

Ecumenism in St Andrews: A fact and a mandate

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Introduction

The twentieth century saw an explosion of high-level theological reflection upon ecumenism. Yet at times, it is difficult to discern how this theoretical discussion translates to local ministry. In St Andrews there exists a high degree of church cooperation and ecumenical activity and in view of this, this piece is a conversation between three local ministers from different traditions – Baptist, Presbyterian, and Episcopalian – and national backgrounds – Dutch, American, and British – about the relationship between ecumenical theology and our local church practice.¹

¹ The vast majority of churches in town participate in the following activities: the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity; the Good Friday Pilgrimage and the Easter Sunrise Service. Most ministers in town meet on a monthly basis for prayer and several times a year for planning meetings. In addition, some churches organise joint services, others share youth work, and again others run an annual holiday club.

In the conversation, we were surprised by a number of commonalities which were revealed. While we all affirm the normative status of Christ's command that his church be one, we nonetheless think such unity is only meaningful within a bounded confession of some version of catholic orthodoxy. Furthermore – and this may in part reflect something of our ecclesiological commitments – all three of us envisioned a fairly significant threshold of ecclesial and liturgical diversity compatible with Christ's command.

We hope this brief window into the sort of conversations occurring at a local level among churches and clergy, contributes in some small way to broader ecumenical endeavours.



What is your theological rationale for engaging ecumenically?

Trevor Hart (Saint Andrew's Episcopal Church): Ecumenism is the attempt in particular places and times to develop closer working relationships among different churches on the ground, and thereby to promote the visible unity of the Church. The major premise of ecumenism is thus the birth of different denominations from various schisms across the Church's history, which is to say, disobedience – failure to abide by Scriptural indicatives and injunctions telling us that in Christ we already are 'one' and must reflect this unity in our life and witness to the world.

The 'fact' of the Church's unity is grounded on Christ having taken our flesh and blood humanity and made it his own, establishing a 'fraternal alliance' (Calvin)² between himself and all those who own this common nature. Christian unity is grounded upon this wider unity of humankind with God in Christ. But as the gathering of those who believe in Christ, the Church is precisely the place in the world where God's name is hallowed by this unity being lived out and borne

² The incarnation, John Calvin argues in his commentary on Psalm 22, establishes a 'true fellowship of the flesh' by virtue of which all humans possess an *ius fraternae coniunctionis* with Christ, although 'the true enjoyment thereof belongs to genuine believers alone'. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. from the original Latin and collated with the author's French version by the Rev. James Anderson, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845), 379; c.f. *Corpus Reformatorum* 31:231.

witness to. The Church is, in this and other ways, ‘the anticipation of the world’ (Barth).³ Or it should be. In the ‘already/not yet’ dialectic of its continuing sinfulness, though, unity as a ‘mark’ of the Church in the world is bound always to be both a ‘fact’ and a ‘mandate’ or command.

While denominations are a symptom of the Church’s abiding fallenness, the sort of ‘unity’ sought by ecumenism is not an enforced *uniformity* in which visible difference is suppressed. Such differences need not be understood as problematic in themselves. The unity of believers is spoken of by Jesus as analogous to the unity in God’s own life as Father, Son and Spirit (‘that they may be one *as we are one*’, John 17:22). The distinction between persons and personal prerogatives in the Trinity is preserved rather than occluded by this unity of being, mandating the pursuit of a healthy ‘unity in distinction’ too between different Christian traditions.

Jared Michelson (Cornerstone United Free Church): I endorse Trevor’s lucid account of the grounds of ecumenism and merely add a question for further conversation and reflection. What theological resources best allow us to affirm both the fraternal alliance between Christ and humanity Trevor identifies, while likewise upholding the antithesis between the church and world which the Johannine literature in particular emphasises?⁴ The uniqueness of the sphere of the redeemed

³ So, e.g., ‘The community is the human fellowship which in a particular way provisionally forms the natural and historical environment of the man Jesus Christ. Its particularity consists in the fact that by its existence it has to witness to Him in face of the whole world, to summon the whole world to faith in Him. Its provisional character consists in the fact that in virtue of this office and commission it points beyond itself to the fellowship of all men in face of which it is a witness and herald. [...] It is *mediate* [...] in so far as it is the middle point between the election of Jesus Christ and (included in this) the election of those who have believed, and do and will believe, in Him.’ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 2/2, ‘The Doctrine of God’ (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 196.

⁴ Studies of the fourth gospel and Johannine epistles often note a set of dualisms between, for example, two worlds or ages, darkness and light, flesh and spirit, and Christ’s community and the cosmos. See e.g., Judith M. Lieu, *The Theology of the Johannine Epistles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 80–83. These dualisms, theologically interpreted, might *prima facie* seem to imply some sort of antithesis between the church and the ‘world’.

is an indispensable, at times potentially overlooked, foundation for ecumenism. It is only if Christians can be decisively distinguished from the rest of humanity that ecumenism can be distinguished from the broader imperative to love all as neighbours for whom Christ has died. I worry that certain modern theologies which speak of humanity as sort of implicitly Christian, awaiting only an existential change in the individual's perspective rather than an essential transformation, might unintentionally hinder ecumenical endeavour.

Paulus de Jong (St Andrews Baptist Church): Like Jared, I echo Trevor's eloquent rationale for engaging ecumenically, adding that, for me, Christ's prayer 'that they may be one as we are one' stands at the heart of my passion for Christian unity. With regards to Jared's poignant question, perhaps the familial language of the Johannine corpus can be of avail. Although Christ has an indissoluble relationship with all creation (John 1:3), those who acknowledge Jesus as Messiah and are born of the Spirit now recognise each other *as family*. We are more than neighbours; we are siblings and ought to love each other as such (1 John 2:9–14). This also poses a challenge: because we are family, we often fight harder over smaller matters than we would ever dream of doing with our neighbours (perhaps this is the irony of ecumenism). Still, precisely because we are family, we ought to 'make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace' (Eph 4:3).



How has your ecclesiology been shaped by your ecumenical activities and, more specifically, by our local ecumenical activities?

PdJ: Through active ecumenical engagement, Paul's multifaceted image of the church as the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12–31) has become a more tangible reality for me. First, our annual sunrise service on Easter morning epitomizes the visible oneness of the church: we are truly one body. All our dogmatic and liturgical differences instantly become of secondary importance as we worship the Risen Christ. Despite our oneness, though, other ecumenical activities also illustrate the huge diversity that exists even on a local level. During the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, for example, we meet in different churches each night of the week. The hosting church typically

shapes the liturgy. The resulting variety of liturgical expressions to me exemplifies that worshipping the Triune God is not bound to a specific prayer book, order of service, or collection of hymns, but to Spirit and Truth (John 4:24). We are truly a body with different parts.

Finally, our ecumenical activities have helped me to take seriously Paul's admonition that, as parts of Christ's body (1 Cor 12:21), we need each other. When it comes to participating in the *missio Dei*, each church brings its different gifts: whereas one church may head up a homeless ministry, another runs the foodbank, whilst other churches have lively youth ministries or go out on the streets to share the Gospel. None of us would be able to do all this alone. As distinct members of Christ's Body, then, we are called to complement each other *precisely by our differences*.

JM: Merely engaging with ecumenism academically or in formal discussions between denominational representatives can implicitly fund the view that only a monolithic unity, with a single polity, ecclesial structure and common liturgy, can be ecumenism's aim. In contrast, as Paulus suggests, engaging locally with the diversity of Christian practice exhibited in our common worship, prayers, and mission, suggests to me that our differences are not only to be lamented – though in many cases they should be – but likewise exhibit a multiplicity which attests to the richness of God's grace and gifts. If the aim of ecumenical action is securing only an imperfect reconciled life which attests but does not perfectly correspond to our unity in Christ, we might envision a future church faithful to Christ's call to oneness which nonetheless consists of diverse ecclesial communities, mutually recognising one another's ministry and participating together in common sacraments and mission.

TH: I think the phrase 'attests but does not perfectly correspond to' captures things nicely. It takes seriously the reality of our continuing weddedness to and preference for what we are familiar with, while acknowledging the fact that such weddedness must not be (and largely is not) allowed to stand in the way of holding publicly what we do in fact hold in common in Christ. Is it problematic that I continue to find it difficult to imagine having to worship each week within a Baptist, or a Presbyterian, or a Vineyard, or some other non-

Episcopalian ethos? No. But it becomes problematic as soon as I begin to suppose that the parameters of my own liturgical and theological ‘comfort zone’ coincide conveniently with a superior or more authentic way of doing things than others available; or when such things are held sacrosanct and unable to be suspended for the sake of sharing in ecumenical ventures intended precisely to ‘attest’ to the fact that, compared to our unity in Christ, such things are finally to be ‘counted as garbage’ (Phil 3:8).



What is the vision of a unified church towards which you work when engaging ecumenically, and, relatedly, what sorts of ecclesial, liturgical, and theological diversity are acceptable and theologically appropriate?

JM: The oft-derided Reformational distinction between the visible and invisible church⁵ rightly situates ecumenical action within the wider scope of the economy of grace.⁶ The first signs of Christian disunity lie not in the eleventh or sixteenth centuries but in events recounted in Paul’s letters. Nonetheless, Paul insists that Christians are one, not by virtue of their activity but in view of Christ’s self-giving on the cross and the reception of that gift at Christ’s table (Eph 2:14–16; 1 Cor 10:17). Ecumenical action then does not generate ecclesial unity – which, like our life, is hid with Christ in God (Col 3:3–4) – but attests to or shows forth the unity secured by God’s action in Christ. Yes, we are to make ‘every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace’, but the aim of this effort is not so that there might be but because there already is ‘one body and one Spirit [...] one Lord, one faith, one baptism’ (Eph 4:3–4). Affirming this more limited aim for ecumenical effort provides an indispensable safeguard against ecclesial utopianism. Ecclesial utopianism almost inevitably is attended by a narrowing of our ecumenical horizons as

⁵ For one particularly influential example of these sorts of criticisms, see: Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: A Study of Dogma in Relation to the Corporate Destiny of Mankind* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1958), 23.

⁶ For an account of the reformational distinction between the invisible and visible church and the application of this distinction to ecumenical questions, see: Bradford Littlejohn, “Believing in the Church: Why Ecumenism Needs the Invisibility of the Church”, *Religions* 10, no. 2 (February 2019): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10020104>.



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we abandon as unreconcilable ecclesial communities less suited to our social or theological sensibilities and less likely to fit within the bounds of the visible ecclesial or episcopal structures supposedly guaranteeing church unity. While at its worst, the distinction between the visible and the invisible church occludes our responsibility for visible unity. And at its best, the distinction engenders a provisionality and humility with respect to the lines we draw supposedly demarcating the true from the false church.

PdJ: I wholeheartedly agree with Trevor's contention that church unity is both a 'fact' and a 'mandate'. To this I would add that this mandate is not merely an apostolic incentive but that the desire for visible unity among God's people flows directly from the heart of God; it reflects the relations that exist within the godhead in which we are called to share as a witness to the world (John 17:21–23).

With regards to the question of diversity, the demarcation between primary truths and secondary matters is always debatable, but, for me, any endeavours for visible unity must be grounded in a shared confession of the Lordship of Christ and a general affirmation of the truths of the Apostles' and Nicene creeds as ecumenical confessions that have stood the test of time.

TH: Drawing lines and setting boundaries comes more easily and naturally to some than others. But lines and boundaries there must surely be if any meaningful identifiability (of one denomination as distinct from another, or of what it means to be part of a Christian Church rather than some other sort of human institution) is to be reckoned with. Unbounded diversity pursued or paraded as an ideology is indistinguishable from chaos. The question is, of course, where are lines to be drawn, and how should they then be deployed in practical, pastoral and missional terms? If ecumenism is to flourish rather than flounder, then participating congregations will have to be content with relatively high thresholds of diversity where models of ministry, styles of liturgy, and even theological commitments on a range of 'second order' matters are concerned. Other commitments, though, are of a different order, and these tend to be those reflected in those ancient ecumenical creeds in which the character of God and the nature of God's dealings with the world are rehearsed. The shared

acknowledgment and worship of Christ as the eternal and now incarnate, crucified and risen Son is chief among such ‘first order’ commitments with which the whole gospel stands or falls and apart from which ‘visible unity’ is bound to be too fluid and formless to be a meaningful witness. In this respect, though, it is the church’s formal subscription rather than the personal variations upon it of clergy or congregation that should be attended to.



What aspects of the way church is viewed in countries like Scotland present challenges to ecumenism?

TH: Contemporary society in Scotland, as elsewhere in the western world, is in thrall to a problematic and unhealthy notion of individual freedom, manifest most obviously, perhaps, in the form of consumerism. We are ‘free’ to choose (or so we are told), and we are constantly urged to choose – whether that be between political parties, brands of coffee, programmes of study, or even various markers of ‘identity’.

This flawed ideology inevitably plays out in the life of churches too, persuading us that being part of the body of Christ in a particular place is a sphere where individual choice and preference may prevail. ‘You did not choose me, but I chose you’ Jesus tells his disciples. We know (officially) that faith is a matter of vocation and not a lifestyle choice. But it is widely assumed that it is up to us to decide what sort of church we would like to attend, prioritising our personal preferences as regards neighbourhood, liturgical style, theological tradition, and so on.

This assumption encourages the proliferation of ever more different and ‘niche’ congregations to satisfy the ‘market’. It also means that denominations are often themselves divided internally between different versions of what it means to be ‘Anglican’, ‘Presbyterian’, ‘Baptist’, or whatever, requiring something akin to ‘ecumenism’ to operate *within* as well as between denominations.

The gradual erosion of credibility of the parish system in Scotland is no doubt partly a symptom of this culture of Christian choosiness and choosing; but it may in its turn risk fanning the flames of consumerism, as ‘non-established’ churches sense an opportunity (and possibly compete) to step in and fill the voids left by former

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presumed parish privilege. Rather than fostering the realization of Christian unity in particular communities or territories, this ‘stalls in the marketplace’ model of church could very easily undermine it, deregulation leading congregations instead to concern themselves with how they might increase their own ‘market share’ and thereby secure their future sustainability.

JM: How might we respond to the effects of individualism and consumerism upon our assumptions regarding church affiliation and growth? Not with dewy-eyed dreams of a church comprehensively re-shaped into a counter-polis impervious to its milieu. The task is to challenge the modernist tendencies Trevor identifies without hoping to wholly escape them through radical catechesis, separatism, or nostalgia for bygone liturgical purity, ecclesial uniformity, or political power. These concerns are of particular relevance when one, often for necessary reasons, transfers or ‘converts’ between Christian traditions. Sometimes in a yearning for tradition or rootedness, one scorns the ecclesial home in which one was nurtured and individualistically *chooses* something supposedly more suitable. The temptation to define and identify oneself in terms of one’s ecclesial tradition (no matter how ancient), or liturgy (no matter how theological one’s rationale) is a testament to the difficulty (or even impossibility?) of transcending our late-capitalist, choice-based setting. What is called for then is not only faithful conviction, but also making do with ecclesial imperfection, remembering that we maintain unity by ‘bearing with one another in love’ (Eph 4:2).

PdJ: I support Trevor’s diagnosis of how our flawed ideas of freedom and consumerism can hinder our ecumenical endeavours. Likewise, I echo Jared’s sentiment that these cultural forces are perhaps impossible to overcome altogether. Especially in our local context we face the challenge of the annual influx of new students and families looking for a church home. The sense of ‘competition’, unhealthy as it is, can be hard to avoid. In addition, the reality might be that the specific church tradition one is affiliated with is not ‘available’ in our smallish town – at least it was not for me. In such a situation, some sort of ‘choice’ must be made. However, I believe that, as local churches, we have the duty to challenge the language of

‘competition’ or ‘preference’ and foster ideas of ‘vocation’ and ‘loyalty’. It hurts when a church member leaves because the church around the corner has a flashier worship team, a more engaging preacher, or a more reverent liturgy. However, this challenge to ecumenism might also turn into an opportunity when, as local pastors, we seek each other’s guidance when such situations occur, supporting each other in our vocation to care for the flock entrusted to us (1 Pet 5:2).



What sort of growth in local ecumenical engagement would you like to see?

PdJ: In my experience, three areas for fruitful ecumenical engagement are worship, service, and mission – although, of course, one might argue these areas are not so easily distinguishable. With regards to worship, I am pleased with our shared commitment to the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, the Good Friday pilgrimage, and the Easter sunrise service. However, I know that, in the past, the sunrise service included a shared celebration of holy communion. Although reestablishing this practice may prove too hard, I would warmly welcome a renewed conversation about shared communion at our local level.

With regards to service and mission, I am pleased that our churches serve the community in diverse ways and initiate different forms of outreaches. I do believe, however, that there is room for growth in ecumenical engagement here. My hope is that we could think more strategically about our service and mission to the local community. Which groups within our community are currently overlooked? How might we support each other better in our various ministries? How can we convey the unity of Christ’s body in more effective ways to our local community through shared mission? These are questions I would love to explore at an ecumenical level.

JM: A prime hindrance to ecumenism impressed upon me in our local ecumenical activities, e.g., in our engaging in common outreach and sharing children’s and youth work, is our misunderstandings of other traditions. Misplaced assumptions about other churches – such as a false assumption that Roman Catholics do not believe in salvation by grace or that low church Protestants have no robust place for tradition

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but see themselves as ‘refounding’ the church afresh – inhibit appetites for increased ecumenical activity. Concretely serving local ecumenism involves increasing our own and our congregations’ awareness of the contours of the faith and practice of other churches. This is a daunting task given the challenge of forming congregations in the traditions of our *own* churches in a secular age. Nonetheless, when the real, but oftentimes rather subtle nature of what distinguishes Christian communions is openly discussed, common ecumenical action becomes plausible.

TH: Congregations in most traditions are typically fairly ‘congregational’ in outlook, looking precisely inward most of the time, in fact, rather than outward to consider what other churches are doing or how and why they are doing it. Attendance and participation in those ecumenical initiatives that exist in the town tend mostly to involve a cohort of faithful ‘usual suspects’ from just a handful of congregations, and very uneven in representation. If ecumenism is to be taken seriously as a mandate rather than a token gesture or a provision for those ‘who like that sort of thing’ then ways need to be found to raise its profile and its importance in the awareness and priorities of all our congregations. More people need to be exposed to a wider variety of ways of being Christian together than what is familiar to them. Two things that might aid this would be for clergy to engage in regular ‘pulpit sharing’ within the town’s congregations, perhaps complemented by ‘open’ services where a particular congregation would invite members of other churches to come and share in its own regular way of worshipping.