

**Ecumenicity in Christ**  
**A challenge to faithful Christians**  
**For joining in reflection, prayer and action**

Since the Seventh Confessional Congress, held in Freudenstadt, Germany, in October, 2004, and the appearance of the “*Freudenstadt Appeal*” the concept of *Ecumenicity in Christ* (EC – in German: “Christozentrische Bekenntnis-Oekumene”) as coined there has been rapidly received, albeit with diverging reactions. Some have expressed glad approval, others have raised puzzled questions and still others, unfortunately, have engaged in unwarranted polemics.

The ***International Christian Network*** (in German: IKBG = *Internationale Konferenz Bekennender Gemeinschaften*) quite early recognized the evident need for clarification. Therefore they have produced a document drawing clear lines of distinction with regard to a variety of ecumenical tendencies. Expressed in “***Twenty theological propositions***”, the present paper explains the spiritual basis and aim of Ecumenicity in Christ, thereby giving a thorough description of how the ICN understands its own scope and purpose. At the same time, faithful Christians of all traditions are challenged to consider EC as an invitation to joint reflection, prayer and action.

Historically speaking, the movement, “*Confessing Protestant Communities*”, started to develop in 1966. After the publication of the *Frankfurt Declaration on the Fundamental Crisis of Missions* (1970) and the world-wide response which it received, this movement set out to raise the defence of the questioned biblical testimony to an international level. This soon led to the observation that, in all areas of church teaching and action as well as in all Christian denominations, new dividing lines are emerging, depending on the acceptance or the rejection of the biblical message of salvation in Christ alone. In this context, there is urgent need for solidarity in the face of the godless challenges of our time, and so the traditional differences and contradictions between Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox positions lose much of their former divisive importance.

These spiritual experiences of how fellowship in confessing Christ transcends denomination prompt us to an action-driven alliance appropriate to the present situation. It leads to the heartfelt longing for a lasting partnership which would give more visible reality to the unity of the Body of Christ in which we all believe. In doing this, the Confessing Protestant Communities join, in their own way, the multiform ecumenical endeavour to restore the unity of the Church which has been lost in history. However, they do this in sharp contrast to those contemporary, distorted visions of biblical unity which have made the term “*ecumenism*” an alarm-ringing shibboleth among conservative Christians of all denominations. Indeed, the shocking experiences with some biblically unjustifiable programmes of the World Council of Churches have led to fears that the ultimate goal of “*ecumenism*” might be the establishment of that very anti-Christian, universal church and religion against which we are warned in the Book of Revelation, Chapters 13-18.

On the other hand, as the word “*oikoumene*” has a variety of meanings in the Bible itself, there is no reason to discredit this historic theological term completely.

Initially, the Greek word οἰκουμένη meant “the entire inhabited earth”. In the Septuaginta (Greek translation of the Old Testament), for example, in Psalm 24, this concept is deepened to include the whole of “God’s good creation”.

However, Satan, the “Prince of this World”, is also striving for universal domination (John 14:30), claiming to have been given the entire “*oikoumene*” (Luke 4:5). In this context, thus, the word assumes a *demonic* meaning.

Later on, however, the universal dimension once again became the formally dominating one - occasionally, in the time of the emperors, combining with a *political* dimension, so that “*oikoumene*” came to mean the Roman Empire. After the recognition of Christianity under Constantine the Great, the term acquired an additional, *ecclesiastical* meaning: “Ecumenical Councils” were universal synods whose decisions, including the creeds formulated by them (e.g. the Nicaean-Constantinopolitan Creed), were authoritative for the entire Church.

In Protestantism, the term “ecumenical” used by the early Church was rediscovered in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century within the framework of the modern missionary movement, being used positively in the sense of “international”. Thus the first “Ecumenical Missionary Conference” was held in New York in AD 1900. Soon afterwards “ecumenical” became a technical term describing those tendencies towards unity which were implemented organisationally by the *International Missionary Council* (1921) and in the *World Council of Churches* (1948). Since the Second Vatican Council the *Roman-Catholic Church*, too, has been using the term “ecumenism” affirmatively.

However, the term has been seriously distorted since the late 1960s when the phrases “secular ecumenism” and “ecumenism of religions” came into circulation. These distortions were emphatically repudiated by the “*Berlin Declaration on Ecumenism*” passed by the First European Confession Congress in 1974. At the same time, Proposition 12 of this declaration called upon those Christian communities in all countries which were faithful to the Bible and to the Creeds to unite “in a world-wide brotherhood of faith, intercession and confession”.

In using the label “Ecumenicity in Christ” we now want the term “ecumenical” to become descriptive of the world-wide, trans-denominational community of all Christians who confess Jesus Christ in the biblical sense. We do this in order to remove from them the stigma of being “anti-ecumenical” in principle, as though they were separatist opponents of the visible unity of the Church of Jesus Christ.

## **Twenty theological propositions of the International Christian Network**

### **Biblical introduction**

In the New Testament we already find the apostolic call to the believers “to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3-6), as well as maintaining harmony and unanimity (Rom 12:16; 2 Cor 13:11; Phil 2:2). God’s dealings with the Church aim at building the Body of Christ and making it mature “to the full measure of Christ” in the knowledge of Him as the Son of God. All baptized believers are united in proclaiming Jesus Christ (Eph 2:14-22; 4, 13-16). Paul accentuates his warnings against developing bad practices and heresies by pointing to that which is taught and practised universally in all churches (1 Cor 14:33 et seq.; Acts 20:28). In the Book of Revelation it is made clear that this unity and faithfulness of the Church will be particularly important in the face of eschatological threats and anti-Christian

persecution (Rev 12:17; 14:12). This makes it all the more urgent for Christians to stand together to serve each other.

The risen Lord warns the faithful church in Philadelphia against “an hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world (“*oikoumene*” in Greek) to test those who live on the earth”. He praises this church for having taken heed of His word of patience (Rev 3:10).

Ultimately all seven circular letters of the Revelation of St. John are addressed to the universal Church, calling her attention to the distortions of the original Christian faith by which she as a whole is threatened and which will become more radical during the eschatological apostasy. In this situation, confessing Christians and churches are called to strengthen each other fraternally and globally, trusting in the help of the present and returning Lord.

### **Definition**

**1.** *EC today is a community of Christians and spiritual movements which, being aware both of the sacerdotal prayer of Jesus for the oneness of those belonging to Him and also of the tremendous challenges threatening the faith, are joining hands across the boundaries of denominations and nations in order to proclaim Him as Saviour.*

The *International Christian Network*, founded in London in 1978, is intended to help to establish ties between the above-mentioned groups and to strengthen them.

### **Theological basis**

**2.** EC aims at a visible expression of the spiritual unity of the *Ekklesia of Jesus Christ* that Christians are commanded to practise (1 Cor 1:10; Eph 4:3-6) – the primary thrust of such union being an apologetic one. This unity is given in Him as the Head of His Body on earth (Eph 1:22 et seq.). The Holy Spirit strengthens this unity by granting special gifts to individual members, both personally and collectively -- gifts which complement each other -- and by encouraging the practice of these gifts (Rom 12:4-6; 1 Cor 12:4.13).

**3.** EC has existed since the days of the early Church as a *joint defence of the true faith* against competing religious movements and against heresies within the Church. The councils of the Ancient Church already practised EC inasmuch as they protected the apostolic faith by formulating delimiting confessions, thus uniting the whole church within the Roman Empire against emergent christological and trinitarian heresies.

**4.** EC is based theologically on the belief in the inspiration, unity and authority of the Holy Scripture in all matters of faith, doctrine and ethics and on the recognition of the normativity of the “*Ecumenical Symbola*”, i.e. the Apostolic and the Nicæan Creeds – In the present struggle for faith, documents such as the *Berlin Declaration on Ecumenism* (1974) or the recent *Freudenstadt Appeal* (2004), are directed against prevailing anti-Christian tendencies.

**5.** EC primarily stands for *spiritual ecumenicity*. It presupposes faith in the common spiritual origin of the whole of Christendom (Rom 5:18; Col 1:6), starting with the fact that believing Christians of different denominational backgrounds acknowledge each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, accepting one another in His love, interceding for each other and praying together (Gal 3:26-28). The practice of *fraternal love* is a mark of Ecumenicity in Christ, coupled with the readiness to confess jointly the faith in the Triune God and in Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Saviour, refraining from any denial of the biblical faith. The wideness of

EC is shown by the fact that Christians are prepared to benefit mutually, within in the biblical scope, from the spiritual experiences and treasures of traditions other than their own. In this sense, Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox churches are free to enrich their life of worship by adopting elements from each other's liturgical heritage.

### **Present Motivation**

6. In Europe, EC has become particularly necessary inasmuch as our Christian occidental heritage is being systematically undermined by rationalism, atheistic ideologies, syncretistic mingling of religions and moral libertinism. At the same time, Ecumenicity in Christ world-wide is a constructive reaction to the globally expanding anti-Christian spirit which has also penetrated existing ecumenical structures.

7. In view of the present general decline of values, EC becomes an irrefutable necessity. It is able to serve as a platform for taking a joint stand for the validity of those basic ethical values which western society owes to Christianity, and which have found world-wide acceptance. Among these values are human dignity and the human rights ensuing from it. They originate in the fact that man was created in the image of God (Gen 1:26 et seq.). Therefore, EC calls for a new recognition of man's true position with regard to God in the light of creation, fall and salvation – a position utterly misunderstood by modern humanism.

8. EC as a movement also owes its coming into existence to the discovery that, since the Christian faith is under attack by atheistic ideologies which are finding their way into the churches themselves, those doctrinal differences which still exist between denominations carry much less weight than the spiritual treasure of the faith which they share in common.

### **Evangelistic Dimension**

9. In Europe, EC is practised in the awareness that the downfall of this continent – which was once shaped by Christianity – can only be stopped by a return to the faith of the fathers, by accepting salvation as offered by Jesus Christ and by submitting to His Lordship. Therefore, Ecumenicity in Christ should be practised with a call to repentance in the context of a joint or co-ordinated new evangelisation of Europe on the basis of the authentic Word of God.

10. Rejecting every form of religious pluralism or syncretism, Ecumenicity in Christ understands confession to have a *doxological* as well as a *missionary* meaning, i.e., it honours God, proclaiming Jesus Christ (Rom 15:5-7) as the only Mediator between the holy God and sinful mankind, being the Lord over all lordships in heaven and on earth (Math 28:18; Eph 1:20b-21). Therefore, Ecumenicity in Christ takes part in the newly growing international movement for world evangelism, striving to facilitate the creation of global networks between those established churches which are engaged in missionary work and the younger churches in all continents.

### **A movement in the making**

11. EC is a step-by-step process with relatively small beginnings. Joint actions may originate simply when Christians from different churches and denominations unite on a secular level for the defence of values and rights which are in jeopardy. This is already happening in the united fight for the protection of unborn children and of senior or incurably sick citizens who

are threatened with “*actively assisted death*”. Likewise, EC becomes a reality wherever Christians from different traditions take a stand for the freedom of conscience and opinion. By acting in concert in this way they may be led to a deeper understanding of those insights which they have been given jointly.

**12.** Today, EC is not expressed primarily by a co-operation between churches as such, since these are often split within themselves – due to the intrusions of the spirit of the time. Instead, it is individual, faithful Christians and movements who join in the common fight (Phil 1:27; Jude 3) against occurrences of apostasy in western society and within their own churches.

**13.** EC is practised with a humble admission of the fact that, contrary to the will of God, there have been conflicts within Christendom (1 Cor 1:10 et seq.), connected with partially justified doctrinal arguments and counter-arguments resulting in permanent schisms. Therefore, EC participates in *actions of repentance* for the injustice which Christians of different confessions have inflicted upon each other, purportedly in the name of the true faith and in *actions of mutual forgiveness*. What is called for is to overcome denominational hostilities which, over the centuries, have originated from prejudice.

**14.** EC neither means sentimental *irenicism* (i.e. desire for harmony at the price of truth) nor dogmatic *relativism*. Admittedly, some of the denominational separations in church history could hardly have been avoided, since both sides felt bound by conscience with regard to the truth of salvation as received from the Apostles. Thus those in responsibility interpreted truths very differently, so losing sight of the fact that God is the Lord of the whole of Christendom (cf. Rom 10:2). This fact, however, makes it mandatory for the separated brethren to strive incessantly to resolve doctrinal differences originating from different interpretations of the Bible. This may be accomplished by listening jointly to the Holy Scripture, by clarifying the theological terms in use and by becoming aware of non-biblical distortions of the Gospel.

**15.** Beyond the ongoing defence of the elementary truths and ethical values of the Christian faith, Ecumenicity in Christ, by its very *raison d'être*, aims at a deeper, joint understanding and confession of biblical truth. To this end, the results reached by serious research undertaken by the *Faith and Order Movement* and by bilateral doctrinal consultations between some churches and denominations may be useful.

**16.** EC has the *goal of hope* that a genuine community of *churches* may come into being, thus achieving *communio in sacris*, i.e. fellowship in the ministry of preaching the gospel and in celebrating the Lord's Supper. However, on this point, long-term patience is called for.

**17.** EC does not mean, as it is sometimes feared, an “ecumenism of return”, which would be impossible in the light of Church History. Neither does it demand giving up any of those particular biblical truths which are especially dear to some communities. It does, however, demand that everyone should be ready to penetrate more deeply into the secrets of salvation and to rectify those misunderstandings or false accentuations which have been caused by human nature. Hence, maintaining that biblical authenticity which the Holy Spirit has taught Christians to acknowledge, the aim is “a unity of churches which remain distinct churches while becoming one Church” (*Joseph Ratzinger, 1964*).

### **Hopeful Prospect**

18. EC does not aim at a merger establishing a centralised church organisation. It rather envisages a community of worship, prayer, evangelism and charity. In this sense, the activities and connections of EC are representative of the Church as a whole.

19. EC should envisage, as a *long range goal*, the visible realisation of that unity among the particular churches which is already given pneumatically. This does not necessarily mean uniformity; instead it means a common recognition of the different confessions after examining their conformity with the Bible – the same being true with regard to forms of worship and church offices. Such a visible – and audible – manifestation is both documented with regard to the early Church (Acts 2:42 et seq.; 5:12 et seq.; 17:6 etc.) and also prophesied for the last days (Ez 34:23 et seq.; 37:23 et seq.; John 10:14-16; Rev 7:4 et seq.; 15:2-4; 18:4).

20. EC has lately sprung up spontaneously where Christians of different traditions have been persecuted. It is in prisons and concentration camps that they have discovered each other as brothers and sisters. There they have shared their faith, encouraging one another. In this way they have gone through their suffering jointly, including their death as martyrs for Christ. Such ***Ecumenicity of Martyrdom*** may be understood as a preliminary form of the eschatological experience which one day, as prophesied, the true Church of Jesus – those who from all nations and denominations have remained faithful – will have to go through under the persecution by the Antichrist (Rev 13:7a; 17:6a ;6:9-11). As the prophetic vision describes it ( Rev 7:9-17), this flock of blood martyrs already began to gather around the heavenly throne of the Lamb of God when the Early Church was under persecution.

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