’s stinging criticism in the late sixties when he called on the World Council of Churches to remember the two billion who had never heard the name of

¹³ The former view is that essentially developed in Leon Howell, *United Methodism @ Risk* (Kingston, New York: Information Project for United Methodists, 2003). For a reply from the evangelical side see Rile B. Case, *A Good News Response to: United Methodism @Risk* (Wilmore: Good News, n.d.)

¹⁴ It is a fact that Asbury Theological Seminary remains the elephant in the room for many United Methodist leaders and institutions. Its resounding success in terms of growth and impact represents a failure of prediction on the part of moderate and Liberal leaders and something of an intellectual embarrassment yet to be overcome.

Christ was readily noted in evangelical circles.¹⁵ The formation of an alternative voice in mission and evangelism represented by Lausanne and other conferences simply consolidated the suspicions of evangelicals. Ongoing and unresolved disputes with the Board of Global Ministries only hastened the day when evangelicals formed their own Mission Board of The United Methodist Church.¹⁶ This represented the climactic manifestation of a tacit conviction: mainline ecumenical leaders and institutions were effectively a hindrance to the mission of the church. The cognitive dissonance between a core conviction of evangelicals and the missionary practices of ecumenism left the evangelicals with the obvious resolution: forget about ecumenism.

I suspect that there were several other factors that reinforced this resolution. One of these factors was and is a distrust of bureaucracies and institutions generally. Evangelicals readily believe that the tendency to corruption in corporate institutions is so endemic that the spiritual risks involved in any kind of organic merger or union are massive. Another factor at work was a cosmic and even apocalyptic fear of one-world movements. Perhaps the whole ecumenical movement, some thought, is really a cover for the forces of Rome or of Moscow; either way it is best to be suspicious and not participate. A third factor was the trend towards secular conceptions of theology and ministry and a perception that many ecumenists were all too ready to sacrifice the uniqueness of Christ in the salvation of the world, thus cutting a critical element in missionary labor.

If I am right in my judgment that evangelicals have no heart for ecumenism, then the challenge of getting them to take ecumenism seriously is an enormous one. In fact, evangelicals generally think that they have been vindicated in their assessment of ecumenism. They readily note that while most Christians could not care less about denominations much less about some kind of united church, the current leadership of The United Methodist Church has lost heart where ecumenism is concerned. To be sure, ecclesial civility requires paying lip service to ecumenism, and ongoing contractual obligations requires the continued funding of the current instrumentalities of ecumenism; however, ecumenism is theologically brain dead; it simply does not engage the brightest and best of the emerging leadership. There is little in ecumenism that fires the theological imagination; there is no pied piper like Albert Outler coming back from Vatican II to rally the troops and give

¹⁵ George Hunter III was a student of McGavran and went on to become an international leader in the Church Growth Movement.

¹⁶ For a recent analysis of “missions” see James V. Heidinger II, “Are we Serious About Missions?” in *Good News*, January/February 2004, 11.

the marching orders. The energy of the church is now redirected to other issues and causes. It is directed at survival, evangelism, and church growth; it is directed to the diverse special-interest groups that have become the allegiance of choice; and it is directed to managing the conflicts that threaten disunity within The United Methodist church itself. It is a sign of how low the ecumenical flame is burning that the recent failure to make any progress between The United Methodist Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Church was barely noticed even as a blip on the screen of ecumenical activity. Folk had long ago switched to other channels.

The current difficulties facing the Anglican tradition over homosexuality only serve to weaken the prospects of ecumenism. Evangelicals have no interest in union with any body that shifts from what they perceive as biblical teaching on homosexuality. Indeed many evangelicals would be fully prepared to form whole new ecclesial bodies rather than compromise. Truth, as represented by scriptural authority, takes precedence over unity. Hence, the prospect for interest in, much less engagement with, ecumenism looks grim indeed.

Yet this is not the whole story. Evangelicals in The United Methodist Church have readily come together with other evangelical and renewal movements across the mainline traditions.¹⁷ This may be a matter of political expediency, but I think that this is a cynical reading of the situation; commitment to the gospel really does compel believers towards unity. Earlier generations of evangelicals have sought to reach across traditional boundaries to form a united front. Furthermore, I think that evangelicals in The United Methodist Church have come to a much deeper appreciation for the common Faith of the Church over the last generation. Hence, they are keen to join hands with those who want to uphold the great doctrines of the Church, especially so if this will help the cause of evangelism. In this the work of Thomas Oden has been highly influential.¹⁸ Equally, there is still a distant memory within evangelicalism that mission and ecumenism were originally joined, thus there is always room for the recovery of this original and originating vision. Finally, I think that the current generation of leadership in the making is less defensive and more open in their outlook. While operationally they are still focused in issues of scripture, doctrine, and evangelism, they might well be interested in new versions of ecumenism that take seriously their core commitments.

¹⁷ The relevant organization is known as The Association for Church Renewal.

¹⁸ Thomas Oden’s effort to retrieve the patristic faith of the Church has received widespread acceptance among evangelicals in the United Methodist Church. Indeed Oden has become one of the leading figures in the evangelical tradition as a whole in the contemporary scene.

So we come directly to the question with which I opened this paper: what would it take to get United Methodist evangelicals to take ecumenism seriously? I think the following *desiderata* would be minimally essential. I will mention five.

First, evangelicals will have to be convinced that the unity of the church is an imperative, that it is, in fact, a matter of obedience to God. Thus the case for the unity of the church will have to be made in robust theological, biblical, and soteriological categories. Frankly, my sense is that evangelicals look upon the great varieties of denominations and local churches, that is, the ecclesial *status quo*, as divinely permitted if not mandated. Like Methodism more generally, they have no robust ecclesiology beyond one that sees every Christian group as already being part of the church universal; they think that disunity is well down the hierarchy of sins; and they are far from sure that God wills an organic form of unity. Thus the case for organic unity will have to be made from the bottom up, so to speak.

Second, there will have to be a resolute recognition that the current instrumentalities of ecumenism have failed in various ways. Without some kind of significant intellectual and practical repentance, it is likely that evangelicals will think that the renewal of ecumenism is a waste of time and effort. They have no stake in reviving a failed enterprise; they have seen the movie version of ecumenism, and they have no interest in rewinding it. Any future vision of ecumenism will have to begin with a heavy dose of realism and contrition.

Third, there will have to be some kind of assurance not just that any new instrumentalities of unity will need to be created over time, but that any such instrumentalities will be under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Thus, ecumenism must be more than some kind of ecclesiastical engineering worked out in committee and mandated from above. It will have to be something that both bubbles up from within the heart of the church and that can be legitimately seen as a genuine work of the Holy Spirit. To be sure, there will be no new ventures in ecumenism without the hard reality of institutional embodiment, but such embodiment will also have to be interpretable as the work of the Holy Spirit if it is to have purchase.

Fourth, any future version and expression of ecumenism will have to be intimately related to evangelism. Thus the connection between evangelism and unity will have to be reforged in categories and practices that evangelicals can appropriate. To this end, the claim that current expressions of Christianity can actually aid evangelism by providing healthy competition or by furnishing different brands of Christianity for different

kinds of personalities will have to be met head-on and overturned. Unity and mission will have to be brought together in convincing and practical ways. Concrete experiments along these lines would speak volumes.

Fifth, ecumenism will have to be such that it preserves the great doctrines of the tradition and the uniqueness of Christ in the salvation of the world. Any idea that doctrine divides and action unites will be resisted. Contemporary evangelicals are hard at work trying to outgrow anti-credalist forms of Biblicism; they have come to a much deeper appreciation of the Nicene tradition of faith. Hence they have no interest in any movement that would undercut the gains made in this territory. An ecumenism devoted merely to uniting humanity or to fixing the world’s ills that is not grounded in the doctrines of the Church will be seen as sub-Christian and rejected as ineffective.

This list of *disiderata* constitutes a massive challenge to any ecumenist interested in persuading United Methodist evangelicals to get on board the ecumenical train. The worst ecumenists can fear is that evangelicals will oppose any effort to get the ecumenical train back on the rails. Certainly there is enough skepticism, contrariness, and disillusionment among evangelicals to make this a likely trend in some circles. The next best thing ecumenists can hope for is that evangelicals will stay engaged in the conversation, remain open to new possibilities, and lend a hand when they can. In this instance, evangelicals would keep their distance but be ready to help if invited to do so. Of course, the very best ecumenists might hope for is that evangelicals might become part of a whole new network of thinkers and agents who would surprise even themselves in producing fresh ways of conceiving and practicing ecumenism in the future.¹⁹

I would not bet a month’s salary on that option, but I would bet more than my shirt on it. Evangelicals have far more fecundity and resources than is commonly recognized. There are thousands of them abroad within The United Methodist Church; they are much more mature theologically and intellectually than they were a generation ago; they care deeply about the Church; they have a long history of advance, retreat, and renewal; and they really do not have any stomach for sectarianism or division. Most importantly they really do believe in the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the faithful. Hence, if unity is the work of the Holy Spirit, they are highly likely to follow that lead as and when it happens in the Spirit’s good time.

¹⁹ I dare to predict that genuinely fresh thinking on ecumenism will emerge from within the evangelical tradition as a whole over the next decade.