

EFCC Statement on Ecumenism

When EFCC was formed in 1967 the churches which were involved were making two commitments. The first one was regarding the direct responsibility of the local church to the Lord Jesus Christ, which indicated our commitment to be Congregationalists. The reason EFCC was formed, rather than all those who shared this concern joining together, was because of a more fundamental commitment to the gospel itself, which indicated our commitment to be Evangelical. At this point of time all churches in EFCC were indicating a desire to make a stand against unbiblical teaching within the church and to unite with those who shared the same commitment. Then the ecumenical movement was extremely active in local Councils of Churches but the aims of the movement were very much in terms of the uniting of denominations.

Since 1972 and the establishment of the United Reformed Church those aims have been largely ineffective. The URC itself has shrunk numerically, despite a further link to the Churches of Christ, and schemes to unite other denominations have been unsuccessful. This meant that, with the formation of Churches Together in 1991, there was a change of aim. The aim was now to achieve unity by uniting for local activity, such as united services, prayer-meetings, marches and evangelistic events. Great pressure has been put on churches, particularly in small communities, to be involved in this way. Issues have been further clouded by the use of evangelical terminology in a misleading way.

HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND TO THE CURRENT SITUATION? In a situation where a church is urged to unite with all other churches in the locality for some activities it is hard to say 'no'. Not simply because there is pressure to conform but also because all true Christians want to be in unity with other Christians, which is what the Lord Jesus Christ prayed for (John 17:20–21).

A POSITIVE RESPONSE Those leading EFCC have always recognised that this spiritual unity we share through the gospel is far more important than the convictions we may have on secondary issues, such as the sacraments and church order. Hence from its earliest days EFCC has belonged to the British Evangelical Council, now 'Affinity—A Churchcentred partnership for Bible-centred Christianity'. We would also urge churches in EFCC to build relationships with other churches in EFCC and also with other evangelical churches in their area. Showing such unity is clearly necessary if we are to be obedient to Christ's will for his churches.

THE REAL ISSUE However this means that the question we need to be asking is whether we should unite with all in our locality who call themselves Christians when they deny in statement or practice the truths that we hold dear and which are expressed in statements of faith such as those in the EFCC Yearbook. So either in statement or practice we will find truths like the inspiration and authority of Scripture; the deity of Christ and his virgin birth, perfect life, miracles, atoning death and physical resurrection denied. While alongside this salvation through works or the sacraments, rather than by faith alone, is affirmed and practices like the adoration of Mary and the acceptability of same-sex unions are

promoted. The unity and sanctification which Jesus prays for takes place through the truth/message (see John 17:16,20) and therefore cannot exist where the gospel is denied and Christ's rule through his word is defied.

IMPORTANT TRUTHS TO EMPHASIZE TODAY The Doctrinal Basis of the Fellowship sets out the Statement of Faith. As a group of churches in fellowship together, we wish to emphasize the following truths as these have been and are under attack.

1. The inspiration, infallibility, authority and sufficiency of Scripture as the only rule of doctrine and life.
 2. The local church as a company of true believers, as defined by the Statement of Faith, who meet under Christ's headship and rule, having the responsibility to maintain and walk in the truths of the gospel.
 3. This gospel, being salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in the substitutionary atoning death of Jesus Christ.
 4. The reality and eternity of heaven and hell.
 5. The duty of the local church to proclaim and contend for the truths of the gospel; and, where necessary, to separate from those churches whose teachings deny these truths.
- We are assuming that all EFCC affiliated churches would endorse these emphases in their preaching and teaching.

TRUE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP DEPENDS ON HOLDING TO THE TRUE

CHRISTIAN FAITH True Christian fellowship is only possible between churches holding to the Evangelical faith and unity with churches holding to other beliefs and practices is not the unity for which the Lord Jesus prays (John 17:20f).

RELATIONSHIPS WITH NON-EVANGELICAL CHURCHES In our relationship to non-evangelical churches, if we are obedient to Scripture, we cannot have fellowship with them (see 2 Corinthians 6:14–18). That does not mean that at a personal level we have no concern or relationship with those who belong to them. Hence:—

1. We recognize that true believers may be in churches that are not true churches. We can pray for such brothers and sisters and share fellowship with them because we recognize that they stand or fall to our common Master (Romans 14:4).
2. That does not mean that we will not tell them, speaking the truth in love, that our own conviction before God is that they should seek fellowship with true believers on a regular basis and should belong to a church which upholds the gospel.
3. Disagreement even about fundamental gospel issues is no excuse for rudeness and arrogance. What light we have, we received from the Lord, and we are to show love and concern for all who are in darkness. Invitations to join in ecumenical ventures should be refused with charity and clarity.
4. We must make it clear that we are not isolationists by nature, but wish to fellowship with all true gospel churches.

We trust that the position outlined will encourage all our churches to consider relationships with other churches and will promote true gospel unity.