

Catholics and Evangelicals and Their Future Relations

Thomas Schirrmacher

Today, Catholics and evangelicals have friendly relationships of mutual respect and cooperation in many parts of the world, but some criticize this friendliness on theological grounds. What forms should their relationship take, given the continuing differences between these two streams of Christianity? In this carefully considered message, the WEA's leader gives his view.

‘Catholics and evangelicals are the two largest faith communities’ within Christianity.¹ Accordingly, one of the most important global conversations that should be occurring within Christianity today is between Catholics and evangelicals. I have enjoyed many warm personal discussions on this matter with Pope Francis and other major leaders of the Catholic Church. I am pleased to have this opportunity to discuss the topic publicly today with a global community listening. Such an opportunity is long overdue. I am thankful that Pope Francis will give his greetings directly after my speech.

I have been invited as Secretary General of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), the largest global evangelical organization. But not all Evangelicals are connected to the WEA. The WEA represents an estimated 600 million Christians, but there are many more Evangelicals, Protestant Charismatics, Pentecostals and Independents with a more or less evangelical outlook who are not connected to us; according to the World Christian Database, counting these would make a total of something like one billion evangelically oriented Christians. Some Evangelical churches belong to the World Council of Churches (WCC); there is a significant and growing overlap between WCC and WEA member churches, since neither body excludes churches that belong to the other body. Other Evangelicals belong to no global body.

Thus, when I speak about ‘Evangelicals’, this is a kind of shortcut term for a broad spectrum of people within and outside the WEA. Some statisticians of religion place Evangelicals, Protestant Charismatics, Pentecostals and Independents in separate categories. I personally think that this does not reflect reality. For example, most Pentecostals hold to the core truths of evangelicalism, and that tendency is only increasing with the growth of Pentecostal engagement in academic theology. Quite

Thomas Schirrmacher, General Secretary of the World Evangelical Alliance, delivered this message to a global dialogue of evangelical charismatic and Catholic charismatic Christians on 15 May 2021.

1 Timothy George, ‘Our Francis, Too’, *Christianity Today*, 4 June 2013, <https://worldidea.org/yourls/ert453ts5>.

a number of Independents are also evangelical in their faith commitment, regardless of whether they refer to themselves as such. Many Christians are Evangelical, Pentecostal (or Charismatic) and Independent all at the same time.

The topic of Catholic–Evangelical relations has become more urgent as many national branches of Christian world communions in the Global South, such as Anglicans and Lutherans, have become more independent from their Western mother churches than previously. These branches are often closer theologically to other evangelical churches in their countries than to their mother churches in the West. This dynamic is rapidly increasing the number of theologically conservative churches who are contemplating how they will relate to the Catholic Church.

I cannot speak on behalf of all our WEA member churches or our regional or national Evangelical alliances. We are a de-centralized organization in which no alliance is obligated to follow my lead. And it would be impossible to describe all the views existing in the WEA’s ranks within one lecture. But I hope all will feel that I have tried to capture their diverse positions in a charitable manner.

I know that most of you in my immediate international audience today experience friendly and mutually rewarding relations between Catholics and Evangelicals. Yet in this message I wish to address *all* Catholics and *all* Evangelicals, whatever their current position is on Catholic–Evangelical relations. I believe we need to make a big step away from historical conflicts and to love one another, independently from the question of how we evaluate the theological parameters involved and regardless of whether we believe that our personal encounters with one another or our joint experience generated by the Holy Spirit can override historical divisions.

I have organized the first part of my message around seven possible ways in which we can relate to each other. I will start at the negative end of the spectrum so as to finish on a more positive note.

1. Enemies

Many Evangelicals and Pentecostals view Catholics as their enemies and vice versa. In some countries, such as Brazil, this attitude significantly shapes the religious landscape. Historically, enmity between the two camps has led to considerable hostility and even armed conflict.

What do we do about this situation? What do we say to Evangelicals who feel discriminated against or even persecuted by Catholics? What do we say to Catholics who feel demonized and treated as a religious and political threat by Evangelicals?

Jesus has an answer to this question: ‘But I tell you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who mistreat you and persecute you’ (Lk 6:27–28). This is the Christian way to deal with enemies. It was designed by the Prince of Peace. Any hatred between us or any use of earthly power against each other—whether through the state, in business, or elsewhere—has to stop, if we want to call ourselves ‘Christians’.

This is consistent with the Old Testament too. For example, God told his people who were facing exile and oppression, through the prophet Jeremiah, ‘Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper’ (Jer 29:7).

This is our first calling: Let's overcome enmity by love. There cannot be any theological excuse for remaining in historic trench warfare. No matter how you feel about the other camp, no matter whether you see the others as fellow Christians or not—love is the only possible answer and it needs to be a love that the world can see!

2. Fellow citizens

Let's move on to the next position on the spectrum. It is not much friendlier. There are Catholics and Evangelicals around the globe who more or less ignore each other and just see them as people who happen to live in the same country.

Paul wrote to the church in Rome, 'If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone' (Romans 12:18). I believe that 'everyone' includes Roman Catholics and Evangelicals or Pentecostals. Both sides are obliged to work towards peace among us, if we want to live as Christians. And let me add: this is especially true in election times, which in some countries are misused to praise one's own camp and denigrate the other to win votes.

Should we have dialogue towards a just and peaceful society with atheists and Muslims who reside in our countries, but not with Evangelicals or with Catholics? As co-president of Religions for Peace, the world's largest body for interreligious dialogue, I sometimes see people from the Catholic or the Evangelical camp for whom it seems easier to cooperate for the common good with non-Christians than with the perceived rival within the Christian world.

Catholics and Evangelicals in the broadest sense represent a combined total of more than two billion people today. Both groups live in almost every country in the world and encounter each other every day in politics, academia, business and social matters. What sense does it make for us to talk to everyone else but not to the other large group of Christians? 'The world' expects us to talk. Our own people expect us to talk. No problems are addressed and certainly no problems are solved by refusing to talk to one another. We know this is true in relations between nations or in marriages; why should we act otherwise in our relations with other Christian groups?

The WEA has a Peace and Reconciliation Network working in many countries in the midst of great tensions. Should this undertaking exclude Catholics? The Vatican sees peacemaking as one of the major goals of its diplomatic service. Should this exclude Evangelicals and Pentecostals? Obviously not.

Moreover, Catholics should be champions of religious freedom for Evangelicals and Evangelicals should safeguard the religious freedom of Catholics! 'Religious freedom including the right to change, and publicly profess, practice and propagate one's religion, flows from the very dignity of the human person which is grounded in the creation of all human beings in the image and likeness of God (cf. Genesis 1:26). Followers of all religions and beliefs have equal rights and responsibilities. Where any religion is instrumentalized for political ends, or where religious persecution occurs, Christians are to engage in a prophetic witness denouncing such actions.'²

Catholics and Evangelicals have a huge area in which they agree on social or

² 'Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct', 2011, <https://worldidea.org/yourls/ert453ts6>, section 3.

moral issues and should cooperate for the common good. This can involve issues where we agree with people of good will in all camps, such as on human rights or creation care, yet where we specifically want to push together for more action. On the other hand, there may also be issues where the number of allies outside our camps has become relatively small—for example, speaking up for unborn children in their mothers' wombs or for marriage as the God-ordained place where a mother and father raise children.

This is our second calling: Live in peace with your fellow citizens who belong to the other Christian camp. If you are the majority or in power, grant them real religious freedom and treat them as you would want to be treated if you were the minority. Again, this is something we should do no matter how we evaluate the theology of the other camp!

3. Viewing each other as objects of mission

Ten years after its completion, major Christian leaders of all camps refer to the signing of the mentioned document 'Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World' by the Vatican, the World Council of Churches, and the World Evangelical Alliance in 2011 as a crucial event in the history of the church. The document speaks about how Christians should witness to adherents of non-Christian religions.

There are many Evangelicals who place Catholics in that category—namely, as non-Christians. Sometimes they even do not see Evangelical converts as truly believers saved by the work of Jesus on the cross, as long as they remain official members of the Catholic Church. On the other hand, many Catholics view Evangelicals or Pentecostals as sectarians or heretics, as extremists or a danger to society. Pope Francis graciously apologized for such attitudes when visiting the Pentecostal Church in Caserta, Italy on 28 July 2014 and asked Catholic church leaders to refrain from such language, but not all have listened to him. Geoff Tunnicliffe, then the WEA's Secretary General, thanked him the same day on Radio Vatican, apologized for sins on the Evangelical side, and promised that the WEA would change its language too.

There is also the unsolved question that the Catholic Church sees Protestant churches not as churches at all (according to the Vatican II documents), but just as Christian communions, and the statement that only the Catholic Church is the church in its full-orbed expression (in the document *Dominus Iesus*). In many Asian and some other countries, Catholicism and Protestantism are officially seen as two different religions and most Christians in those countries follow this practice.

Well, even if anyone in Catholic–Evangelical relations views the counterpart as not being part of the body of Christ, still everything stated in 'Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World' applies! Using political power, bribery, manipulation or lies against others including Catholic and Evangelicals is against the will of Jesus! That document used 1 Peter 3:15–17 as its scriptural motto: 'But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience.' The document declares, 'If Christians engage in inappropriate methods in exercising mission by resorting to deception and coercive means, they betray the gospel and may cause suffering to others.'

A Catholic who exhibits immoral behaviour towards Evangelicals is betraying the gospel, and so is an Evangelical who exhibits immoral behaviour towards Catholics! Whoever follows Jesus' command and preaches to others also needs to follow all the other commandments of Jesus themselves.

Here are the opening sentences of the 'Christian Witness' document: 'Mission belongs to the very being of the church. Therefore, proclaiming the word of God and witnessing to the world are essential for every Christian. However, it is necessary to do so according to gospel principles, with full respect and love for all human beings.' So even if you do desire to convince the other side to come over to your side, both sides deserve to be dealt with according to the mindset of Jesus. Christians see others always as in the image of God, even if they totally disagree with them. In Christianity, their human rights do not stem from being Christians but from being created as men and women, because God created all people and he created them equal.

This is our third calling: Treat each other with the mindset of Jesus. Even if you think that others are not believers or not real churches, this is no excuse for acting contrary to the gospel principles taught by Jesus and his apostles. Let there be love, respect and peaceful theological discussion, but let us abstain from using political, economic and any other kind of earthly power against each other.

4. Interlocutors

'Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World' reminds Christians that in doing mission they must observe the commandment, 'You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour' (Ex 20:16). The document states, 'Christians are to speak sincerely and respectfully; they are to listen in order to learn about and understand others' beliefs and practices, and are encouraged to acknowledge and appreciate what is true and good in them. Any comment or critical approach should be made in a spirit of mutual respect, making sure not to bear false witness concerning other religions.'

To do this, we must take time to listen to and study thoroughly the views of others, so as to ensure that our statements about the other are truthful and fair. Again the 'Christian Witness' document states, 'Christian witness in a pluralistic world includes engaging in dialogue with people of different religions and cultures (cf. Acts 17:22–28).' And should this not be true of our engagement with fellow Christians as well?

I want every Catholic leader worldwide to know Evangelical positions not from hearsay or from the media, but first-hand from Evangelicals themselves. In most cases, such direct conversation dispels false conceptions and fosters better understanding, which in turn can even lead to reducing discrimination against Evangelicals.

I also want to hear first-hand what Catholic leaders and Catholics stand for and have to say. I do not want to depend on hearsay or the media. Sometimes, through such interaction, I learn that the other side is further away from evangelical Christianity than I thought. But more often, I discover what we have in common, that I need to examine their positions more carefully, or that there are things I need to learn from them.

Ongoing dialogue about central theological issues is necessary so that we can

come together whenever possible without theological compromise and have a clear grasp of exactly where and why we do genuinely disagree. And friendship is a better platform than mutual antagonism on which to discuss deep differences in theology.

Five billion people in the world do not understand why people called Christians, named after Jesus Christ, battle each other over the question of whether the others are really Christians. In such behaviour, we become guilty of God's evaluation of us: 'God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you' (Rom 2:24 quoting Is 52:5).

If you feel that someone else has not spoken fairly of you, you still have this obligation: 'Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift' (Mt 5:23–24). Just as God reconciled us to him even when we were still his enemies, so God wants us not to wait until the other side repents, but to be proactive and search for reconciliation, even when our brother does not seem to be looking for it.

To refrain from talking or even to forbid others to talk to the other camp and to view such engagement as proof of theological compromise overlooks the fact that God has created us in his image with the ability to establish and improve relationships through verbal communications. You cannot end any war or any tension if the parties involved are not willing to talk to each other, at least with a mediator.

This is our fourth calling: Talk, listen, study, discuss. We need more ongoing dialogue and personal encounters on all levels—between Catholics and Evangelicals as neighbours, fellow citizens, local leaders, and all the way up to the global level.

5. Humans in need of God's grace

In Scripture, Jesus speaks two judgements that I pray will not be spoken over us. While on earth, he described a Pharisee who came to the Temple and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like the others' (Lk 18:11). This statement was opposed to the 'evangel', from which we get the word Evangelical—the gospel, which was captured in the other man's prayer: 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner' (Lk 18:13).

If a Catholic thanks God that he is not like those Evangelicals, or the other way around, no one can claim that this is Christian behaviour. Such people are subject to Jesus' second judgement. This one comes from the *risen* Lord in his letter to the church at Laodicea: 'You say, "I am rich ... and do not need anything." But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked' (Rev 3:17).

And Paul reminds Christians, 'So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!' (1 Cor 10:12). Rather than boasting that we are in the right camp, we should pray and repent. Then God will hear from heaven: 'If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land' (2 Chron 7:14, NIV).

The gospel is the message that God's grace alone can save and heal us. We are called 'Christians' because Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died for our sin and was resurrected by the power of the Holy Spirit, and this alone and nothing else guarantees our everlasting fellowship with God. How in the world can any side in

our dialogue forget this when dealing with the other side? None of us is saved because he or she formulated the best theology ever, is free of sin and error or has a natural right to be accepted by God. God's saving grace through Jesus Christ, as the centre of Christian faith, must be visible to the world in how we deal with and talk to each other.

This is our fifth calling: Catholics and Evangelicals should pray for a humble spirit, asking God to have mercy on others just as we need it ourselves. Grace and love should shape our relations, so that the world can connect our name 'Christians' to reality.

6. Fellow 'Christians'

The vast majority of Christians around the globe hold more things in common with each other than they disagree on. This is at least how it looks from the outside. This is true for the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church as much as the statements of faith of the vast number of Evangelical, Pentecostal, Charismatic or Independent churches. An Evangelical student could read a 1,000-page book by a Catholic author on the Trinity and who God is, without even realizing that it is a Catholic book. Bible commentaries are shared across all confessions, and the number of academic commentaries pushing for traditional confessional positions has become very small. Intra-Christian discussions of human rights, religious freedom, peace and reconciliation cross all church camps.

This is the reason why non-Christians often refer just to 'Christians'. Yes, Christians of all kinds have so much in common that it is appropriate to put them all in one box when comparing them to other world religions or non-religious worldviews. Like it or not, all Christians often are seen in the same boat by others.

In making these comments, I do not mean to overlook the serious doctrinal differences between the churches. We very clearly formulated them in the 2016 dialogue document between the Theological Commission of the WEA and the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, which addressed 'Scripture and Tradition' and 'The Role of the Church in Salvation'.³ I would strongly encourage you to read this document. It reflects careful listening on both sides. As a result, the authors correct many misunderstandings, identify theological convictions that we have in common, express praise for each other's positive contributions, and indicate where our positions have moved towards each other. Yet the document also identifies areas where there is a huge and sometimes growing gulf between the two sides. Although it points out significant differences, the overall tone is full of love and respect.

Let me give an example of a topic where we once were divided and now no longer are, and one where we are more divided than 200 years ago.

A good example of a positive development concerns religious freedom. When the Evangelical Alliance was founded in 1846, religious freedom was part of its DNA, whereas the Vatican at that time saw religious freedom as a product of atheistic and secular philosophies and still very much promoted and relied on the establishment of Catholic states. Today, both parties join in championing religious freedom for all,

³ This document was reproduced in the April 2018 *Evangelical Review of Theology*; see <https://worldidea.org/yourls/ert453ts7>.

not just as a valid political principle, but as part of Christian doctrine. We agree that God does not want the State or anyone else to force anyone to believe in the triune God or to intervene in the beliefs and consciences of people. Christian faith is genuine trust in God from the deepest of our hearts; it cannot be forced or fabricated.

I also see a positive move with regard to the doctrine of justification of faith, even though there still is some debate in my own camp on this point. In fact, I believe the greatest threats to New Testament teaching on justification and salvation by grace and faith within the evangelical movement are not coming from the Catholic Church. Rather, they are the result of problems within the Evangelical movement. These problems include biblical illiteracy, some new interpretations of Paul's letters, and teachings that minimize or deny the holiness and justice of God, rendering juridical justification unnecessary. And then there is the growing influence of versions of the so-called health-and-wealth gospel, which could be seen as questioning the idea of God's free gift of salvation and the Holy Spirit.

I am sure that very few Catholic theologians today would contend that the teachings of the Council of Trent can be found directly in the letters of the New Testament. The Pope and many Catholic spokespeople are embracing justification by faith, which is amazing in itself regardless of whether or not Evangelicals judge that they have gone far enough. I quote from the sermon that Pope Francis delivered at Lund, Sweden, in October 2016, when the Pope and the Lutheran World Federation had invited major Christian leaders, including the then Secretary General of the WEA and myself, to celebrate 500 years of Reformation:

The spiritual experience of Martin Luther challenges us to remember that apart from God we can do nothing. 'How can I get a propitious God?' This is the question that haunted Luther. In effect, the question of a just relationship with God is the decisive question for our lives. As we know, Luther encountered that propitious God in the good news of Jesus, incarnate, dead and risen. With the concept 'by grace alone', he reminds us that God always takes the initiative, prior to any human response, even as he seeks to awaken that response. The doctrine of justification thus expresses the essence of human existence before God.

Besides areas of doctrine where we see great progress towards one another, at the same time other areas stay untouched or the gulf has even widened over time. Catholic teachings on Mary pose a greater obstacle to Protestants today than during Luther's time, and the gulf in this area has grown with each new declaration by a Council or Pope concerning Mary. And a real Catholic-Protestant discussion on Mary has not yet occurred in any of the official dialogues, as far as I know.

This is our sixth calling: Let us progress in our theological dialogue, with the Bible at hand, with a humble and prayerful spirit, asking the Holy Spirit to enlighten us. Let us clearly point to the things we have in common; at the same time, let us not shy away from our differences. Our beliefs are not put at risk when we compare and discuss them with other Christians.

7. Fellow believers

Much of the increased convergence in unity between the Catholic Church and believers from Evangelical, Charismatic and Pentecostal churches is the result of the

overall charismatic movement. It especially emphasizes life and experience more than following theologies or the statements of theological commissions. Many personal bonds have grown in this way that outweigh any church politics or any theological statement. As a result, a growing number of Catholic and non-Catholic Christians pray together, read the Bible together and even worship together—albeit by default without sharing the Lord’s Supper.

There is a second factor that contributes to the sense of spiritual unity today. That is the great number of Christian believers facing persecution and martyrdom for Christ. As Pope Francis has pointed out often, those killing Christians because of their faith do not distinguish between the different churches and confessions. They kill people because they are named for their Saviour Jesus Christ, because they pray to Jesus Christ or because they follow the commandments and principles of Jesus Christ (Rev 12:17b; 14:12). Amidst extreme sufferings, Christians from different churches have been brought together and found rest in worshipping God together. Very early in my life, I found it very difficult to question the faith of martyrs, or of anyone who was willing to risk their life for Jesus, only because they belonged to a church whose theology I questioned.

My personal conviction, that Pope Francis is a believer filled with the Holy Spirit, comes first of all from my prayers with him, even though it is backed by my evaluation of what he says and stands for. This personal judgement does not bind others. Evangelicals, Charismatics and Pentecostals around the globe always have taken the liberty to use their actual experience and study of others as a basis for their evaluation of their faith. When Anglicans and Pentecostals within the WEA share the Lord’s Supper, it is also more on the basis of mutual spiritual experience than the result of the work of a theological commission. Within the WEA, I see various churches and Christians happily working, praying and worshipping together, and I conclude from those observations that the Holy Spirit in others can be felt or experienced or however you want to describe it, even though those judgements are not absolute and surely do not replace God’s final judgement.

Therefore, let us ask the key question that is at stake here: *Can doctrinal differences be superseded by personal experience in joint prayer and felt unity?*

Let’s start with one side of the story. I think there is a valid place for those kinds of experiences and private judgements. The Christian faith is a very personal thing. The Holy Spirit does not fill only the body of Christ collectively, nor is he bestowed only on its leaders; rather, he fills every individual believer. Every believer has his or her own history with God. Every believer should not just be able to recite correct phrases to others, but should trust God himself, understand and express his faith—within the range of his gifts and abilities—and be able to ‘witness’ about his faith, that is, to explain the unchanging revelation from God in the light of his ever-changing life and experience. The Christian faith is embodied in real life and in the history of personal relations, with God and with humans, as to love God and to love one’s neighbour as oneself are the highest commandments.

The Apostolic Council of Acts 15:1–33 was about a very serious theological matter. The whole church met—the Apostles, elders, delegates from the churches and apostolic teams. The end result was summarized by the person presiding, James, who claimed that their conclusion must be true because it was in line with Scripture.

But even though the interpreting and declaration of Scripture by the authorities was the council's final step, the theological discussion actually centred on reports of experiences. Peter, Paul and Barnabas won the day, so to speak, because of the many moving stories they told, arguing that God had decided the matter already by sending his Holy Spirit on the Gentiles, as they had witnessed it. Acts tells us that Peter addressed those gathered as follows: 'Brothers and sisters, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us' (Acts 15:7–8). And Acts adds: 'The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them' (15:12). Telling those stories was Christian and biblical theology at its best, not some inferior method of theological argument! The Apostolic Council followed official leadership, reason, experience and finally Scripture. The four did not exclude each other, but strengthened each other!

The New Testament is also clear that we first of all have to judge ourselves: 'Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?' (2 Cor 13:5, NIV). That is true even for the Lord's Supper: 'Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup' (1 Cor 11:28, NIV).

But now to the other side. All this does not supersede the need to tackle very serious doctrinal questions. The Christian faith follows revelation that has been given over to writing, and it is a doctrinal religion based on historic facts. Holy Scripture is as important for the faith and the church as is the Holy Spirit, its author and the only guarantee that the will of God can materialize in our daily life.

I think the tension between experiences of unity and awareness of deep doctrinal differences is the misery felt by many engaged in intra-Christian dialogue. We know that God wants all Christians to join together in prayer, yet we see a long road before us with regard to overcoming theological differences; sometimes it even seems to be a road with no end.

'Live a life worthy of the calling you have received'

What adds to this tension is the fact that working towards unity of the body of Christ is not an option that we can put aside for the time being, but a clear command of Jesus (e.g. Jn 17) and the apostles (e.g. Eph 4). We could avoid this tension if unity were just a nice thing to have, not a necessity. We could just be happy with the camp we are in and stop wasting time on theological disputes. But we have no choice here; as long as our unity is incomplete, we have to continue striving for it.

The history of the Evangelical Alliance from 1846 to today exhibits a strong concern for the unity of all Christians. We are all impoverished if we are not in unity. Yes, this must be a unity in faith, a theologically based unity. But the idea never was that the membership of the WEA defines who is in and who is out of the body of Christ, but that the WEA would be a tool to work towards the unity of the whole body of Christ.

The Global Christian Forum was started 25 years ago by the Vatican, the World Council of Churches, the World Evangelical Alliance and the Pentecostal World

Fellowship as a low-key place to meet with Christian leaders even outside all those bodies. Those involved in this undertaking believed that Jesus' mission of unity does not end with our organizational boundaries and that all those bodies should not exist to enlarge their membership for membership's sake, but should add to the goal of unity with all those who believe that Jesus Christ is God and their Saviour. Today many of the cautious visitors from earlier years are vital participants in the Forum.

We are also aware that the institutional membership of our churches is not identical with the body of Christ—that is, all those who trust in Jesus Christ as their Saviour and are brothers and sisters of Jesus himself. Along with Geoff Tunnicliffe, who was WEA Secretary General at the time and presented an Evangelical view of evangelism, I attended the Bishop's Synod on Evangelization presided over by Pope Benedict XVI, discussing how to evangelize those Catholics who are members of the church through baptism but show no sign of Christian faith or life. Pope Francis has mentioned often that a pure paper membership in the Catholic Church does not save us. For Evangelicals, it is obvious that nominal Christians who belong to our churches but do not believe in Jesus as their Saviour are not members of the body of Christ.

There is no cheap way out here. Yes, the body of Christ cannot live without doctrine or without clear formulations of theological truth. But neither can we surrender our fundamental commitment to the goal of unity in faith. Our requirement to pursue Christian unity is itself a Christian doctrine.

Of course, the means of expressing that unity before the watching world may—and should—be debated, but we cannot ignore Jesus' prayer for the church in John 17:18–23 just because living it out might be very difficult and seem unrealistic. Indeed, the World Evangelical Alliance was founded to embody this very prayer.

Jesus prayed: 'As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. ... My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me' (John 17:18–23).

This is the largest frame possible. In its unity, the church mirrors the unity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Its unity preaches loudly and clearly to the world. Only God can create this unity of the body of Christ through reconciliation in his blood, as Paul teaches clearly in Ephesians 2:11–22 using the example of believers from Jewish and non-Jewish backgrounds. As humans we constantly tend to build walls between us, which can be overcome only through God reconciling us with him and among each other.

But the opposite is also true: disunity and a cacophony of Christian messages to the world hinder the spread of the good news.

All great ecumenical movements in history have sought unity for the sake of Christian mission. This was true of the World Evangelical Alliance when it united Protestant churches in 1846, just as it was true of the World Council of Churches in 1948 uniting Protestant, Orthodox and Oriental churches. When Pope Francis

visited the WCC in Geneva for its 70th birthday, he chose to call that organization back to its history of putting mission first, stating that without witness to the gospel, no unity would be possible.⁴

Again, this is not to downplay our theological differences. *For Christians, unity follows from the truth, not from cheap compromises.* Yes, there are wrong ways to create unity among Christians. Finding the least common denominator is one of those wrong ways. In that approach, the gospel tends to become smaller and smaller with each new player who becomes involved. Just following the majority or the most powerful actor is a wrong way as well.

But no necessary warning about wrong ways to achieve Christian unity can nullify our task to strive for the unity of the body of Christ and to proclaim one Lord, one voice and one body, as it is stated in Ephesians 4:1–6: ‘I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ... Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.’

Living in unity means ‘to live a life worthy of our calling’. Three times in Ephesians 4, Paul mentions our calling as Christians as a basis for the importance of seeking unity. Being a Christian entails being humble, gentle and patient towards everyone, especially other Christians.

Does this mean that we should forget about truth? No! If there is only one God (*theos*), then in the end there can only be one truth about God (theology). If there is only one Spirit, and if it is the Spirit’s task to lead us into all truth, the Spirit and his truth will not divide but unite us. And if there is only one faith, we never have to choose between unity and faith; rather, a deeper and clearer faith will always lead to unity, and greater unity will lead to a deeper and common faith.

In Ephesians 1–3, Paul uses in-depth teaching to prepare for Ephesians 4. He reveals to us who God is and who Jesus is; he explains forgiveness, the resurrection, the ascension and other central topics of Christian teaching. One needs to read these chapters over and over again to understand the whole depth of their message. Paul paints a magnificent picture of God’s universal purpose for the church of Jesus Christ. It is so magnificent that it seems quite distant from the reality of our often-ugly local churches. So what practical outcome does the teaching in Ephesians 1–3 have? That’s easy: ‘Thus I admonish you’ (Ephesians 4:1) to live and work for unity! Paul’s admonitions in Ephesians 4 are not the end of biblical revelation and teaching, but the practical result of it. ‘Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ’ (Eph 4:15).

Let us pray that the Spirit of God will protect us from wrong ways of pursuing Christian unity, but even more so, that we will make truly biblical and spiritual paths to Christian unity the centre of our thinking about the one church, the one body of Jesus Christ.

4 Thomas Schirrmacher, ‘Pope Calls upon World Council of Churches to Return to Emphasizing Evangelism’, *Bonner Querschnitte*, 27 August 2019, <https://worlddea.org/yourls/ert451ts8>.

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