

What is ECOT?

Rev. David B. Roberts; October 10, 2006

Introduction

ECOT.

It's not a perfect label, and some might argue against the very use of labels since they can tend to delimit people with inflexible expectations and stereotypical presuppositions. But for the sake of convenience we need to have a workable label to talk about the divide we believe is rending the UCC and so "ECOT" emerged out of the discussions that then led to the January 2006 formation of the Faithful and Welcoming Churches of the United Church of Christ (FWC). Those of us who dissent with the current direction of the denomination were simply trying to identify the common denominator that was drawing us together as "the loyal opposition" within the UCC.

ECOT is an acronym combining four descriptors: "Evangelical, Conservative, Orthodox and/or Traditional". Before FWC was officially born, we tested and talked about each of these labels and whether any of them adequately or appropriately described the kind of UCC members, clergy and congregations who were expressing dismay, objection and frustration with the recently concluded General Synod 25 and the ongoing "God is Still Speaking" marketing campaign. As we examined each label, we found no unanimity among us. We each seemed to prefer one term or another, but we also were uncomfortable with the connotations that any single term might bring with it to the group. We tabled the issue of finding a label. Later, in our correspondence with one another we began out of necessity listing all four. Eventually, because it was so cumbersome to type, the list was naturally shortened into the current four-letter, pronounceable result.

For the sake of engendering greater understanding, this paper attempts to give clarity to how we, who are dissenters within the UCC, use each of the terms in our particular context. We do not attempt to define the terms for all UCCers, nor to claim exclusive rights to them, but merely to help our partners in ministry and our brothers and sisters in the UCC to understand who we are and how we see ourselves. This is the label which helps us talk about a large segment of the UCC community, which even though it may be a minority, we feel is often underrepresented, misunderstood and sometimes maligned within the denomination as a whole.

Evangelical

"Evangelical" in our usage does not refer to our heritage in the UCC and its predecessor denomination, the Evangelical Synod of North America, nor to any broader usage and definition that is often employed within the UCC. Instead, we use the term as it came to be used in the second half of the 20th century for people such as Billy Graham, Chuck Colson, John Stott and others. *Christianity Today* might be considered the representative magazine for this particular understanding of the Christian faith. Even though their ministries pre-date our particular usage of the term, we can cite a number of evangelicals from our UCC heritage. These might include Jonathan Edwards, Charles Finney, Philip Schaff and John Nevin. Today, UCC theologian Donald Bloesch and UCC New Testament scholar Royce Gruenler fall into this category.

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Sometimes the media and others mistakenly assume that “evangelical” is a synonym for “fundamentalist”. This is not accurate. Most of us who acknowledge the ECOT label for ourselves would prefer to distance ourselves from many connotations and associations that generally accompany “fundamentalism” per se. For example most evangelicals do not consider themselves to be biblical literalists.

John Stott, the former rector for All Souls Church in London, is often looked to as the spokesperson for evangelicalism. He says that there are two particular things evangelicals emphasize: the concern for authority on the one hand and salvation on the other.¹

We mean that we are “evangelical” primarily with regard to the issue of personal salvation. There is a basic assumption among evangelicals that all people are “lost” due to their sin and therefore are in need of “salvation”. Thus “redemption” and “deliverance” from “eternal damnation” or “hell” is offered in the unique Savior Jesus Christ, the Son of God incarnate, who offered himself unto death on the cross as the “substitutionary atonement” for sin. As a result we evangelicals place great emphasis on the proclamation of the “gospel”. Whether we use these exact terms or not, they refer to concepts which are rarely, if ever, discussed in our UCC-based conversations, but to us they are essential truths which cannot be compromised or buried away.

A banner scriptural text for evangelicals might well be Romans 10:13-15:

¹³ ... for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” ¹⁴How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? ¹⁵And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” *Romans 10:13 – 15 (NIV)*

Conservative

This particular term is problematic. Many would confuse our usage to imply a specific approach to politics, to economics or to societal issues as a whole. Some might assume that we mean “right wing” or Republican. This is not our intent. To say we are conservative does not necessarily mean that we voted for George W. Bush or that we support the war in Iraq or that we subscribe to Reaganomics. There are ECOTs who may well be registered Democrats. Nor do we mean we are necessarily conservative with regards to worship style or ecclesiology.

When we use the word, we mean that we lean toward a more conservative approach in our reading, interpreting and applying the Scriptures and to a more conservative approach to theology as well. We are prone to “conserving” that which has been revealed and discerned and agreed upon as the core doctrines of the Christian Church over the full course of its two thousand year history. We are less inclined to pursue what might be called “progressive theology” and/or “evolving theology” which tend to introduce novel ideas derived from what we would say is an inappropriate hermeneutic and which in our eyes results in diminishing the sovereignty, authority

¹ *Christianity Today*, October 2006, ‘Evangelism Plus’, interview by Tim Stafford, page 94

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and immutability of God. To us, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.² God's mercies are new every morning, but his truth is not.

John Stott has said:

For evangelical people, our authority is the God who has spoken supremely in Jesus Christ. And that is equally true of redemption or salvation. God has acted in and through Jesus Christ for the salvation of sinners.

I think it's necessary for evangelicals to add that what God has said in Christ and in the biblical witness to Christ, and what God has *done* in and through Christ, are both, to use the Greek word, *hapax*—meaning once and for all. There is a finality about God's word in Christ, and there is a finality about God's work in Christ. To imagine that we could add a word to his word, or add a work to his work, is extremely derogatory to the unique glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.³

As believers who are theologically and biblically conservative, we can affirm that God is still speaking for He is indeed the living God and we attest that the Holy Spirit still actively guides us, but in our view God's Revelation (with a capital "R") is complete. As conservatives we might emphasize the following passages of scripture.

⁶"I the LORD do not change." *Malachi 3:6 (NIV)*

¹⁵² Long ago I learned from your statutes
that you established them to last forever. *Psalms 119:152 (NIV)*

³³Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. *Luke 21:33 (NIV)*

¹⁸I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. ¹⁹And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. *Revelation 22:18 - 19 (NIV)*

Orthodox

Here, we obviously do not mean Orthodox with a capital "O". We are not meaning a specific branch and tradition of the Christian Church such as the Russian or Greek or Serbian Orthodox Churches

Literally this term means "right teaching". Its very meaning suggests that there exists something such as "wrong teaching" or what the Bible calls "false teachings" or "false doctrines" and warns us to be on our guard:

¹Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. *1 John 4:1 (NIV)*

⁸See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ. *Colossians 2:8 (NIV)*

² Hebrews 13:8

³ *Christianity Today*, October 2006, 'Evangelism Plus', interview by Tim Stafford, page 94

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If we are careful to be orthodox, then we will automatically be guarded against any teaching which challenges or contradicts the established teachings which have been handed down to us. This again, is our conservative nature at work. But how do we know if what we are currently teaching is right? How do we know that the new teaching being introduced to us is wrong? In humility we dare not trust any one human source, not even ourselves. People are not perfect and are prone to promoting ideas of their own invention rather than the truth. As the test for orthodoxy we humbly rely on the consensus of a broad spectrum of Christian thinkers from many diverse cultures and across the centuries rising above the temporal fads and trends of Christian debate. This is Congregationalist theory at its best: the Holy Spirit will not contradict Himself, but will lead the Church of Jesus Christ (as a whole) into all truth.⁴

The Church encountered and confronted many false teachings (heresies) from the very start. No doubt Jesus had to overcome many false assumptions and attitudes even in his most devoted followers. But over time we believe that the Apostles and the New Testament authors gained a worldview and an understanding of the truth which is consistent with that which Jesus wanted them to have. We trust that the ancient creeds (Apostles' and Nicene) captured the truth and repudiated the errors which continue to be reintroduced even today. More than that we trust that there is a solid consensus (though no unanimity) among most Christians from every time and place to give us confidence to reject that which arises out of a few, or from a faction, or from a sect.

More specifically we judge that an orthodox theology is really a "theology of divine redemption". What disturbs us is that we see a different kind of theology rising in the UCC (and in other mainline denominations) and it is currently displacing this classic theology of orthodoxy. It is what Episcopalian Philip Turner has referred to as a "theology of divine acceptance" in which the core value is "radical inclusion without qualification".⁵ Such a shift, in our view, has reduced the role of Christ from Savior of the World to that of mere Example for Humankind. We recommend Turner's article for a clearer understanding of this divergence of theologies and the resulting deterioration of what we view as a supreme Christology.

As orthodox believers in the reformed tradition, we rely on Scripture first and foremost, then on reason and logic, then on church tradition (consensus from many times and places) and finally on personal experience. If all of these are in alignment, then we feel confident that our teaching is right. If we cannot reconcile all these levels, then Scripture must trump the others.

⁴ John 14:26

⁵ Philip Turner, "An Unworkable Theology" in *First Things* 154 (June/July 2005); pages 10-12

Turner writes this about his own denomination, but it also seems an accurate observation of the UCC if we simply replace 'radical inclusion' with the phrase 'extravagant welcome': "This unofficial doctrine of radical inclusion, which is now the working theology of the Episcopal Church, plays out in two directions. In respect to God, it produces a quasi-deist theology that posits a benevolent God who favors love and justice as inclusion but act neither to save us from our sins nor to raise us to new life after the pattern of Christ. In respect to human beings, it produces an ethic of tolerant affirmation that carries with it no call to conversion and radical holiness."

Turner also writes: "In a theology dominated by radical inclusion, terms such as 'faith,' 'justification,' 'repentance,' and 'holiness of life' seem to belong to an antique vocabulary that must be outgrown or reinterpreted. So also does the notion that the Church is a community elected by God for the particular purpose of bearing witness to the saving event of Christ's life, death, and resurrection."

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If, as the aggregate Body of Christ, we are currently teaching falsehoods and there is then a new or corrective teaching God has for us, how will we know to let go of the error and embrace the real truth? We believe that the Holy Spirit will not fail. Time will tell and the truth will eventually emerge in consensus among His faithful.

Traditional

Again, this word could be misapplied. By “traditional” we do not imply anything about our music or architecture or ministry strategies. We are traditional in the sense that we cling to the consensus of a long history and a broad ecumenicity of Christian thought and understanding.

Our traditional bent might be evident in the preference among some of us for the “traditional” language for the Trinity as “Father, Son and Holy Spirit”, even though we may well embrace inclusive language when referring to people. We might prefer being called “Christians” rather than using the modern, watered-down term “persons of faith”. But tradition is about more than word selection.

There are ideas and concepts which endure throughout the centuries and are consistent across cultures. There is a thread which connects our faith back through the Reformers to the Apostles. Indeed there are ideals and constants which are consistent all the way back through Moses, to Sarah and Abraham, to Noah and even to Eve and Adam themselves. These constants are not rooted in particular times and places and cultures, but they are ideals set in place by God for all humanity and for all time.

A few of these are found in the ideals of “male” and “female”, and “marriage”. These concepts and realities are part of the created order which God put into place in perfected design. (“And God saw that it was good.”⁶) They are not mere cultural conventions and they are not open to human redefinition and tweaking. They represent ideals and realities which still endure even though their expression and practice have been marred and distorted as a result of the Fall. None of us in our sinfulness can truly live up to them. We have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God.⁷

There are also New Testament ideals such as “church” and “baptism” and “communion” and “scripture” which may be practiced and applied in many different forms, but at the core they are essential and not to be compromised.

One of the purposes of these “traditions” is to serve as correctives to our encroaching sinful practices and self-rationalized understandings. (“Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love.”⁸) Their purpose is to give us some measure and standard for the Holy Spirit’s work in us that we might be reformed and ever reforming; both in our lives and in our institutions.

⁶ Genesis 1:27,31; Genesis 2:24

⁷ Romans 3:23

⁸ “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing”, hymn by Robert Robinson, verse 3

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If we are traditional, it is because we do not feel it is our place, as mere sin-plagued mortals, to replace or redefine these divinely created institutional ideals. Here, we might point to the words of our Lord when he said: “It was not this way from the beginning.”⁹ Even Jesus said that he came not to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfill them.¹⁰

Conclusion

In shortened summary then, we who call ourselves ECOT mean to use the four terms broadly enough to encompass all who are perplexed by and do not want to encourage or identify with the current direction of the UCC.

We use the term “evangelical” with regard to the centrality of the need for personal, eternal salvation and holiness found only in Jesus Christ in contrast to the current UCC disregard for issues of personal sin and salvation and eternity.

We use the term “conservative” with regard to interpreting the Scriptures in contrast to the current UCC trend toward “cutting edge” and “innovative” interpretations.

We use the term “orthodox” with regard to the classic theology which emphasizes the Divine as the God of redemptive atonement in contrast to the current UCC bent toward “progressive” or “personalized” or “contextualized” theologies which emphasize the Divine as the God of liberation or radical inclusion.

We use the term “traditional” with regard to the broad consensus of 2000 years of Christian history including the global, multi-cultural and ecumenical Church of today in contrast to the current UCC attempt to create for itself a distinct identity apart from the rest of Christianity.

We intend for the term ECOT to be a useful, though imperfect, tool to aid us in our conversations both among ourselves and within the larger Church. We do not claim exclusive right to each of the labels which ECOT encapsulates. Others with whom we strongly disagree may well use each or all of these four words, but with different definitions, to describe themselves. We are only trying to find a way to capture the essence of whatever it is that ECOTs have in common and sets us apart in opinion and interpretation and expectation from the larger UCC as it is now positioned. We ask that our brothers and sisters try not to take offense, but to try to understand us and to include us. Ultimately we do not want to be apart from the UCC, but we do wish to be a part of the UCC.

Also, we hope that by offering this particular definition of ECOT we might help give voice and expression to a minority segment of the denomination which itself is proving to be rather diverse in race, culture, and ministry priorities. We hope that the ECOT label will be a broad enough umbrella to cover a spectrum of believers of many divergent backgrounds and opinions, and yet allow us to be unified enough to have impact and influence upon the future of the UCC.

⁹ Matthew 19:4,8

¹⁰ Matthew 5:17