

## Ecumenism – yes and/or no?

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### Abstract

*There is considerable confusion present in the Evangelical world when it comes to defining ecumenism. There is no common definition, strategy or goal, unlike in the Roman Catholic Church, which has clearly defined its terms, goals and the main goal of ecumenism in the Second Vatican Council, in the Pope's encyclicals, as well as some other documents. Even though ecumenism has spread beyond the circle in which it was started, outside of Protestant-Evangelical Christianity, and today includes the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches, and even Islam, I will attempt to answer the question in the title by considering the relationship between Evangelical Christianity and the Roman Catholic Church, which has taken a leading role in the ecumenical movement after the Second Vatican Council. In the first section, I will consider the historical emergence of ecumenism in churches which stemmed from the Reformation tradition; I will define the non-biblical term of ecumenism from a biblical standpoint; I will answer the question "why YES to biblical ecumenism", and I will go on to review some arguments as to "why NO" to the different, expanded ecumenism, i.e. I will answer the question of where the boundaries are, or, what are the specific obstacles for ecumenism outside certain boundaries.*

Keywords: *ecumenism, the Gospel, church, unity, fellowship, dialogue.*

### Introduction

The article is entitled both "Ecumenism – yes or no" and "Ecumenism – yes and no" due to the simultaneous complexity and simplicity of the subject. One of the

things that makes ecumenism complex is defining the very term and emergence of ecumenism. There is considerable confusion present in the Evangelical world when it comes to defining ecumenism.<sup>1</sup> There is no common definition, strategy or goal, unlike the Roman Catholic Church, which has clearly defined its terms, goals<sup>2</sup> and the main goal<sup>3</sup> of ecumenism in the Second Vatican Council, in the Popes encyclicals, and other documents which were a result of dialogue between Roman Catholics and certain Evangelical groups.<sup>4</sup> Even though ecumenism has spread beyond the circle in which it was started, outside of Protestant-Evangelical Christianity, and today includes the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches, and even Islam, I will attempt to answer the question in the title by considering the relationship between Evangelical Christianity and the Roman Catholic Church, which has taken a leading role in the ecumenical movement

- 1 For Evangelical Christians, ecumenism can mean one of these things: co-existence, appreciation, dialogue, mutual working for the common good, a way of evangelizing, starting the New World Order, belonging to one general church (the common household).
- 2 “The restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council. Christ the Lord founded one Church and one Church only. However, many Christian communions present themselves to men as the true inheritors of Jesus Christ; all indeed profess to be followers of the Lord but differ in mind and go their different ways, as if Christ Himself were divided.(1) Such division openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages the holy cause of preaching the Gospel to every creature. But the Lord of Ages wisely and patiently follows out the plan of grace on our behalf, sinners that we are. In recent times more than ever before, He has been rousing divided Christians to remorse over their divisions and to a longing for unity. Everywhere large numbers have felt the impulse of this grace, and among our separated brethren also there increases from day to day the movement, fostered by the grace of the Holy Spirit, for the restoration of unity among all Christians. This movement toward unity is called “ecumenical.” Those belong to it who invoke the Triune God and confess Jesus as Lord and Savior, doing this not merely as individuals but also as corporate bodies. For almost everyone regards the body in which he has heard the Gospel as his Church and indeed, God’s Church. All however, though in different ways, long for the one visible Church of God, a Church truly universal and set forth into the world that the world may be converted to the Gospel and so be saved, to the glory of God. The Sacred Council gladly notes all this. It has already declared its teaching on the Church, and now, moved by a desire for the restoration of unity among all the followers of Christ, it wishes to set before all Catholics the ways and means by which they too can respond to this grace and to this divine call.” (*Unitatis redintegratio*, 1).
- 3 “This sacred Council has several aims in view: it desires to impart an ever increasing vigor to the Christian life of the faithful; to adapt more suitably to the needs of our own times those institutions which are subject to change; to foster whatever can promote union among all who believe in Christ; to strengthen whatever can help to call the whole of mankind into the household of the Church.” (*Sacrosanctum concilium*, 1).
- 4 For further details see documents: *Church, Evangelization and the Bonds of Koinonia - Report of the International Consultation between the Catholic Church and the World Evangelical Alliance (1993 - 2002)*, *Evangelicals and Catholics Together (1994)*, *Evangelicals and Catholics Together II - The Gift of Salvation (1997)*.

following the Second Vatican Council.

In the first section, I will consider the historical emergence of ecumenism in churches which stemmed from the Reformation tradition; I will define the non-biblical term of ecumenism from a biblical standpoint; I will answer the question “why YES to Biblical ecumenism”, and I will go on to review some arguments as to “why NO” to the different, expanded ecumenism, i.e. I will answer the question of where the boundaries are, or what are the specific obstacles for ecumenism outside certain boundaries.

## Why “yes” to ecumenism?

As the supreme authority for faith and practice in Evangelical Christianity, the Bible<sup>5</sup> speaks and calls for the imperative of unity. After he “bows his knees before the Lord”, and after claiming that, in Christ and the church God is “able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think” (Eph 3:14-21), the apostle Paul calls the elect to unity in the Lord.

“Therefore I, a prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. *There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.*” (Eph 4:1-6).

Spiritual unity and spiritual fellowship are New Testaments imperatives. The return to “the Shepherd and Keeper of our souls” (1 Pt 2:25) includes finding a flock and unity. A man who is “*born again by the Holy Spirit through obedience to the truth*” (Jn 3:3) and *the Word of God* (1 Pt 1:22-23) cannot remain alone; instead, he will crave for true spiritual unity and fellowship (Acts 2:41).

It is precisely this need for fellowship and unity, and with the purpose of a more effective mission, that gave rise to ecumenism as an organized movement in 1910, in Edinburgh. Fellowship, unity and cooperation with the purpose of reaching people with the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ were the needs which brought about the historical ecumenical movement in churches of the Reformation tradition.

5 ‘Scripture alone’, or ‘Sola Scriptura’, is the primary principle of faith and practice for most churches of the Reformation tradition, while in the Roman Catholic Church it is the Scripture as well as Tradition which need to be “received and honored with the same sentiment of piety and reverence.” (CCC 80-82).

## The foundation for biblical ecumenism

In the beginning of his first epistle, the apostle John, in an unclear period ruled by Docetism and Gnosticism, which have a lot in common with the hazy postmodernism of today, clearly writes that Christian fellowship and unity are based in God, that they stem from God, that the Christian fellowship and unity are results of knowing God, the results of “*knowing*” (Jn 17:3) the eternal, embodied (1 Jn 1:1), and written Word (Jn 17:17).

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life— and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us— what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ (1 Jn 1:1-3).

In the same (con)text John goes on to write that clearly, the basis of Christian fellowship and unity is God, who is Light, and our fellowship with Him.

This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him and *yet* walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. (1 Jn 1:5-7).

It is worth noting that John does not primarily put God who is love as the basis for Christian fellowship, but God who is Light. In 1 John 1:5, John claims that “God is Light”, while later on, in 1 John 4:8, he writes that “God is love”. No matter how much we preach, teach, write and sing about God’s love, we can never emphasize God’s love too much, because it surpasses knowledge. God’s love is too high, too wide, and too deep. God is love, but God is not only love. God is not a prisoner of any one of His attributes. God is love. God is merciful, gracious, and kind, but He is also righteous, holy, and true at the same time.

It is a fact that the Church was preaching God in an unbalanced way during the Middle Ages. In the Middle Ages, the Church emphasized God’s holiness, righteousness, and truthfulness, while completely forgetting that God was also merciful, gracious, and full of love. God was a stern judge and a consuming fire. Hell was a prominent and often visited subject. Luther experienced a different God, and the Reformation began with going back to the Scriptures—the return to Paul’s epistles to the Romans and Galatians, which speak about justification by faith and salvation through God’s mercy, the epistles which emphasize that God is filled with love, grace and mercy, and is a friend of sinners.

Now, if the Middle Age Church forgot all about God’s love, mercy and grace,

what is the situation with us today? How much balance do we have as we present a God who is “full of grace and truth”? (Jn 1:14) When was the last time you read or heard about God’s holiness, righteousness, and truthfulness? Are Christians no longer following the One who said, “For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice”? (Jn 18:37) When was the last time you heard about hell, which is described by the Lord himself as a terrible place of torment (Mt 5:27-30, Lk 12:4-5)? Did hell burn up? Was Origen’s doctrine of “apokatastasis”, which was found to be heretical at the 5th Ecumenical Council in Constantinople in 553, finally successful in acclimatizing hell through secular-religious-Christian universalism? One of the biggest, if not *the* biggest problem of the church today is yet another imbalance in proclaiming God. The church has all but forgotten that the God of the Bible is holy, righteous, and true.

“*Love binds, and doctrine divides*” is a principle which had a very significant role in spreading ecumenism outside the boundaries of the Reformation tradition. It must be admitted that the principle sounds good and tempting, and that it responds to many challenges of today, but as such it is incomplete and unsustainable. The apostle Paul writes to young Timothy that God “*cannot deny himself*” (2 Tim 2:13). God cannot become unbalanced or separated.<sup>6</sup> God is love! Love is part of God’s character. Just as God is love, He is also light! Light is not something that God has or does not have, or something that He has more or less of. Righteousness, holiness, and truthfulness are part of God Himself. God is light! He is the light which is the basis and source of Christian fellowship and unity.

In this era of tolerance and “dictatorship or relativism”<sup>7</sup>, a time of universalism, we still have at our disposal something incomparably higher than bearing with one another, co-existence or tolerance, and that is the crucified and risen Lord, who still loves people, and who is still the friend of sinners. Because God is light (1 Jn 1:5) and because God is love (1 Jn 4:8), we must preach the “truth in love” (Eph 4:15). Love must be seen, love must be felt, and truth must be heard!

6 Then the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in loving kindness and [a] truth; who keeps loving kindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.” (Ex 34:6-7).

7 Joseph Ratzinger, retired Pope, wrote this about the dictatorship of relativism: “Relativism is purporting to be as the only viewpoint that is fitting for our time. This brings about a dictatorship of relativism, in which nothing is recognized as final, and which holds that the ultimate standard is one’s own person and one’s desires.” (*Diktatura relativizma*, Zagreb, 2009).

Why “no” to ecumenism? Where are the boundaries of ecumenism? What are the obstacles to ecumenism outside the boundaries of Reformation-tradition churches?

### **Biblical and theological problem: What is the Gospel?**

Ecumenical theologies often promote views which more or less conflict with the Scriptures and which emphasize the biblical and theological problem in defining the Gospel today. The apostle Paul also dealt with redefining the Gospel, i.e. twisting the Gospel of Christ. He gave Galatians a very stern warning:

I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed! (Gal 1:6-9).

In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Augustus Aurelius concluded that the church is a “*corpus pre-mixtum*” (“mixed body”) and, as he was aware of the Scriptural imperative for unity, he repeated that which was emphasized by John Stott and others in our day: “In essentials, unity; in doubtful matters, liberty; in all things, charity.”

The Gospel is important; the Gospel is of utmost importance! If there is no Gospel, there is no salvation; if there is no salvation, there is no church, and there is no true fellowship and unity. What is the Gospel? That is a foundational and fateful question for today. If the question before the church and its councils at the beginning of church history was, “Who is Christ?”, then the question that is before the church today is, “What is the Gospel?”

When Paul and Barnabas came to Galatia, Paul preached the one and only Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Gospel of the grace of God. We find it at the very beginning of the epistle:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins so that he might rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom *be* the glory forevermore. Amen. (Gal 1:3-5).

After less than six years, Paul had heard some sad news regarding the Good News in Galatia. Galatia had been visited by “*some*”, as he calls them (Gal 1:7), people who preached a “*different*” Gospel than Paul and Barnabas had proclaimed. These “*some*” taught and preached that on the cross Jesus merely opened up the possibility for salvation, and for a person to become truly justified and saved before God, in addition to believing in Jesus Christ, one must be circumcised, obey the Law of Moses and other Judaic traditions.

These “*some*” were actually teaching that the work which Christ began will be finished by Moses. Under the influence of a “different Gospel”, i.e. the “Gospel of grace and merit”, the church became legalistic. Galatian believers were attempting to build their relationship with God on the basis of the Law and works. The result of this legalistic relationship with God was the loss of the relationship itself. In Galatians, the indicators and consequences of legalism were as follows: nepotism (Gal 1:1), confusion (Gal 1:7), pleasing people instead of pleasing God (Gal 1:10), spiritual control and hypocrisy (Gal 2:11-14), holy days (Gal 4:10), religious slavery (Gal 5:1-4), and finally, the “*known deeds of the flesh*” (Gal 5,19-22). Upon hearing the sad news regarding the Good News, Paul reacts by writing an epistle to the Galatians, in order to protect the church which he helped establish, where he served and which he loved. Paul was the “doctor of Law”. Taught by Gamaliel, he was very well-versed in the Law, the traditions and customs of the Israelites (Phil 3:4-6, Acts 22:3), and before he encountered the risen Jesus Christ, he was spending his life trying to save himself through obedience to the Law. Paul, who was “doctor of Law”, was also “doctor of grace”, because on his way to Damascus he met the One who is gracious. Paul knew about grace, because he himself experienced it. He was illuminated by the Light from the heavens. Whether he was writing to an individual, a church or a group of churches, he starts most of his epistles by saying: “*Grace and peace to you from God*”, and concludes the with: “*Grace be with you.*” Paul had experienced, preached, and safeguarded the Gospel of grace. He knew that the “Gospel of merit”, i.e. grace + faith + obeying the Law + tradition + customs, would lead back to the slavery of religion (Gal 5:1-4), and he emphasized that the Truth of the Gospel – the “*Light of the Good News*” (2 Cor 4:4) must not be tampered with! We read about this in the beginning of chapter 2:

Then after an interval of fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also. It was because of a revelation that I went up; and I submitted to them the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but I did so in private to those who were of reputation, for fear that I might be running, or had run, in vain. But not even Titus, who was with me, though he was a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. But it was because of the false brethren secretly brought in, who had sneaked in to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to bring us into bondage. But we did not yield in subjection to them for even an hour, so that the TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL would REMAIN with you. (Gal 2:1-5).

It is generally thought and increasingly expressed that all religions are essentially the same, while they only differ on the surface. The fact is that all religions are the same on the surface, because they tell about what man can and must or must not do in order to be saved. All religions speak of a single ‘pactum soterology’, a synergy of salvation of sorts, of a single cooperation between God and man on

this long path of salvation. The biblical Gospel is in its essence contrary to every religion, because it speaks about the One who has done everything, once and for all. The biblical Gospel says, "For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life." (Jn 3:16).

The empty cross in churches belonging to the Reformation tradition emphasizes the resurrection, as well as the perfection of Christ's life, and the perfection, complexity, and completeness of the sacrifice that was offered once and for all. "*For by one offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us*" (Heb 10:14-15). This is the truth that is not to be tampered with!

The shortest and loudest presentation of the "Gospel of grace" can be found in Ephesians 2:8. Paul first sets forth a thesis, "*For by grace you have been saved...*" Then, in order to emphasize it, he adds an anti-thesis, "*and that not of yourselves... not as a result of works, so that no one may boast*". He then gives a clear conclusion and establishes it with the synthesis, "*it is the gift of God*".

Famous Reformed theologian, R. C. Sproul, explained and clarified the biblical Gospel by using the following theological equation: grace alone + faith in Jesus Christ alone = salvation + works (Eph 2:8-10, Jas 2:14-26). If we were to present the Roman Catholic Gospel in the same way, we would get a very different theological equation: grace + faith in Jesus Christ + baptism (CCC 1256) + sacraments (CCC 1129) + the mass (CCC 1405) + good works (CCC 2016) + obeying the Law (CCC 2068) + Purgatory (CCC 1030) + indulgences (1498) = salvation.

After Roman Catholicism, the most numerous Evangelical Christianity bases its own unity and fellowship on the Biblical Gospel. In 1999, Evangelical Christian leaders formed a board called "Committee on Evangelical Unity in the Gospel", which issued a common document, "*The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration*", which clearly states:

*We affirm* that the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone is essential to the Gospel (Rom 3:28; 4:5; Gal 2:16).

*We deny* that any person can believe the biblical Gospel and at the same time reject the apostolic teaching of justification by faith alone in Christ alone. We also deny that there is more than one true Gospel (Gal 1:6-9).

*We affirm* that the doctrine of the imputation (reckoning or counting) both of our sins to Christ and of his righteousness to us, whereby our sins are fully forgiven and we are fully accepted, is essential to the biblical Gospel (2 Cor 5:19-21).



*We deny* that we are justified by the righteousness of Christ infused into us or by any righteousness that is thought to inhere within us.

*We affirm* that the righteousness of Christ by which we are justified is properly his own, which he achieved apart from us, in and by his perfect obedience. This righteousness is counted, reckoned, or imputed to us by the forensic (that is, legal) declaration of God, as the sole ground of our justification.

*We deny* that any works we perform at any stage of our existence add to the merit of Christ or earn for us any merit that contributes in any way to the ground of our justification (Gal 2:16; Eph 2:8-9; Tit 3:5).

Biblical ecumenism (unity and fellowship in the biblical Gospel) comes from God himself as a consequence of knowing the eternal, embodied, and written Word, as well as a fruit of the new birth (Jn 3:3, 1 Pt 1:22-23). The biblical and theological problem of defining the Gospel in ecumenism further gives rise to the pastoral and theological problem which asks for extensive Scriptural answers to the questions: what is church, and whom do we evangelize?

### **Pastoral and missiological problem: What is church? Whom do we evangelize?**

The answers to these questions are very complex and call for extensive research of the Scriptures. In this section, we will only note the questions and the problem which will, hopefully, encourage Evangelical theologians and pastors to start comprehensively studying these themes in the Scriptures and applying the Word of God in practical living.

We live and act in a society where a large number of citizens profess to be Catholic, i.e. members of the Roman Catholic Church. Being baptized as an infant allows them to call themselves Christians. Along with the biblical and theological problems, there is also a pastoral problem: Does this make them Christians? If an unaware baby receives the forgiveness of sins by the grace of God through water baptism—if it becomes justified, and if the water baptism makes it part of Christ's global church—if the water baptism bestows the indelible seal of the Holy Spirit upon the baby, as well as the gift of the Holy Spirit, i.e. the charisma for building up the church—then who or what is the church? According to the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, all of the above is involved in the water baptism.

All of the above really does take place in baptism, however not the water baptism, but the baptism of the Holy Spirit, whom we receive by accepting in faith

the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and not through the obedience to the Law (Gal 3:1-5). If water baptism is equal to the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and if the sacrament of baptism truly does work “*ex opere operato*”, if the sacrament equals conversion and the new birth, if the Gospel of grace equals the “Gospel of grace and merits”, then we Evangelical Christians in Croatia only need to focus on how “*Jesus walked the earth doing good*”, and forget that “*Jesus went into all the cities and villages, in which He taught and preached.*”

## Conclusion

When we differentiate between the ecumenism which is based on the Gospel from the ecumenism that is based on the Gospel, tradition, and/or humanism, we come to the simple answer: ecumenism in the Gospel – YES; any other form of ecumenism – NO. As *The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration* state:

Christians have the command to love one another, in spite of differences in racial or sexual identity, level of privilege, or social, political, and economical status (Jn 13:34-35; Gal 3:28-29), and to be of one mind whenever possible (Jn 17:20-21; Phil 2:2; Rom 14:1-15:13). We know that divisions among Christians hinder our witness before the world, and we strive for greater mutual understanding and speaking the truth in love. We also know that, as those who have been entrusted with God’s revealed truth, we cannot embrace any form of doctrinal indifference, relativism, or pluralism, which sacrifices God’s truth for the sake of false peace.

Doctrinal disagreements require debate. A dialogue for mutual understanding and, if possible, diminishing the differences is valuable, furthermore that the desired goal is unity in what is essential, liberty in what is doubtful, and love in everything. Evangelical Christians, who have been entrusted with God’s revealed truth, stand united in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and they invite all Christians to renounce their “gospels” and embrace the Gospel of Jesus Christ, in which all Christians will be united for the glory of God. And just as is emphasized in the document, *The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration*, we must all renounce doctrinal indifference, relativism, and pluralism, which sacrifice God’s truth on behalf of false peace.

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## **Ekumenizam da i(li) ne?**

### Sažetak

U evanđeoskom svijetu prisutna je poprilična zbunjenost što se tiče definiranja ekumenizma. Ne postoji neka zajednička definicija, strategija ili cilj, za razliku od Rimokatoličke crkve koja je jasno definirala pojam, ciljeve i glavni cilj ekumenizma na II. Vatikanskom saboru, u papinim enciklikama i u nekim drugim dokumentima. Iako se ekumenizam proširio izvan okruge svoga nastanka, izvan protestantsko-evanđeoskog kršćanstva, i danas uključuje Rimokatoličku i Pra-

voslavne crkve pa i Islam, na naslovno pitanje članka pokušat ću odgovoriti razmatrajući odnos između evanđeoskog kršćanstva i Rimokatoličke crkve koja je nakon II. Vatikanskog sabora preuzela vodeću ulogu u ekumenskom pokretu. U prvom djelu razmotrit ću povijesnu pojavu ekumenizma unutar crkava reformacijske baštine, definirat ću ne-biblijski pojam ekumenizma s biblijskog stajališta, odgovorit ću na pitanje zašto DA biblijskom ekumenizmu, dok ću u nastavku izložiti nekoliko argumenata zašto NE drugačijem, proširenom ekumenizmu, odnosno, odgovorit ću na pitanje gdje su granice, ili koje su konkretne prepreke za ekumenizam izvan utvrđenih granica.