

What is Ecumenism?

What do you think can, and should be done to further its aims? What are the main barriers to Christian unity?

An essay written by Alison Wallace, a member of Carnone Presbyterian Church, which won first prize in the all-Ireland synod RE exam for the senior age group.

The word 'ecumenism' is defined as "the organised attempt to bring about the cooperation and unity of all believers in Christ". This unity doesn't mean uniformity but a belonging, like members of a family - each having the freedom to be different, yet still united as a family.

Our motivation for ecumenism comes from Jesus praying to His Father, saying: "that they all may be one; even as thou Father art in me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in us, so that the world may believe that thou has sent me". Ever since He uttered these words, we have been aiming towards Christian unity, and indeed, unity in the wider religious world. The Bible calls us towards ecumenism, particularly the New Testament, as we see from following passages:

1 Corinthians 4:4b-8 *It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time... He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness & will expose the motives of men's hearts... For who makes you different from anyone else?*

Here, we see that God will not judge people by looking at their labels to see which denomination or religion they belong to - He will look into men's hearts to see who they really are. Therefore God will see if they are truly devoted to the will of Christ in trying to achieve Christian unity.

Galatians 5:14 *The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbour as yourself". If you keep biting & devouring each other watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.*

This passage teaches us that, if we don't respect each other, with our different ways, we are really not only damaging others, but ourselves also, as well as treating God with disrespect. In loving each other, we appreciate our differences, and have a desire to have harmonious relationships.

Galatians 3:26-28 *You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus... Here there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male, nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

This message is also found in Colossians:

Colossians 3:11 *Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all and is in all.*

These verses portray how, in Christ, there are no divisions, and so, we must do all we can to abolish our dividing walls & follow God's teachings.

Philippians 2:3, *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not to your own interest, but to the interests of others.*

Philippians chapter 2 tells us how to imitate Christ's humility. If we consider others better than ourselves, we can appreciate them & what they can teach us.

Ephesians 2:14 *For He Himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the dividing wall of hostility.*

These words written by Paul teach us of Jesus' stand on hostility, and we see that we must also try & abolish religious and social barriers in our day-to-day lives & welcome those different from us.

Jesus' attempts at breaking down barriers are also seen in John chapter 4, in the story of the woman at the well.

John 4 *Jesus was very thirsty & went to Jacob's well. There, a Samaritan woman came to draw water. Jesus asked her for a drink. Even just by doing this, He was doing something out of the ordinary, as Jews & Samaritans never shared the same cup, as it would be considered unclean. Then, Jesus basically told her who He was & discussed this with her, which was very strange, as in those times religious matters were not to be discussed with, or by women.*

In this story, we see Jesus making changes in the world by abolishing the walls of hostility, and by teaching us how to do so also. He saw the woman as God's child, and had no other preconceptions. He accepted her & did not judge her. We should all follow in his footsteps to bring peace to His world.

Romans 14 *Do not judge your brother. Welcome the person who is weak in the faith. One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another whose faith is weak eats only vegetables. The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not;... For God has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? ... He who eats meat, does so to the Lord. You then, why do you judge your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgement seat.*

Romans 3:1-2 *What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God.*

Romans 15:7 *Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring peace to God.*

These passages from Romans, written by Paul, give us a very strong, powerful message about ecumenism. They teach us not to be judging or prejudiced, and that all Jews and Gentiles are driven by their love for God. Their beliefs and traditions mirror this love and respect, therefore we cannot say one is any better than the other. Romans, in particular, attempts to further the aims of ecumenism: "in order to bring peace to God".

It is clear that we must follow the Bible and our hearts. Love and respect for one another must be our priority. To this end, large ecumenical movements have been organised to bring together all of God's people.

The term "Ecumenical movement" refers to activities and ideas planned and undertaken to promote Christian unity. This would involve 'dialogue' between 'experts' from the different churches and communities, and making an effort to avoid judgements etc, which do not represent the separated denominations fairly, as this would make relations between them more difficult.

At these meetings, each explains his/her own tradition in greater depth. In this dialogue, everyone gains a truer knowledge and better appreciation of both his/her own tradition and of the traditions of others'. These actions prepare the way for cooperation between them. Finally, everyone is encouraged to examine their own personal faith & thereafter go about completing Christ's will for unity.

The ecumenical movement is ongoing at international and local levels. In our local community, the Church of Ireland, Presbyterian & Roman Catholic clergy & members of congregations meet to discuss religious matters and try to find new ways to unite God's people, for example carol services, a 'week of prayer for Christian unity', etc.

A service on Racial Justice Sunday in September 2000, Bishop John Sentamu preached the words: "If you spit on the face of your brother, you spit on God's face, because we all are created in the image of God" (from Genesis 3: 1b-2)

By "all", this man really did mean everyone. God did not just make Presbyterians, for example, in His likeness, he made us all in His likeness, spiritually. Without realising this, and recognising that we are equals, we cannot have this healing dialogue.

In making ecumenism a reality, we learn about our own faith. The elements at the forefront of one denomination's tradition reminds us of how we should praise and remember all He has done for us. Therefore differences can help us become more aware of important aspects of our personal faith. For instance, some traditions baptise infants and then have a confirmation of their beliefs when the child grows up, while others believe in adult baptism (Baptism of believers). However, both traditions remind the other of the importance of baptism and of the true declaration of faith in the Father. How often the Eucharist is celebrated also reminds us of its importance - denominations with very frequent celebrations of Communion remind us of our need for the constant reminder of Christ in our lives, while less frequent celebrations of the Eucharist remind us of how sacred it is. This learning makes our faith stronger and our praise to God more personal and true, therefore ecumenism is essential for Christian unity in our love for God. As Proverbs 27:17 states: People learn from one another, just as iron sharpens iron.

However, things do still stand in the way of ecumenism. These are barriers and walls of hostility, as Jesus puts it. Sectarianism, where people have been brought up to hate others, such as the problem in Northern Ireland, is one example. In my opinion, the perpetrators do not really understand why they "hate" each other, as it has gone on so long now, that it has almost become a 'formality', as such. This leads to segregation and makes the healing of it all so much harder. Such things lead to, and are a result of an unjust perception of other denominations' beliefs and traditions. Therefore it is a vicious circle. However, I believe it can be fixed if we all work at ecumenism. (Just as the political conflict has religious integrity, the cure must also lie in religion.) Peace talks are being held to try to overcome such barriers, and lead the way towards peace.

Ecumenism is not an option - it is a necessity for life and for Christ's will of unity. The writing of this essay has opened my eyes to the need for ecumenism, particularly here in Ireland. I feel the main message to promote the aims of this movement is in the commandment:

Love your neighbour as yourself, and maybe more importantly, as the Old Testament focuses on - Love the stranger, and those different from you.