

Doctrinal Agreement and Christian Unity: Methodological Considerations (1972)

“We are all to come to unity in our faith and in our knowledge of the Son of God, until we become the perfect Man, mature with the fullness of Christ himself” (Eph 4:13 BJ).

With its call to unity in truth and to living the truth in love, the Epistle to the Ephesians depicts the Christian life as the growth of a body to maturity or, in another passage, as the erection of a building whose cornerstone is Christ. The goal is a completeness, a perfection, a fullness that lies ahead and toward which each Christian and the Christian fellowship as a whole must grow.

Ecumenical dialogue among separated Christians is a part of this process of growth. Its aim is not to produce a statement of minimum essentials by which one Church can measure the orthodoxy of another, but to deepen, strengthen, and enrich the life of both. As Vatican II declares in the Constitution on Divine Revelation: “There is growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. ... As the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her” (Dei Verbum 8).

Churches coming out of the isolation imposed by the divisions of the past find that they are able to contribute to each other’s growth in the fullness of divine truth. But unless the origins and purposes of theological discourse are rightly understood differences in terminology and in modes of conceptualization, due in part to past isolation, can lead to failure of communication and even impasses in doctrinal discussion. Theological discourse must always be interpreted within the horizon of man’s experience of the divine mystery because it grows out of that experience. From this it follows that no formal or conceptual statement can ever be fully adequate to the religious data. Because of man’s nature, however, his religious experience must come to expression by every means available to him.

Whenever man speaks about the engulfing mystery of God he speaks from within a particular situation – geographical, temporal, cultural, sociological, psychological, linguistic. ... Because of the transcendence of God’s mystery, one must always speak about him symbolically, but these symbols, taken from man’s experience of the world, always have the stamp of human particularity. Even statements made by groups of men in representative councils bear this stamp of particularity. For example, when the early councils apply to God and Christ terms such as substance, person, and nature, they are using the terminology and conceptual tools available in a given culture. When these terms in another time and culture take on different connotations their effectiveness for expressing the truths of faith may be impaired. Human discourse even under the working of grace is perspectival and hence also pluralistic.

To acknowledge the relativity of theological statements is not to fall into relativism but to escape it. Because encounter with God always calls man beyond himself, it must be recognized that all

religious expression may itself be transcended. The abiding presence of the Holy Spirit moves communities of believers to express their life in Christ in ways that may not be abstractly deducible from their previous statements.

The result of the preceding analysis is to recognize that Christians who are orthodox in their faith may express it in varying formulations, as the Bible and the creeds of the early Church so well exemplify. This does not mean that all formulations are equally appropriate. Some may in fact express, and conduce to, a misapprehension of God and his relationship to man, and thus be impediments to the Christian life.

The participants in this dialogue, fortunately, rejoice in the possession of the same Sacred Scriptures, the same creedal formulations of the ancient Church, and a substantial body of shared intellectual and spiritual tradition. They also acknowledge the need for critical scholarship if the meaning of the ancient texts is to be accessible to modern man. There are, however, some other doctrinal formulations which, in the course of a sadly separated history, have been adopted by one communion or the other and are generally seen as obstacles to full communion between the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches.

In order to promote the cause of full mutual recognition and full ecclesiastical communion, the participants commend the following operative principles in the assessment of whether such divergent formulations do indeed constitute an essential obstacle to full communion:

1. Paradoxical Tension

As previously pointed out, theological language never adequately corresponds to the reality to which it refers. In revelation itself there is always an inherent tension between God's self-disclosure and man's capacity for understanding: human thought and language can never encompass the divine mystery. For this reason there is a peculiar ambiguity in theological statements. The grammatical opposite of a true statement of faith, therefore, may in some sense be also true. E.g., man is – or is not – saved by faith alone; the Bible is – or is not – the word of God.

2. Contextual Transfer

It should be recognized that past doctrinal utterances were made in definite cultural situations that are not our own, and hence that they reflect the presuppositions, terminology, and concerns of their times. This means that a Christian today, in order to be orthodox and to maintain continuity with the tradition expressed in the language of another day, may need to find new language and even new concepts to express the same truth; e.g. the descent into hell.

3. Relative Emphasis

It should be acknowledged that some statements made in the past as “definitions” and imposed under anathema, are no longer insisted upon because, at least today, they do not seem to be of crucial importance in relationship to salvation. E.g., the teaching of the Council of Vienne on the soul as the substantial form of the human body (DS 902).

4. Doctrinal Pluralism

a. Within a single Church one and the same formula often receives different theological interpretations – e.g., the Banerian and Molinist interpretations of the Tridentine canons on grace; the use of the Thirty-Nine Articles in the Church of England. We see these as instances of the principle of comprehensiveness which, rightly understood, involves living in tension and does not admit of easy compromise or superficial syncretism.

b. Because the same mystery can sometimes be conveyed more effectively by different formulas in different cultural contexts, one may support a variety of theological expressions among different groups of Christians. In Churches entering into full ecclesiastical communion, different creedal formulas are sometimes mutually acknowledged – e.g., the use or omission of the “Filioque” in the agreement between Churches of the East and West at the time of the Council of Florence.

Both these forms of doctrinal diversity should be taken into consideration in assessing the possibilities of overcoming obstacles to union among separated Churches.

5. Empathetic Evaluation

Any Church, in deciding whether it can enter into communion with another, should seek to appraise the role played by the formulations of the other community in the life of that community. One should not condemn all that one would not personally wish to say. In this connection one may apply the principle of St. Ignatius Loyola, prefixed to the Spiritual Exercises: “... It is necessary to suppose that every good Christian is more ready to put a good interpretation on another’s statement than to condemn it as false. If an orthodox construction cannot be put on a proposition, the one who made it should be asked how he understands it...”

6. Responsive Listening

Since no Church exists by itself in this world, every Church should listen respectfully to what the others find unacceptable in its own formulations, and consider whether its own official doctrinal commitments can be re-expressed in contemporary statements that remove the occasion for offense. In this way the Churches will be of mutual help to one another in their ongoing expression of the faith.

Mindful of the fact that the revelation once for all given to man is the person of Christ present in the Spirit, Christians are called to be faithful to that presence at all times in their living tradition. The foregoing principles should be applied in conformity to that abiding presence, and thus in a way that leads to an ever richer appropriation of the gospel. “So the body grows until it has built itself up in love” (Eph 4:16 BJ).

January 23, 1972, New York City

Note: As part of the work of its eleventh meeting held in New York City, the Anglican-Roman Catholic Consultation in the United States (ARC) unanimously approved this statement on January

23, 1972. The statement is made public in the hope of advancing one of the aims of the Report of the Anglican-Roman Catholic Joint Preparatory Commission written at Malta, January 3, 1968. The pertinent section of the “Malta Report” is 5. “We agree that revealed truth is given in Holy Scripture and formulated in dogmatic definitions through thought-forms and language which are historically conditioned. We are encouraged by the growing agreement of theologians in our two Communion on methods of interpreting this historical transmission of revelation. We should examine further and together both the way in which we assent to and apprehend dogmatic truths and the legitimate means of understanding and interpreting them theologically. Although we agree that doctrinal comprehensiveness must have its limits, we believe that diversity has an intrinsic value when used creatively rather than destructively.”