

**THE FREE CHURCH TODAY:
NEW LIFE FOR THE WHOLE CHURCH**

The Free Church

The
Free Church
of Scotland

Today: New Life
for the Whole Church

BY ARTHUR A. ROUNER, JR.

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The Free Church Today: New Life for the Whole Church
How a New Breed of Evangelical American Christians
can Electrify the Ecumenical Movement
By Rouner, Arthur A., Jr. and Kennedy, Gerald
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Introduction

There are times when great ideas and movements begin to run forward, and any criticism of them is regarded as either heresy or a spiritual hardening of the arteries. Sometimes later on we wish that we had listened to the criticisms. But at the time, the critics are shot down or are rolled over and crushed by the machine that favors the new. I have seen this happen in church conferences and I think it is now happening so far as what is vaguely called "the ecumenical movement" is concerned.

This great new fact of our time, as the late Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, put it, is certainly one of the most promising and exciting things in the Christian world. What has come out of the Second Vatican Council did not seem possible to me a few years ago. I never expected to see in my lifetime the Catholic-Protestant relationships which are becoming more commonplace every day. This whole new spirit of cooperation and appreciation is a miracle and the gift of God. What hath God and Pope John XXIII wrought?

Very few churchmen do not cheer this new ecumenical spirit. It is long overdue. All of us should understand that no single church has all the truth, that every communion has much to contribute to the whole, that denominational bitterness and competition are wrong, and that we must love each other and try to help each other in our common task of bringing the world to Christ.

Yet, when it comes to implementing these great hopes,

there is room for disagreement and there ought to be much discussion and criticism. Is one Protestant Church the will of God? Apparently Dr. Blake and Bishop Pike think so. Must that new church have bishops and be organized under episcopal authority? Arthur A. Rouner, Jr. has serious doubts about this one, and in this book he makes a very eloquent plea for the free church polity. This was very good for a fellow in the episcopal tradition to read and ponder. I have raised certain questions myself concerning the proposed merger of ten denominations. Arthur Rouner's voice should be heard and given honest consideration.

At the end of this book there is a rather simple plan suggested under the title "Proposal for Christian Unity." It is so simple that I believe it would receive approbation from the vast majority of Protestant Christians. It would be a definite step forward toward experiencing our unity and bearing witness to our essential oneness in Christ before the world. It would not water down our differences to some common denominator. It would not create a huge bureaucracy, which is nearly always the enemy of spiritual insight and experimentation. In short, it ought to be considered by all of us faithfully and honestly.

The trouble with a good deal of our discussion these days about ecumenicity is that it is in a vacuum or suspended in the air. It never gets down to the actual organization involved and what the cost will be in terms of church machinery. I belong to a communion that is very highly organized. Whenever I return from another high-powered church conference, I want to seek out the anti-institution brethren and volunteer to be their leader. I know, however, that churches must have machinery. I am not willing yet, however, to say that this can be increased a hundredfold and still provide the world with a great new Christian power. My guess is that Arthur Rouner has also had some of these misgivings.

At any rate, it seems clear to me that this ecumenical busi-

ness needs great debate within an atmosphere where differences are welcomed. We ought not to say that a man is against the ecumenical movement because he does not get enthusiastic over some particular form of organizing it. Nor should we move forward without being aware of the great virtues of the past. The free church pluralism of America has provided us with the most relevant church life I know of anywhere. The good Lord knows it is bad in many ways and needs improvement, but not all of it is bad. Can we save the good and at the same time take another step toward the better? Before you make up your mind, it will be well to read and ponder the following pages.

BISHOP GERALD KENNEDY

Hollywood, California

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Preface

One does not need to be a prophet or seer, I think, to read in the signs of the time that the days through which the church of Jesus Christ is living now are among its most exciting and significant. They are not its halcyon days; they are not its most glorious, as in the first century of its life; they are not its most dramatic, as in the sixteenth-century days of Reformation. But they are crucial days, days when every Christian counts, days that will tell the story of the future. They are great days to be alive in the life of the church.

They are great days because they are days of change—days of radical change, in form and structure, in theology and mission, and in the very stance and alignment of the church. Part of the excitement is that everything is changing. America is in the throes of a crisis in authority. In social life, in political and moral life, as well as in religious life the word of authority is less and less heard. Many have written about what seems to be happening to America's morality. It does not need to be documented here. Much too has been written about America's religion: about the exciting new "religionless Christianity" of Bonhoeffer, the "Honest to God" realism, and on to the "death of God" idea.

Some are excited because religion seems at last to have caught on, to have learned "the name of the game," to have caught up with the times. Many in the church hail the new thinking, and not a few clergy rise to meet what they think is the new tide.

I am one who thinks they misread the signs of the time, that they are missing what is most significant and what is going to make the most difference for the ages and ages hence. If the gospel of Jesus Christ is “the same yesterday, and today, and for ever”—and I believe it is—then the excitements of today will evaporate, and we will have spent our energies and thoughts on the things most ephemeral, and have missed the point of our period in history, unless we have eyes to see what is the real excitement of our time, and what is the most significant.

The real news today, I believe, is the life of the spirit. It is what the Holy Spirit is doing in the world in the most unexpected places.

One of those unexpected places is the Roman Catholic Church—everywhere. Many think Rome is getting the ecumenical spirit, preparing to organize with the Protestants into one big church again. I think what is happening to Rome is far more profound than that. I think the Roman Church is on its knees—in prayer, and before the open Bible. I think they are beginning to read the Bible as our evangelical friends long have read it, as the Word of God to sinful men. I think they are taking it seriously, and that the Bible, under the power of the Holy Spirit, is leading Rome on pilgrimage: on pilgrimage back to the days of the church’s first century, back to the days before popes and politics, before church and state, and before cathedrals and colleges of cardinals.

What is curious and exciting to me and, I think, of vast significance to the future of the church, is that this pilgrimage through the pages of Scripture to the vitality and Spirit-dominated life of the church of the apostles is precisely the pilgrimage made in the late Reformation years by the first of the modern-day “free” churches, the “gathered” churches of the English Pilgrim or separatist movement of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The Roman Catholic Church is discovering in our day what the Congregationalists

and Baptists, forerunners of the Disciples, Covenant, Quaker, and Pentecostal traditions, discovered three hundred years ago.

I am convinced that many Catholics and many free church, theological conservatives, and evangelical Protestants do not realize it yet: we are moving into a day when these Christian groups, the very ones that have long thought of themselves as at opposite poles in theology and polity, are going to discover that in things of the heart and of deep belief they are the ones who have most in common. Dr. Billy Graham was mouthing no platitude when he admitted after his Boston visit with Richard Cardinal Cushing that he felt closer to some Catholics than he did to many of his Protestant friends. Well he might say so, for here in common is a sense of God's authority and man's sinfulness and need—and also, a growing awareness among Catholics of the centrality of the “Word” in worship, of the importance of the people, and of the freedom of the Spirit.

There is a new, common view of the nature of the church emerging, in which Catholics are sensing more and more that the church is, in the final analysis, the local congregation of the two or three gathered together by Christ, their absolute Lord, who governs by the power of his Holy Spirit.

Curious too, for the church scene today is that these two traditions—from the far right and the far left, in terms of church polity—are those least likely to be enamored of the very thing that many think to be the whole purpose of the ecumenical movement: the gathering of everybody, but everybody, into one vast organizational church. The free-church Protestants have too great a fear of what organization can do to the power of the Spirit, and the Catholics are realistic enough to know this would be too much to hope for from the free churchmen. In the meantime, their own pilgrimage is leading them to have some doubts about the infallibility of organization and centralization.

In the meantime, on the Protestant side, many conservative

and evangelical churchmen are themselves on something of a pilgrimage in their concern for social justice and Christian action. A new concern is rising, and men who long thought the two concerns were mutually exclusive are finding that a new conviction is emerging, the need for a new man, who is an utterly committed Christian in evangelical faith, but who at the same time—out of that faith—cares deeply about justice and love in the world Christ came to save.

These are movements of our time that excite me and tell me that God is doing something strange and wonderful among men in my time. Where they will end, I do not know. But that they have begun, I am utterly certain.

If this is true, I think we face a decade, and much longer, of great surprises. And if this is true, it also means that in a day when the Christian church, and indeed the Christian faith itself, seems to be fighting with its back to the wall against forces both from within and from without that appear bent on its destruction, there is hope of help from a new quarter, a new alliance—an alliance that could bring the answers from the Spirit of God which secretly this generation is seeking, and which could provide the key to the present-day ecumenical dilemma, in an emphasis on what the Holy Spirit can do, when organization fails, to bring men together in common work, at a common table, and under orders mutually accepted and recognized by all.

I pray God it is no arrogance that leads me to think this is an insight that has been given for sharing with all who might listen or read. It seems to me someone should say these things, even if only a few give heed. I am glad enough to be one of those to speak.

That is the reason for this book, and for the stolen hours and vacation days that have produced it. My hope is that some, at least, will find in it a truth, and that so it may give honor to the One whom all Christians know to be not only the Truth, but also the very Way and the Life for them.

Sometimes, in the midst of the pressures and demands of the modern ministry, the writing of a book would seem the last thing a busy pastor would want to undertake. Indeed, there are times when the agony of grinding out on paper one's deepest concerns in a form comprehensible to others seems, after all, to be hardly worth the effort. But somehow, like Francis Thompson's "Hound of Heaven," through all the labyrinthian ways of your own mind the idea pursues, and so you return to it—struggling to find the time, and striving to say what you feel so surely.

My concern is about what everyone knows today as the "ecumenical movement." It is about how that "great church" will ever come. It is about what it will be. And it is particularly about the contribution that the "free" churches in America will make to it.

There is no doubt about the fact that the ecumenical movement is here to stay. The word is known, if not understood, by Christians throughout the world. It comes from a Greek word meaning "whole," "universal," meaning the movement of all churches, and all denominations, and all Christians toward unity, toward standing together, and worshipping, and acting, and witnessing together as brothers in Christ. It means overcoming the differences that divide us.

That the ecumenical movement is valid and part of God's will for his church today is attested by the fact that suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, the Roman Catholic Church has taken up the cry and the cause, and her heart is reaching across barriers the Protestant world had never dreamed to see bridged! There is no question but that Rome and her worldwide church has been deeply influenced by the thought and conviction of Protestant ecumenical theologians and statesmen.

But while Rome joins Geneva in the new cause of our time, my concern is for the large minority of American churches and churchmen who have remained almost untouched by the

new concern and the new hope. Not only have they not been caught up by it, they have sometimes been repelled by it. Skepticism and mistrust have led too often to misunderstanding. And this does not need to be.

Perhaps the people of these traditions do not realize that the so-called ecumenical movement is, or at least can be, part of that very mission and ministry of the Gospel in the world about which they are so sincerely concerned. But what is far more tragic is that they fail to see that they themselves, they personally, and their denominational traditions, have more to offer and are more vitally needed in the ecumenical movement than they had ever dreamed.

They have something, I am convinced, which the ecumenical movement needs desperately today if it is to live at all, if it is to avoid being swallowed up and consumed by mere ecclesiastical machination and machinery, and if it is ever to provide "a Way" for Christian brothers to walk together.

The churches I refer to, the people who concern me, are those of the "free" churches in America, those at the left end of the spectrum of American Protestantism. And by "free" I do not mean to make an odious comparison to some of the more traditional, liturgical, and more highly structured denominations. I mean simply those denominational traditions which have had either a freer and more flexible tradition of theology or a freer and more flexible tradition of polity. I mean the traditions not bound by creeds, or by specific theological formulations, or those not bound by liturgical or constitutional practice and law. I am thinking of the Friends, of the Baptists—Southern and Northern—of the Pentecostal groups, of the Disciples, and of the Congregationalists—my own tradition—both those who continue in the historic pattern and those who have gone on into the new tradition of the United Church of Christ. There are other groups who perhaps both should and would want to be included among these traditions—some of the Methodists, the Missionary Alliance

churches, the Adventists, the Covenant churches, the Evangelical Free Church, and others.

These free churches, I am convinced, have far more in common with each other than they realize, and they also have far more in common with the ecumenical movement than they realize. While some of their denominational leaders have been immersed in the ecumenical movement as leaders, many of their own people have remained aloof and uncertain, and uncommitted.

My hope is that this book might help to show what tremendous gifts they have for "the coming great church" and why they are so needed; and also to challenge them to give those gifts, and to help the ecumenical church to accept them. I do this in awareness of my own failures here, but also with a sense of tremendous inner excitement at what the insights and understanding of the free church view of the church has to offer to the church ecumenical.

I am not beyond believing that the free churches may hold the key to the future of the coming great church, that they may have within their own life and practice the basis of new forms which can be the answer to some of the deepest differences separating Christians from each other today. I think they may be able to offer the freedom the ecumenical church needs, but also the basic commitment to Christ as a person that it needs. I think they may be able to offer the form and framework in which churches of vastly different tradition and background can work and serve together. And I think they may possibly offer an understanding of the church free from entangling ecclesiasticisms in the relation between churches, for which our world and its modern men are "hungering and thirsting."

Perhaps this will seem like news to nobody but me. Perhaps some will say the ecumenical movement has long since passed the point at which ideas such as these would be either useful or welcome. But they are burning inside me to be said, and