Ecumenical Movement - Is it of God, Man or Satan? Part 1

By Charles Feinberg

This is the prophetic message of Charles lee Feinberg dean of Talbot theological seminary in La Mirada California. The theme of our message is the ecumenical movement. Is it of god, man, or Satan? The ecumenical movement. Is it of god, is it of man, or is it of Satan? All who are in any measure acquainted with the trend of affairs in the religious world recognize that vast and significant, yes, revolutionary changes are taking place in our day. The secular press, the news media keep these matters constantly before the public. This question of the ecumenical movement can easily take the claim, and it can make the claim with warrant to first place in public interest. On the heels of the several world council of churches meetings in recent years have come as we know the various sessions of Vatican counsel too. Now the general non-religious public never much on the niceties of doctrinal differences has a tendency to view the proceedings of the move to unity with a very favorable eye. Roman Catholics both liberal and conservative have made known their positions on this important world issue. Protestant and eastern orthodox leaders of all shades of theological persuasion have expressed themselves on the matter as well. It is safe to say it is the burning issue of the day in the religious world. It’s here and each one of us must decide its merits or demerits and we should indicate why. Now the world ecumenical though formidable sounding enough comes from a well-known Greek word oikoumene which means the inhabited earth. Hence, ecumenical signifies that which is comprehensive and universal. in this instance, liberals and conservatives alike embarrassed before an unbelieving world over the many divisions among the professed followers of Christ
have sought a starting place for their activities in the pages of scriptures. Not that they have tried to circumvent the scripture as such. They claim they go directly to the bible for their proof for their foundation of their activity and their movement. The main passages they use as the basis for the movement, the ecumenical movement, must be carefully scrutinized. We avoid this at our own peril. We must carefully scrutinize and we must arrive at an accurate interpretation or exegesis. This is where we must all begin. Now the basic passages that are given are John 17 and Ephesians 4. And we want to look at both of them very very carefully. I'm taking these passages in the order I've just indicated. John 17 and Ephesians 4. Now the verses in John 17, I hope you have your bible open before you. The verses that are considered as especially relevant to this discussion are John 17 verse 11, verse 21, verse 22, and verse 23. Now with your bible open and worn beforehand, I'm going to read these passages, and I am going to read them purposely incorrectly. Because I'm going to be reading them the way all too many people either read them or understand them. And it is a misunderstanding of them. Now notice this. John 17:11 now I am no more in the world but these are in the world and I come to thee. Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me that they may be one. In verse 21, our lord Jesus is indicating that he's praying not only for his disciples but for those that would believe on him through their word. Verse 21 that they may, they all may be one. Why is he praying that they all may be one? That the world may believe that thou hast sent me. Verse 21. Verse 22 and the glory which thou hast gavest me I have given them that they may be one. Verse 23 I in them and thou in me that they may be made perfect in one. That the world may know that thou hast sent me hast loved them as thou hast loved me. Now that appears as though I am reading these passages correctly. I have not read them correctly. I
have read them the way they are ordinarily read and understood, and that gives an entirely false impression because I have left out the most important part of those verses. Now watch as I read them completely. Verse 11 in John 17. Now I am no more in the world but these are in the world I come to thee. Holy Father keep though thine own name those whom thou hast given me that they may be one as we are. As we. Notice that. That’s the most important part of it. That they may be one, don’t stop there, as we. The father and the son. Now in verse 21 again, he’s been praying not for these alone but for them also who shall believe on me through their word. That they all may be one, don’t stop there, as thou father art in me and I in thee. That they also may be one in us. Not just one among themselves, but in us that the world may believe that thou has sent me. then verse 22 and the glory which thou gavest me I read in full have given them that they may be one, now watch, even as we are one. That’s the part I didn’t read. And that’s what made it incorrect. Not only that they may be one but even as we are one. And then verse 23 as I’ve given it. I in them and thou in me that they may be perfect in one and that the world may know that thou has sent me and has loved them as thou has loved me. You see these verses that are so relevant to the discussion cannot be properly understood until they’re seen in their unique context. A good bit of the difficulty if not most of it comes at the very outset from taking these portions out of context. Will you please notice the strategic place and length of the section in chapters 13 to 17, called sometimes the upper room discourse. I’ve even heard it called the supper room discourse. Chapters 13 to 17. Those marvelous 5 chapters out of this wonderful and so important gospel according to John. You see you have practically one fourth of the gospel of John in this remarkable discourse. The upper room discourse going from John 13 through 17. 21 chapters in John and 5 of them are given over to this important
section. You must recognize that through this portion, Christ is looking at Calvary not as something in the future but as an accomplished fact. Because he indicates here. I’ve glorified thee, verse 4, I’ve glorified thee on thee on the earth. I’ve finished the work. Well John 19:30 tells us that he said it is finished on the cross. So you see he’s looking at the work of the cross as finished. I’ve glorified thee, I’ve finished the work which thou gavest me to do. I repeat. You and I all must recognize that through this portion Christ is viewing Calvary as an accomplished fact. This passage is proceeding on the basis of post Calvary conditions. For instance the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is given. Prayer. The indwelling Christ. His return for his own in the rapture in chapter 14. The illuminating ministry of the holy spirit in the life of the believer. And other truths. It’s a marvelous compendium of conditions that will exist after Calvary and after Pentecost even. First it’s vital beyond all ordinary importance to see that Christ does not have in view this prayer the general masses of humanity. And that’s where the first serious blunder and mistake is made. To think that our lord Jesus is talking about the general masses of people. He had them in view many many times. He had them all in view when he went to the cross. But in this high priestly prayer, he’s praying not for the general masses of humanity. Notice verse 2 of John 17. He says to us many as thou hast given him. Verse 3, they should know thee. It’s those who know god through Christ. Verse 6. The men whom thou gavest me out of the world. Thou gavest them to me. They’ve kept thy word verse 6. Verse 7. Now they’ve known that all things whatsoever thou hast given me are of thee. Come from thee. Verse 8. I have given unto them the words which thou gavest me. Not only that. They haven’t been unbelievers. They’ve received and they knew and they believed verse 8. And verse 9. I prayed for them, not for the world. No. he’s not praying for the general masses in this passage. But for them whom thou
hast given me. For they are thine. And verse 10 I am glorified in them. Look at all the marks and indications one after another that our lord Jesus is talking about believers. Those who have followed him. Those who have trusted him as lord and savior. And then verse 11. Wonderful word. Keep them in thy name. Keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me. And then verse 12. While I was with them in the world I kept them in thy name. That’s believers. Why even takes time out to differentiate between them as believers and Judas. None of them as lost but the son of perdition. The scripture might be fulfilled. He takes time out to make a distinction between his own followers and Judas who never was a child of god through faith in Christ. Now continue this same basic essential survey all the way through the last verse. Verse 26. Now my beloved friends. When Christ went to such lengths to make plain of whom he was speaking. And there was no inherent obligation on his part to allow his disciples to hear his prayer ministry. He did allow them to overhear his prayer ministry directly to the father on their behalf. But there was no inherent obligation for him to do that except he wanted them to overflow with supernatural joy. That my joy may be in them and that their joy may be full. I say when our lord Jesus took time out as it were here, to have them hear him speaking and to make it so plain of whom he was speaking. I say it is exegetical crime of the highest order to disregard the numerous sign post our lord set up throughout the passage, indicating of whom concerning whom he was speaking. The passage will not permit for a split second the universalistic called comprehensive worldwide handling to which it has been sadly subjected. There are vast areas of scripture thank god that treat about the unsaved. And that’s vital. But this is not one of those passages. And secondly the lord made it clear from whom unity must originate. Verse 11 does not call upon any man to inaugurate a unity. No he says Holy Father, keep through thine own
name those whom thou hast given me that they may be one as we are one. It is god the father in heaven, the Holy Father. Doesn’t call on any man to inaugurate a unity. its Christ’s prayer to the father to keep sustain, maintain a unity already in existence of this unity has been brought about by the testimony, the word referred to again and again. What’s the testimony. The testimony cries mortal man’s sin. Christ’s provision of redemption. And the sole necessity of faith for regeneration. Yes. The lord made it clear. Of whom he was speaking. He made it clear for whom, from whom unity must originate from god. And finally the unity for which he prayed was of a unique quality. We must remember that. Notice in every instance the point of comparison. As we are one. As we are. Such unity is a product of divine activity. Yes. Not only that, it is vital. Its organic. It does not disregard belief. It’s based squarely on belief. Absolutely on it. It’s later reinforced by the baptism of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost where by all believers then, and all since at regeneration are sovereignly placed in the body of Christ. That for which so many are still praying. They do not realize that god has already answered the prayer of our lord Jesus in john 17, he answered it in acts 2 on the day of Pentecost. First Corinthians chapter 12 and verse 13. We read these wonderful words for by one spirit were we all baptized into one body. Whether we be Jews or Greeks. Whether we be bond or free. And have been all made to drink into one spirit. There it is. By the spirit of god we have been baptized into the body Christ sovereignly placed there at regeneration. So friends for a unity to exist between believers such as exists and obtains in the godhead. There must be a unity of essence, a community of nature. In short, there must be a partaking of the divine nature. And that’s exactly what’s stated in 2 peter 1:4. That we have been made partakers of the divine nature. So the order then in john 17, vital, is first the family relationship and then the bond of unity. First the family relationship and
then the bond of unity. And then another passage that is set forth with reference to a justification for the ecumenical movement, a warrant for it is Ephesians chapter 4. Notice how this chapter reads the first 6 verses of chapter 4 in Ephesians. Ephesians 4:1 to 6. I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation, that’s the calling, to which ye are called,

With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. Now this passage in Ephesians 4 is considered of great importance. Equally so with John 17 because it deals with an exhortation to believers instead of a prayer offered to God as in John 17. Now this portion has been explained to teach that first there’s got to be fellowship and then doctrine. First fellowship, then doctrine. That’s what they tell us. Unity of faith and belief is supposed to follow fellowship. Commenting on verse 3 endeavoring to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. An evangelical leader said I discovered that there you start with fellowship. It’s only later in verse 13 that the apostle says, till we all come in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God unto a perfect man unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ. it’s in this way that some are most erroneously seeking fellowship with liberals who deny the basic truths of the word in order finally to come to doctrine agreement. My friends. If we analyze this section of Ephesians, Ephesians 4, you’ll see that in the first 3 verses, Paul is giving us a general exhortation for unity. In the next 3 verses, verses 4 to 6 he describes the
character or the nature, the essence of that unity in what particulars exists. And then in verses 7 to 12, he talks about the beautiful variety in that unity. And the way God has taken to preserve it and keep it. And then in verses 13 to 16 he talks about the unity completed. The ultimate realization of it. And so he presents that both positively and negatively. It’s vital again friends to see that this chapter follows all the truth thus far revealed in the book of Ephesians. It’s not a case where fellowship precedes doctrine, but the very opposite. Because the doctrine has been enunciated in the first 3 chapters of the epistle, to the praise of the glory to the grace of the father to the praise of the glory of the grace of the son to the praise of the glory of the grace of the Holy Spirit. Because that doctrine has been enunciated in the first 3 chapters of the epistle. Now we come to the exhortations in chapter 4. After we have ascertained that the apostle is speaking to those for whom all the activity of God in chapters 1 to 2 has been directed. We must notice what the exhortation contains. It’s not to make, it’s not to work up, it’s not to manufacture or create a unity. But the word is very clear, to keep. To preserve. To keep the unity. A unity already brought about, affected by God. It’s the unity of the spirit. He’s the one who’s produced it. Unity created by the spirit is characterized by the items mentioned in verses 4 to 6. One body. One spirit. One hope. One lord. One faith. One baptism. One God. And father of all, who is above all and through all and in you all. Now notice among these features, one cannot fail to see all three persons of the Godhead. The spirit, the Lord Jesus Christ, and God the father. Now the popular notion is that the way to achieve unity is to work together, pray together, evangelize together, and so as time goes on, we arrive at a doctrinal unity. The trouble is that they find fault with doctrine. And the trouble is that their getting together, working together, praying together, evangelizing together hasn’t always worked out
so that they’ve arrived at a doctrinal unity. Where has this worked out in practical terms? Their view is the doctrine divides. But this passage is teaching the very opposite of that common position. It’s the doctrine unites. Paul’s actually speaking of the perfecting of that which is already in existence. And he says what now exists is going to grow and develop and ultimately by the grace of god, be completed. You have the same teaching on maturity of the believer in second peter 3:18. Grow in grace of the knowledge of our lord and savior Jesus Christ. You have the same truth in first Corinthians 3:1 and following in Hebrews 5. 1 Corinthians 13:12. We shall know even as we are known. We know in part now but were going to know even as we are known. Paul is speaking of the complete development of that which is already present in believers. It’s important to realize the warning against false doctrine too, right in this passage. In Ephesians 4:14. That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, by which they lie in wait to deceive. The emphasis in verse 15 is on speaking the truth in love, but speaking the truth in love literally Truthing. Truthing in love. Speaking the truth in love that may grow up into him in all things who as the head even Christ. The emphasis I repeat in verse 15 is on speaking the truth in love. It’s not a case of love only. But holding the truth or truthing in love. Orthodox men may and do fail often in the matter, the display of genuine love. But that’s no excuse for stressing the love to the exclusion of truth as though it were inconsequential. In all orthodox men do not constantly act in an unloving way either. That is an unfounded accusation. Now there are some factors that work against unity in believers. There are for instants sects or parties within the body of Christ. 1 Corinthians 1. False teaching as the wisdom of this world. 1 Corinthians 1:17. Or the works of the law added to the gospel. Just look at Ephesians. Or any
effort to add to the finished work of the lord Jesus Christ. And then another factor that works against the unity of believers is anything good exults man instead of Christ. It’s a remarkable comparison you can make between the ecumenical counsels, the general counsels of the first centuries the Christian era, and the world counsel of the churches today. Those churches, those church counsels in the first centuries the Christian era were much concerned with doctrine. They defined doctrine. They denounced condemned error and heresy. But amazingly enough, the chief characteristic of the modern movement is indifference to doctrine. They exult a spirit of inclusivism and cooperating practically and say nothing about doctrine. I tell you nothing will drive the world away from truth as confusion in the church with respect to her god given message. And that’s undoubtedly the main cause of the present declension in religion. The world won’t be impressed by mere coming together in externals while there’s a central disagreement about the fundamentals of the faith. It’ll interpret it and attempt on the part of the church authorities to save their institution. In much the same way it sees businessmen forming combines amalgamations with the same objective and intention. Just to perpetuate their existence. The question the world is still asking is what is your Christian faith. What’s your teaching? Do you have anything that is powerful enough to offer us, that is authoritative enough, that has absolutes built into it. It’s interested in this rather than in organizational matters and rightly so. And it’s ready when it sees that to respond in a marvelous wave. Comes to this friends, what are folk after? Are they after an inclusivist organizational set up or union, or are they interested in an internal spiritual inward union of which the word of god speaks? Now let’s look a moment at some of the historical background of this ecumenical movement. We’ve talked about the scriptural basis that they give. Now look at the historical background.
Many have felt that ever since the protestant reformation and the modern growth of the many denominations of Christendom that somehow the prayer of our lord has been bypassed in John 17. That somehow his wish in these matters has been flouted and pressure has been building up for some years to present a solid united front to the unbelieving world. The solution they tell us is for the union of all Christian groups. Well the birthplace of the ecumenical movement actually [inaudible] at the conference on faith and order and missionary cooperation that met in Edinburgh Scotland in 1910. For a number of years, partly because of its 2 world wars, matters seem to be at a standstill. Then the world council of churches, wcc, the world council of churches came into existence in 1948. Now the formula was supposed to make it acceptable to almost any shade of theology. Under what kind of a banner would they proceed? Well this is what they wrote as their formula. The world council of churches is a fellowship of churches who accept Jesus Christ as god and savior. Well the evangelicals were dissatisfied right away. They tried to get a more definite statement showing at least a basis in the Holy Scripture. And when an attempt like that was tried by the church of Norway at the world council of churches assembly in Evanston Illinois, it read this way. The world counsel of churches is a fellowship of churches who according to Holy Scriptures confess Jesus as god and savior. That church of Norway with this proposal was sidetracked and referred to a central committee. Then in august 1960, the world council of churches met at Saint Andrews in Scotland and submitted this for ratification at the next meeting in New Delhi which took place in 1962. The world council of churches. It it’s a fellowship of churches which confess the lord Jesus Christ as god and savior according to the scriptures and therefore seek to fulfill their common calling to the glory of the one god father son and Holy Spirit. And it was at St Andrews in 1960 that the ecumenists
seriously discussed eventual union with Rome. Because they saw in the new office that pope john XXIII had created. They saw in that a hope for the unity of Christians. But that office was set to perform a double function. Pope John XXIII had 2 objectives in mind. First to enable non-Catholics to follow the work of the second Vatican ecumenical counsel. And secondly, mark it carefully, to help the churches not in communion with Rome to arrive at unity with the Roman Catholic Church. Two Roman Catholic observers were present at Saint Andrews. There was a representation at New Delhi as well at New Delhi the Russian Orthodox Church was admitted as a member of the world council of churches. And the world council of churches observers have a tend to the second Vatican council and subsequent meetings. Thus far, impending events will be the next phase of our thought. Needless to say, we are witnessing unprecedented events. Were on the threshold of even more striking activities. Just a few years ago it was recorded in religious education, a magazine. It’s a catholic magazine. It recorded that in his presidential address at one of the annual conventions of the society of catholic college teachers of sacred doctrine, a Bernard cook, a Jesuit of Market University said and it’s in this religious education article, the Vatican counsel in the ecumenical division. He says with the second Vatican council, witnessing one of the key events of our 20th century. The aims he said will be to work seriously toward the union of Christians and to bring the expression of the churches life more closely into contact with our contemporary world. He went on to say that history. Particularly the history of the late medieval councils that work for unity. That history teaches us that’s not enough to work out Christian reunion on the top authoritative levels. There’s go to be a preparation for an acceptance of reunion on all levels if it’s to be truly effective and lasting.