

# EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 21

---

Volume 21 • Number 2 • April 1997

---

## Evangelical Review of Theology

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from  
publications worldwide for an international  
readership for the purpose of discerning the  
obedience of faith*

**EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS**



Published by  
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS



for  
WORLD EVANGELICAL FELLOWSHIP  
Theological Commission [p. 98](#)

**ISSN: 0144-8153**  
**Vol. 21 No. 2 April-June 1997**

Copyright © 1997 World Evangelical Fellowship

**Editor**

Bruce J. Nicholls

**Book Reviews Editor**

David Parker

**Editorial Assistant**

Kathleen Nicholls

**Committee**

(The Executive Committee of the WEF Theological Commission):

Rolf Hille (Chairman), Bong Rin Ro, Ken Gnanakan,  
Pedro Arana, René Daidanso Ma Djongwé, Ward Gasque,  
Judith Gundry-Volf, Roger Kemp

**Editorial Policy**

The articles in the *Evangelical Review of Theology* reflect the opinions of the authors and reviewers and do not necessarily represent those of the Editor or Publisher.

**Manuscripts, reports and communications**

should be addressed to the Editor and sent to  
Union Biblical Seminary, Bibwewadi, Pune, Maharashtra, India

The Editors welcome recommendations of original or published articles or book reviews that relate to forthcoming issues for inclusion in the Review. Please send clear copies of details to the above address. [p. 100](#)

# Editorial

During the last two decades evangelicals have had several fruitful dialogues with responsive Roman Catholic theologians. Recognizing the need to give guidance to its national member bodies, the WEF sponsored its own consultation 'A Contemporary Evangelical Perspective on Roman Catholicism'. The report was presented to the WEF 1986 General Assembly. Catholics felt that a number of fundamental issues were inadequately treated. This led to brief meetings between WEF theologians and representatives of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity in 1988 (Jerusalem) and in 1990 (Budapest). A more carefully prepared consultation was held at Venice in 1993 and the revised papers of this consultation are reproduced in this issue of ERT. The Catholic view of the Word of God as Scripture and Tradition, the extent of the Fall, Justification, the Unity of the Church were key issues that surfaced in the Consultation. Points of agreement and of misunderstanding were clarified. The mistreatment of evangelicals by Catholic bishops as 'sects' was carefully noted. The next joint consultation will be held near Jerusalem in October 1997. Additional articles in this issue deal with the divergence at the Reformation on the doctrine and practice of ministry, the weakness of evangelicalism today and the Roman Catholic stance on the centrality of Rome.

The two major contributors to Christian mission in the developing 'third world' are evangelicals and Roman Catholics. It is imperative we understand each other better and critically evaluate our stereotype images of each other. May Christ be Lord in the Church and in our suffering and lost world. [p. 101](#)

## Introduction

Paul G. Schrottenboer

This issue contains the papers delivered at a consultation in Venice, Italy, in October 1993 between the World Evangelical Fellowship and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. The occasion for the consultation was the appearance in 1986 of the WEF 'A Contemporary Evangelical Perspective on Roman Catholicism'. Prior to the consultation two brief meetings were held between representatives of the WEF and the Pontifical Council, first in Jerusalem in 1988 and then in Budapest in 1990. These meetings were far too brief for extensive discussion but they were helpful in pinpointing the differences between the two communions. Therefore it was proposed that a well-prepared consultation be arranged at a later date. This took place in the Casa Cardinala Piazza in Venice.

A concern from the RCC was that the most fundamental issues between them and evangelicals are not dealt with adequately in the Perspective. The 'fundamental issues', they said, are Scripture, tradition and the nature of the church. We conceded that these issues are indeed very important topics but observed that in evangelical perspective all the topics contained in the WEF statement are significant. A consensus emerged that some of the topics might serve to lead on to the discussion of other topics, and in that sense are more important than others. These were seen to be Scripture, tradition (the development of doctrine) and the nature of the church as communion.

When Pierre Duprey invited us to meet with Representatives of the Council in the Casa Cardinale, the WEF Executive Committee were pleased to accept the invitation. The accommodation at the Casa proved to be fully adequate and the atmosphere was congenial throughout. The Casa staff were considerate and helpful, especially to me because of my health problem which made walking difficult.

As the preparations for the consultation in Venice progressed, it became clear that we could not ignore the doctrine of justification. This topic arose in the earlier discussion when the RCC representatives [p. 102](#) commented that evangelicals make the doctrine of justification by faith the key to the interpretation of Scripture. The Evangelicals' reply was that this is not the case, at least not with all Evangelicals. A more useful and biblically attuned 'key' is the person and work of Christ. When the discussion on the topic for the consultation was finished it was decided that the papers should centre on Scripture, Justification, and Tradition.

In the general discussion that followed the presentation of the papers in Venice a number of issues surfaced of which we will give a brief summary.

1. All participants recognized that there is a difference in assessment of men and women in their natural state. This difference did not seem as great to the Catholics as it did to the Evangelicals. The Catholic view does not seem to take entirely seriously the biblical statement that we are dead in trespasses and sins prior to rebirth.

According to most recent papal encyclicals human nature has remained basically intact. We agreed that all people have a knowledge of God ([Rom. 1:21](#)) but argued that it should be affirmed also that the response of the unregenerate to this knowledge is to hold down the truth in unrighteousness ([Rom. 1:18](#)).

2. Dr Avery Dulles' paper was entitled 'Revelation as the Basis for Scripture and Tradition'. Commenting on the Catholic view that Scripture and Tradition together form one Word of God, including the post apostolic tradition, the Evangelical participants stressed the continuing 'over-againstness' of the scripture to the tradition of the church. The Catholics want to make tradition and scripture one inseparable whole. Dr Avery Dulles made a strong case that both Scripture and tradition flow from a single source, the revelation of God.

In the other lead paper Dr George Vandeveld spoke on 'Justification between Scripture and Tradition'. He stressed the radicality of sin and the locus of authority in Jesus Christ to whom the Scriptures bear testimony. The difference in understanding the effects on human beings, both before and after conversion, now stood in clear light.

3. In the further discussion we deprecated the fact that evangelical groups are at times called sects by Catholics. This was done, for instance in Mexico by a Catholic churchman where most of the non-Catholics referred to are Presbyterian. (The recent Encyclical 'Vita Consecrata' speaks of non-Roman Catholics as 'ecclesial communities').

The response to this was that while some bishops continue to use the term sects this is now falling into disuse. The attitude of Catholics towards other churches should be seen in the view of religious liberty adopted by Vatican II. This, said Thomas Strassmann, was a 180° change from the former position. There is no suggestion in Vatican II that Catholics have a greater right than others to civic freedom.

We received the distinct impression that our expression of hurt was not ignored. Rather we received assurance that if we would submit documented proof that Evangelicals are mistreated by Catholics, the [p. 103](#) Pontifical Council would seek to remove the offence.

4. The Evangelical Contemporary Perspective on Roman Catholicism stated that in the view of the Roman Catholic Church the path to unity in the church is for the other churches 'to come to Rome'. Monseigneur Meija said that it would be more accurate to say that 'all

should be incorporated into the Roman Catholic Church'. Stransky said that the path should lead, not to Rome as it was, nor to Rome as it is, but to Rome in the process of reformation. For reformation, he added, dialogue is needed and therefore we should no longer engage in monologues.

This was the first meeting of its kind for the WEF, perhaps for all Evangelicals. At this point, therefore, we should ask ourselves what we accomplished in the 1993 consultation in Venice. We would list the following benefits:

1. We were able to remove certain misunderstandings Catholics had concerning the evangelical position. Likewise, we heard that we should free ourselves from certain misconceptions of Catholics.

2. We highlighted certain differences in teaching concerning the church and its mission in the world. (These topics will be addressed in a consultation in October 1997).

3. We have realized more strongly that we should not again issue a statement on Catholicism without consulting with them before publication.

4. We have been confirmed in our need to accept the other participants in the dialogue on the basis of their Christian testimony even as we were accepted by Christ and by them. Together we should draw closer to him.

5. There is sufficient reason for us to continue the discussion with Roman Catholics, for the following reasons.

- Evangelicals and Catholics live and evangelize in close proximity in many areas, sometimes in amiable relationships (as in the Billy Graham Crusades) and sometimes in unhappy and even hostile relations. Since we cannot ignore Catholics, if we do not talk with them, we can only comment on them from a distance. There is merit in sitting down together to express and hopefully resolve differences.
- Much if not most of world evangelism today is done by Evangelicals and Roman Catholics. We therefore cannot avoid brushing shoulders and in some occasions entering into competition with Catholic missionaries. In addressing the lost we cannot ignore the Roman Catholic Church.
- We recognize a significant continuing difference in view between us concerning the radicality of sin both in the sinner before conversion and in the convert to Christ. The role of tradition in the church remains also in need of further joint reflection. Our experience in Venice has convinced us that we should be fully aware of the official teaching of the Catholic Church as well as important developments that occur among its theologians.

---

**Dr Paul Schrottenboer, served as the organiser secretary for the WEF Consultation with the Roman Catholic Church. p. 104**

## **Revelation as the Basis for Scripture and Tradition**

Avery Dulles, S.J.

Since this paper is composed for an ecumenical dialogue, I shall give primary attention to the official doctrine of the Catholic Church rather than to my personal theological opinions. The principal source will be the *Dei Verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation adopted by the Second Vatican Council on October 29, 1965. With the help of contemporary theologians I shall try to spell out the implications of official Catholic teaching for the precise question assigned to me. In what sense, if at all, is revelation the *basis* for Scripture and tradition? Respecting the limitations of time and space, I shall make no attempt to set forth in these pages anything resembling a complete theology of revelation.

## 1. THE BESTOWAL OF REVELATION

When the bishops assembled for the first session of Vatican II in October 1962, they were presented with several schemas, the first of which was a five-chapter draft of a dogmatic constitution to be entitled *De Fontibus Revelationis*. The first chapter depicted revelation as issuing from Scripture and Tradition, rather than being the basis for them. It explained that the sources of revelation were two, since the entire revelation is contained not in Scripture alone but in Scripture and Tradition as in two sources, though in different ways.<sup>1</sup>

When this schema came up for discussion on November 14, 1962, it was severely criticized by many of the leading bishops. Cardinal Achille Liénart of Lille faulted the schema for its failure to deal with the deeper source from which both Scripture and Tradition flow, namely the word of God. The entire tone of the schema, he objected, was too cold and scholastic, since it failed to [p.105](#) reflect love and gratitude for the mysterious ways in which God had manifested himself, especially through his incarnate Son. In this connection he remarked that the schema missed a splendid opportunity to inculcate reverence toward the word of God. 'Our separated brothers, who have such a love and veneration for the word of God' should be given an occasion to see 'that our devotion in this matter is not less than theirs'. After several further comments on the polemical tone of the draft and on its neglect of the role of the Holy Spirit, the French cardinal concluded: 'Our faith is not founded on scholastic arguments but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. It is to be regretted that the decree on the sources of revelation has not been conceived according to such a principle, unhesitatingly admitted by all, and therefore I strongly urge that it be totally rewritten.'<sup>2</sup>

The next speaker, Cardinal Joseph Frings of Cologne, spoke in similar terms.<sup>3</sup> The schema should be rejected, he held, first because of its tone and secondly because of two major doctrinal points. With regard to the tone, he asserted that the Council here spoke not with the voice of the Good Shepherd who calls his own by name but with that of the professor or judge who is eager to condemn. The schema lacked the pastoral tone for which John XXIII had called in his opening allocution at the Council. The first doctrine to which Frings objected was that of the two sources. This manner of speaking, he said, was alien to the Fathers of the church, alien to the great scholastics, including St Thomas, and

---

<sup>1</sup> This approach in terms of two sources was not original with the 1962 schema. Pius IX in his letter *Inter gravissimas* (October 20, 1870) had declared that 'Scripture and tradition are the sources of divine revelation' (*Acta Pii IX*, part 1, vol. 5, p. 259). Pius XII in the encyclical *Humani generis* (1950) followed the lead of Pius IX. See the excerpts from *Humani generis* in Denzinger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion symbolorum*, no. 3886. This anthology will henceforth be abbreviated DS.

<sup>2</sup> *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II*, vol. III, part 3 (Vatican City: Typis Polyglottis, 1974), 32–34. This collection will henceforth be abbreviated AS.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 34–36.

alien likewise to all the ecumenical councils. Although, in the order of discovery (*in ordine cognoscendi*), one may speak of two sources being used by a scholar seeking to ascertain the doctrine of revelation, it should be recognized that in the order of being (*in ordine essendi*) there is only one source, the word of God. It would be particularly unfortunate, said the German cardinal, if the Council in its opening statement were to offend the separated brothers (*fratres separati*) by emphasizing a point that no longer has the same importance that it did four centuries ago.

The second doctrine to which Frings objected was the handling of inspiration and inerrancy. The schema, he said, embraced a rigid, deductive theory, according to which the inerrancy of the Bible in all details was deduced aprioristically from a certain concept of inspiration. Some Catholic theologians hold different theories of inspiration, based on the biblical texts as they stand. Such theories should not be rejected, because it is not customary for councils to settle debates among Catholic theologians or to anathematize particular schools, but only to condemn heresies and very dangerous errors.

A succession of other speakers followed, several defending the schema but the majority opposing it for substantially the reasons already p. 106 mentioned. After a predominantly negative vote, Pope John XXIII ordered that the schema be withdrawn and that a new text be composed by a mixed commission that would be chaired jointly by Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani of the Holy Office and Cardinal Augustin Bea of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity.

The new text was circulated by mail in April 1963 and revised in the spring of 1964 on the basis of written comments from the bishops. On September 30, 1964 this revised text was discussed on the Council floor. Since there were disagreements within the drafting commission it was decided to present both majority and minority reports. The majority view, defending the text as written, was presented by Archbishop Ermenegildo Florit of Florence. In his explanation of the second paragraph, Florit lucidly summarized the position of the new text on the priority of revelation over both Scripture and tradition. He declared:

As regards the nature of revelation, it is said to be of divine origin, chiefly because it begins unconditionally from God and is carried forward by him.

In his revelatory action God is impelled by his goodness and wisdom, rather than solicited by the impotence and need of human beings. Thus the fact of revelation has a primarily theocentric character.

The constitutive elements of revelation are both the deeds wrought by God in salvation history and the words by which God himself wills his works to be explained. Hence appears the historical and sacramental character of revelation: historical, because it consists primarily in all the interventions of God, which are designated by the name of 'economy' insofar as they are unified by the single aim of procuring salvation; sacramental, moreover, because the total significance of the deeds is not known to us except by words, that is, by the 'speech of God', which is itself a historical event.

As regards the object of revelation, God himself is to be considered first of all, insofar as he reveals himself through the salutary works which he has done, and which are brought to a head in the supremely salutary event of the Incarnation of the Word, whereby Christ truly pertains to the history of every age. The logically secondary object, which however accompanies and perfects the history of salvation, is the speech of God, by which we learn the truth both about God and about human salvation. Inasmuch as God has become our brother and mediator in Christ, this truth is by no means exhausted in the intellectual order, but it demands that, in and through Christ, it should be put into practice

through communion with the most blessed Trinity: which therefore is a truly interpersonal communion.<sup>4</sup>

Because Florit, in the words just quoted, gives a very condensed summary of a single article in chapter 1, it may be desirable to expand his statement in the light of the final text of that chapter, which differs only in small details from the draft on which p.107 Florit was commenting. Like the archbishop, *Dei Verbum* describes revelation primarily as an action or process originating from God. God, out of sheer love, emerges from his silence, and enters into conversation with human beings in order to bring them into fellowship with himself and make them sharers in his divine life (DV 2). Salvation is here depicted in terms of communion, though of course there are other aspects to be considered. Vatican II could take it for granted that, as the Council of Trent had taught, justification involves the remission of original and personal sin as well as the interior renewal by which we are made heirs of eternal life (Trent, Session 6, chap. 7, DS 1528).<sup>5</sup>

The same article (DV 2) mentions in general terms the means whereby God establishes this revelatory communication: words and deeds intrinsically connected with each other. On the one hand, the works that unfold in the history of salvation exemplify and confirm what the words declare. On the other hand, the words make the deeds known and elucidate the mystery contained in them. In other terms, revelation is not conferred through uninterpreted facts or through non-factual interpretations, but through interpreted facts. The structure of word and deed is compared by Florit to that of the sacraments, in which words and actions are ordinarily joined together.

Revelation, of course, is not just a haphazard collection of revelatory words and deeds. Drawing on patristic authorities, the Council speaks of a unified plan of revelation and salvation: the economy. The teaching of Vatican II is at this point influenced by modern discussions of salvation history. The Council does not reduce the content of revelation to historical events, as some enthusiasts for salvation history have done. On the contrary, it holds that God himself, in his eternal reality, is the primary content or object of revelation. By his words and deeds in history God enables us to know him and his salvific intentions for his people.<sup>6</sup>

A further point, briefly mentioned in our quotation from Archbishop Florit, is the role of Christ in the economy. In a closely packed sentence the Council declares that Christ is 'the mediator and the fullness of the revelation'. This sentence from *Dei Verbum* 2, further explained in no. 4, demands careful consideration. In what sense is Christ the revealer, the fullness of revelation, and the mediator of revelation? p. 108

---

<sup>4</sup> AS III/3, 131–40. The minority report, given by Bishop Franic[v] of Split, Yugoslavia, dealt only with the disputed question on the relationship between the contents of Scripture and tradition, which concerns chapter II on the transmission of revelation. Franic[v] defended the position represented by the schema of 1962 to the effect that there are some revealed truths preserved for the church in tradition alone. See AS III/3, 124–29.

<sup>5</sup> A possible weakness of *Dei Verbum* is its failure to deal with the negative aspects of the human condition. As Joseph Ratzinger observes in commenting on article 3, 'The whole vast subject of sin, law, and the anger of God is gathered together here in the one little word *lapsus* (*Post eorum lapsus* ...) and thus is given neither its full weight nor is it taken seriously enough. The pastoral optimism of an age that is concerned with understanding and reconciliation seems to have somewhat blinded the Council to a not immaterial section of the testimony of Scripture'. Ratzinger's commentary on chapters 1 and 2 of *Dei Verbum* may be found in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler, 5 vols. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 3:155–98; quotation from 174.

<sup>6</sup> See the first and last sentences of DV 2, which speak of God revealing himself.



As the eternal Word of God, Christ is identified with God the revealer. God reveals by means of his Word, the Logos, the reflection of his glory ([Heb. 1:3](#)). The Word, when he comes into the world, becomes the agent who makes the Father known ([Jn. 1:18](#)). No one can know the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son reveals the Father ([Mt. 11:27](#)).

Christ is the fullness of revelation because he is the self-revealing truth, the expression of all that the Father has to say. Everything else is simply a preparation for, or a gloss upon, the essential message that God gives in his Son. At the Council one of the bishops (Archbishop P. Zoungrana of Ouagadougou, Upper Volta, speaking in the name of sixty-seven African bishops) declared that the very person of Jesus Christ is divine revelation. He supported this opinion by alluding to biblical texts such as [1 Jn. 1:2-3](#), [Jn. 14:9-10](#), [Col. 1:15](#), [Heb. 1:3](#), and [Mt. 17:5](#), as well as a famous passage from St. John of the Cross's *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* (Bk. II, chap. 22).<sup>7</sup> The great Spanish mystic, after quoting from Hebrews ([1:1-2](#)) the passage that God in these last days has spoken to us in his Son, goes on to say that if Christians were to ask God for visions and revelations, God could reply: 'I have already told you all things in my Word, my Son, and if I have no other word; what answer or revelation can I now make that would surpass this? Fasten your eyes on Him alone, because in Him I have spoken and revealed all, and in Him you shall discover even more than you ask for and desire.' John of the Cross then cites from Paul's letter to the Colossians that in Christ 'are hidden all the treasures of the wisdom and knowledge of God' ([Col. 2:3](#)).<sup>8</sup>

Neither St. John of the Cross nor Vatican II intended to say that a passing glance at the man Jesus Christ is an adequate revelation of God's total plan of salvation. As the Constitution later explains, Christ reveals God by living among human beings, by speaking what the fourth Gospel calls 'the words of God' (in [3:34](#)), by his symbolic acts and miracles, and especially by his death and resurrection, crowned by the sending of the Spirit of truth (DV 4).

It is relatively easy, from the perspective of Christian faith, to acknowledge that Christ is both the revealer and the culminating revelation of God. More difficult, perhaps, is the thesis that Christ is the mediator of all revelation. In the perspectives of Vatican II there is only one economy of revelation. Every element in the economy finds its true revelatory meaning in relation to Christ, the centre, who stands first in the order of the divine intention. The saving truth that is mediated through nature and history comes from him and finds its final significance in him. In the Old Testament Christ the Logos was at work giving anticipations of himself, preparing [p. 109](#) the way for his own advent with this outlook, declare that the gospel was 'kept secret for long ages, but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles' ([Rom. 16-25-26](#); cf. [1 Cor. 19:1-11](#)). The latent significance of all the types and prophecies of the Old Testament

---

<sup>7</sup> AS III/3, 212-14.

<sup>8</sup> St. John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book II, chap. 22, nos. 5-6; in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1973), 180-81.

becomes manifest in the incarnate Son.<sup>9</sup> The total message of God, spread out in the history of salvation, appears in concentrated form in Christ, the *Verbum abbreviatum*.<sup>10</sup>

*Dei Verbum* 3 gives some indications of the ways in which revelation was given prior to the Incarnation. The paragraph begins by mentioning the function of the Word in the creation and conservation of the world. According to biblical texts such as [Romans 1:19–20](#), God offers lasting testimony to himself in the works of creation. This general (or ‘cosmic’) revelation appears to be something different from natural theology—the work of reason by which the human mind, so to speak, climbs up to God.<sup>11</sup> Rather, reference is made to the activity of God who addresses the human spirit through the order of creation. The same idea seems to be conveyed by Paul in his speech at Lystra, in which he says the God ‘has not left himself without a witness in doing good—giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with good and your hearts with joy’ ([Acts 14:17](#)). In its Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* Vatican II stresses the universal availability of cosmic revelation: ‘All believers of whatever religion have always heard his [God’s] revealing voice in the discourse of creatures’ (GS 36). Since the Word manifests aspects of himself in the whole work of creation ([Jn. 1:3](#); [Col. 1:15–17](#); [Heb. 1:3, 10; 11:3](#)), revelation through nature is in its way Christological.

The next few sentences give a very brief summary of the course of salvation history. Although this history is not knowable to us today except with the help of Scripture, it is properly placed in chapter 1 of *Dei Verbum* because the patriarchs, Moses, and the prophets received revelation even before the Hebrew Scriptures, let alone the Christian Bible, existed.

## 2. THE COMPLETION OF REVELATION

When, if at all, does divine revelation come to an end? A decree of the Holy Office, in 1907, had condemned the Modernist proposition that ‘the revelation that constitutes **P. 110** the object of Catholic faith was not complete with the apostles’ (*Lamentabili sane*, prop. 21; DS 3421). Some Fathers at Vatican II, going even beyond this teaching about ‘the object of Catholic faith’, wanted the Council to declare that revelation had ceased, or was closed, with the death of the apostles.<sup>12</sup>

As is evident from the texts quoted above, Vatican II preferred to avoid this negative manner of speaking and to concentrate on Christ himself as the consummation of revelation. According to Christian faith the supreme and unsurpassable revelation of God has been made in Christ, the incarnate Son. The Christ event, properly understood in its total context, teaches all that we can wish or hope to know by way of revelation. Against progressivists such as Joachim of Fiore and his disciples, the Catholic Church teaches that there will be no post-Christian dispensation of the Holy Spirit, since the Spirit can declare

---

<sup>9</sup> Thus the Council can say in DV 16, echoing a passage from Augustine: ‘Thus God, the inspirer and author of the books of both Testaments, has in his wisdom arranged that the New Testament be hidden in the Old, and the Old be made manifest in the New (cf. [Lk. 22:20](#); [1 Cor. 11:25](#)).’ In a footnote the text here refers to Augustine, *Quaest. in Hept.* 2:73; PL 34:623; CChr 33:106.

<sup>10</sup> See Henri de Lubac, *La révélation divine*, 3d ed. (Paris: Cerf. 1983), 81–82.

<sup>11</sup> Far from rejecting naturally acquired knowledge of God, Vatican II affirms this in DV 6, but makes it clear that achievement of reason falls short of the knowledge bestowed by revelation. In contrast to Vatican I, which spoke of natural knowledge before revelation and faith, Vatican II discusses the natural knowledge of God only after treating revealed knowledge and faith in DV 1–5.

<sup>12</sup> See *relationes* of July 3, 1964 and Nov. 30, 1964; AS III/3, p. 77 and IV/1, p. 345.

only the revelation given in Christ ([Jn. 16:12-15](#)). *Dei Verbum* therefore preferred the positive formulation that ‘the Christian dispensation, as the new and definitive covenant, will never pass away. No new public revelation is to be expected before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. [1 Tim. 6:14](#) and [Tit. 2:13](#))’ (DV 4). In this final ‘manifestation’ of the mystery of Christ the same revelation will be proffered in a new mode, that of glory, rather than, as at present, under the veil of faith. Because the eschatological revelation will clearly disclose what God has already attested in Christ, it will confirm the definitive character of the revelation we now possess.

Notwithstanding the centrality of the Paschal event, Christian revelation was not entirely complete with the Ascension and the day of Pentecost. The early church needed further interventions from the Holy Spirit so that it could rightly grasp the meaning of what God had disclosed in his Son and ascertain the essential structures and mission of the church itself. Karl Rahner makes this point persuasively:

Theologically speaking, we certainly cannot hold that the Church was already complete on the day of Pentecost. The Church indeed had then visible existence as a community, a legal structure (at least in its basic traits) and the Holy Spirit. Still, she was not yet complete. There really existed, in the literal sense of Batiffol’s term, an *église naissante*, the Church in the process of birth, and the process took a certain amount of time. In order to understand this point, we have only to recall that the Church, whose ‘only’ mission, as it rightly said, is to conserve and interpret divine revelation, did not yet possess its complete being at Pentecost for the simple reason that there was further revelation after Pentecost (e.g. concerning the Canon of Scripture). The Apostolic Church had both more and less than the later Church’s mission of conservation and interpretation; it had more because it was still [able] to receive new revelation, and it had less because it did not yet possess all the truths which the later Church p. 111 was given to preserve, since they had not yet all been revealed.<sup>13</sup>

With the end of the apostolic period, which coincides approximately with the completion of the New Testament, the era of constitutive revelation came to a close. Nothing substantively new is added to ‘the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints’ ([Jude 3](#)), the ‘deposit of faith’ entrusted to the apostolic church ([1 Tim. 6:20](#); [2 Tim. 1:14](#)).

The completion of constitutive revelation should not be understood as the cessation of revelation itself. As we have seen, Vatican II taught that God’s revealing voice is still heard in the discourse of creatures (GS 36). God continues to speak to his people when they gather to hear the Scriptures proclaimed in the church (SC 7; cf. DV 8, 21, etc). He speaks through the voice of conscience (GS 16) and through the ‘signs of the times’, which are to be interpreted ‘under the light of the gospel’ (GS 4, 11, 44). All these forms of ‘speaking’ may be included under the category of revelation, provided that they are not seen as adding to the content of the definitive revelation given in the Incarnate Son.<sup>14</sup> Emphasizing the permanence of the apostolic deposit, *Dei Verbum* treats God’s subsequent conversation with his people under the rubric of ‘The Transmission of Revelation’, the title of its second chapter.

### 3. APOSTOLIC TRADITION AND REVELATION

---

<sup>13</sup> Karl Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, revised translation (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964), 47–48; cf. German original, *Über die Schriftinspiration* (Freiburg: Herder, 1958), 53.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of the problem of ‘continuing’ or ‘dependent’ revelation, see Gerald O’Collins, *Retrieving fundamental Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1993), chap. 7, pp. 87–97.

According to the teaching of *Dei Verbum*, which echoes in part that of Vatican I, God in his providence saw to it that what he had revealed for the world's salvation would not be forgotten or corrupted (DV 7; cf. Vatican I. *Pastor aeternus*, DS 3050). What was to be preserved and handed down was nothing other than the gospel, which Vatican II, following Trent, described as God's revelation in Christ, promised in advance through the prophets and promulgated in its fullness by Christ (DV 7; cf. Trent, DS 1501). As we have already seen, Vatican II, under the prodding of cardinals such as Liénart and Frings, distanced itself from the rather academic view, current in the nineteenth century, that Scripture and tradition were the sources of revelation, and returned to the more traditional doctrine. Like the Council of Trent, Vatican II characterized the gospel of Jesus Christ as 'the source of all saving truth and moral discipline' (ibid.).

*Dei Verbum* gave a somewhat fuller description than did Trent of the mode by which the apostles transmitted to others the revelation they had received. Whereas Trent concentrated primarily on the verbal element in the gospel and apostolic tradition, Vatican II mentioned also the non-verbal components: 'The apostles handed on, by their oral preaching, exemplary actions, and p. 112 ordinances, what they had received from Christ's lips, his way of life or his works, or had learned by the prompting of the Holy Spirit' (DV 7). Only after saying this did the Council mention the New Testament: 'The apostolic mandate was fulfilled, too, by those apostles and apostolic men who, under the inspiration of the same Holy Spirit, committed the message of salvation to writing' (ibid.).

For more than a century after its foundation, the church was without a canonical list of Holy Scriptures. The Christians did of course read the sacred books of the Jews, but there seems not to have been as yet a 'Hebrew canon', still less an 'Alexandrian canon' or a 'Christian canon', accepted by the church. Instead there was a rather indefinite set of books, including the Pentateuch, the prophets, the psalms and other 'hagiographa'. As we can see from the New Testament, the Christians in their citations made no clear distinction between books that were later received as canonical and others that are today regarded by most Christians as apocryphal. For example, the Letter of Jude cites the Assumption of Moses and the Book of Enoch as authoritative.<sup>15</sup> We may therefore agree with Oscar Cullmann that the oral proclamation of the gospel had a clear pre-eminence over the written during the first few decades of the Christian era.<sup>16</sup> The spoken gospel, even though Paul and others received it through the church, was not seen as a merely human tradition, because the Lord was held to stand behind the apostles as they transmitted his words and deeds. In Cullmann's words, 'Transmission by the apostles is not effected by men, but by Christ the Lord himself who thereby imparts this revelation.'<sup>17</sup>

Paul can therefore insist that the tradition he proclaims is truly the word of God ([1 Th. 2:13](#); cf. [Gal. 1:8-9](#); [1 Cor. 7:25](#); [11:23](#)). He puts his oral doctrine and his letters on the same authoritative level ([2 Th. 2:15](#)). The epistles of Paul began to be collected at a relatively early period, thus preparing them to be incorporated into what would eventually become the New Testament (cf. [2 Pt. 3:16](#)).

In one concise sentence Vatican II summarizes the stage of oral apostolic preaching: 'The apostles, after the Lord's Ascension, passed on to their hearers what he had said and

---

<sup>15</sup> [Jude 6, 9](#), and [14-15](#). Allusions to, and echoes from, books that Protestants do not accept as canonical may be found in [Rom. 1:19-32](#) ([Wis. 13:1-15](#)), [1 Pt. 1:7](#) ([Wis. 3:5-6](#)), and [Heb. 11:35](#) ([2 Mac. 6-7](#)). These books, however, belong to the Catholic Old Testament.

<sup>16</sup> See especially the essay 'La Tradition', which appears in English translation as chapter 4 of Oscar Cullmann's *The Early Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), 55-99.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 73.

done, together with that fuller understanding which they now possessed, instructed by the glorious life of Christ and taught by the light of the Spirit of Truth' (DV 19, with references to a number of passages from the fourth Gospel).

An official footnote at this point in *Dei Verbum* refers to the Instruction of the Pontifical Biblical Commission *Sancta Mater Ecclesia* (1964), p. 113 which points out that after the resurrection of Jesus the apostles 'faithfully explained his life and words'. As an example the Biblical Commission mentions the speech of Peter to Cornelius and his household, summarized in [Acts 10:34-43](#). Just as Jesus after his resurrection interpreted to his disciples the words of the Old Testament as well as his own previous teaching ([Lk. 24:27, 44-45](#); cf. [Acts 1:3](#)), the disciples later interpreted his words and deeds according to the needs of their listeners. "Devoting themselves to the ministry of the word," they preached and made use of various modes of speaking that were suited to their own purpose and the mentality of their listeners' (SME 8, with reference to [Acts 6:4](#)). For this reason, the Biblical Commission observes, it is necessary to distinguish in the surviving records of the apostolic preaching a variety of literary forms such as catechesis, story, *testimonium*, hymn, doxology, and prayer.

As this last sentence implies, the apostolic proclamation was much more than a mere relaying of historical information about the words and deeds of Jesus. It was a creative interpretation of the teaching and career of Jesus, accomplished under the revealing light of the Holy Spirit. Because the early tradition is ascribed to the Lord as its true author, it may be seen as revelation.

Although the church did not yet have a fixed collection of canonical Scriptures, it was not a totally fluid community. Tradition, without being crystallized in rigid formulas, was a stabilizing force. The apostles exhorted their converts to hold fast to the traditions that had been committed to them ([2 Th. 2:15](#); [1 Cor. 15:1-11](#)). These traditions, according to Vatican II, were not merely historical and doctrinal; they included 'everything that helps the people of God to live a holy life and grow in faith' (DV 8). Vatican II's Constitution on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum concilium*, explains in greater detail the mission of the apostles to 'carry on the work of salvation that they were announcing, by means of sacrifice and sacraments, around which the whole of liturgical life revolves (SC 6). The formation of the will, emotions, and imagination of the faithful through prayer and actual practice is an integral part of the tradition.

The community and its tradition were under the authoritative direction of the apostles who, as *Dei Verbum* reminds us, 'left as their successors the bishops, "handing on their own teaching function to them"' (DV 7).<sup>18</sup> The Pastoral Epistles enable us to glimpse the handing over of apostolic authority from the apostles to the heads of local churches through delegates such as Timothy and Titus. The Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*; cites Tertullian and Irenaeus to the effect that the bishops became the guardians of the apostolic tradition (LG 20).<sup>19</sup> For these second-century p. 114 theologians the teaching of the apostolic churches and their bishops was the principal norm of faith.

#### 4. THE SCRIPTURES AND REVELATION

In the course of time the church did develop its own Bible, formed out of a combination of Jewish Scriptures with newly written Christian Scriptures. The apostolic message was

---

<sup>18</sup> The quotation is from Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, III.3.1; PG 7:848; SC 210:31.

<sup>19</sup> Reference is here made to several patristic texts, including Tertullian, *De praescriptione haereticorum*, 32; PL 2:52-53; Cchr 1:212-13; and Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.*, III.3.1; PG 7:848; SC 210:31.

committed to writing by the apostles and their co-workers (DV 7). Recognizing the eminent status of the Bible as a document of revelation, *Dei Verbum* devotes the last four of its six chapters to the Bible. In line with the teaching of earlier popes and councils, it asserts that the biblical books are inspired; that is to say, they were written under the influence of the Holy Spirit (DV 8). The nature of inspiration is explained in ways that bypass the mythological (or at least metaphorical) conceptions that had been current among the rabbis and some early Church Fathers. Inspiration, as understood by Vatican II, involves neither a 'mantic' or 'ecstatic' loss of the writer's faculties nor a process of verbal dictation from God to the human scribe. In positive terms, God is said to have brought about the composition of the sacred books by employing human agents, using their own powers and faculties, so that they wrote as authors in a true sense, and yet in such a way that they set down all that God intended, and nothing else (DV 11). The Council does not go into a speculative discussion of how God brings about this result.

In Catholic theology, Scripture is often said to be the inspired word of God. This terminology, correct though it be, may give rise to some confusion, since orally delivered prophetic utterance can also be the inspired word of God. What is distinctive to the Bible is that it is the written word that comes about through divine inspiration.

Vatican II asserts that the Holy Scriptures contain the word of God and, because inspired, really are the word of God (DV 24). Their special dignity is that, 'having been inspired by God and committed to writing once for all, they impact the word of God in unalterable form' (DV 21).

Inspiration is not the same thing as revelation. When he reveals, God communicates new knowledge of himself. When he inspires, God moves a human being to communicate and directs the process so that it achieves the divinely intended end. To say that the Scriptures are inspired is not *eo ipso* to say that they are revealed but only to say that they record what God wanted to be recorded.

Many Catholics make a distinction between the revealed word of God (described in the first chapter of *Dei Verbum*) and the inspired word of scripture (discussed especially in the third and sixth chapters). While this distinction has merit, it should not be pressed as though revelation and inspiration were mutually exclusive. For three reasons a very close connection must be acknowledged.

(1) It is quite possible for God to make a revelation through oral or written inspiration. A prophet or apostle who is moved to proclaim a message may be the organ by which God reveals. In the words of von [p. 115](#) Balthasar, 'Revelation to the prophets and promulgation by the prophets tend to merge together, and form virtually a single act of revelation effected by the Spirit in the service of the coming or past incarnation of the Son.... Revelation, then, is effected partly before the writing, partly in the actual writing; in other words, Scripture participates in God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ through the Spirit.'<sup>20</sup> Thus the oracles of Isaiah and of the Book of Revelation (to mention only two examples) are simultaneously inspired and revealed.

(2) Even when Scripture is not proposing new and original oracles, its contents coincide in great part with what has previously been revealed. This is evidently the case where the Scripture is laying down articles of faith, as occurs in credal or confessional passages such as [Dt. 6:4-5](#), [Rom. 10:8-9](#), and [1 Cor. 15:1-4](#). Since the prophetic and apostolic proclamation is by its nature transitory, Scripture is needed to give it a public and enduring existence, so that it becomes available in stable form for future generations.

---

<sup>20</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Word and Revelation: Essays in Theology 1* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964), 11.

(3) The particular events and words of revelation given at particular points of salvation history take on a new significance when viewed in the light of the whole biblical canon, which surveys the course of God's revelatory work from the dawn of history to the end of the apostolic age. This context is indivisible. One cannot carve the Bible up into revelatory and non-revelatory passages, as though it were possible to make an anthology of the former, excluding the latter. To excise parts of the Bible would alter the meaning of the whole.

A distinguished Catholic exegete has objected that certain passages in the Old Testament, such as the genealogies in the first nine chapters of 1 Chronicles, contain no revelation.<sup>21</sup> My own impression would be that these chapters contribute to our grasp of the self-understanding of the people of God of the Old Testament, and more especially their understanding of the Davidic monarchy, which is a type of the kingship of Christ. It might be difficult to distil propositions of faith from these chapters, but they affect our comprehension of what was fulfilled in Christ and the church, and hence pertain to revelation.

The revelatory character of the Bible as a whole has often been seen as excluding error in any part. The doctrine of inerrancy was vigorously debated at Vatican II, with some defending and others attacking the prevalent Scholastic formulations. p. 116 Eventually a satisfactory compromise was reached. Omitting any sweeping claim of inerrancy in all respects, the Fathers contented themselves with declaring: 'Since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation' (DV 11).

Some interpret this statement as though the Bible could be divided into passages that present divinely given truth and others that present fallible human opinions. But according to the intentions of the Theological Commission there was no question of dividing the Bible into materially distinct parts, some of which would be subject to error and others guaranteed against error. The distinction is to be understood in terms of the formal object, that is to say, the aspect under which the Bible is considered. When seen with reference to the communication of salutary truth, the Bible as a whole is free from error. Every passage has its place in this communicative process, since the purpose of the Holy Spirit in inspiring the sacred writers was to point the way to salvation. Certain sentences, if read with a view to scientific or historical information, or without regard to the total biblical context, might seem to be misleading, but when seen in the framework of the entire Bible, viewed as the inspired record of God's gradual self-revelation to his people, these passages can be grasped as belonging to the divine message of salvation, and thus as revelatory.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Raymond E. Brown, in *The Critical Meaning of the Bible* (New York: Paulist, 1981), 7, criticizes the position of Vatican II (and my own) to the effect that the whole Bible not only transmits, but is, the word of God. He objects to this statement on the ground that it seems to make inspiration and revelation coextensive. He goes on to say (p. 8) that for his purposes revelation applies only to 'biblical claims to receive or transmit the word of God' and not to the church's understanding of the Bible as the word of God. This seems to me to be an unwarranted narrowing of the concept of revelation.

<sup>22</sup> On this point see A. Grillmeier, 'Excursus on Article 11', in Vorgrimler, *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, 3:233-37; Johannes Beumer, *Die katholische Inspirationslehre zwischen Vatikanum I und II* (Stuttgart: Katholische Bibelwerk 1967), 92-95; more briefly, R.A.F. MacKenzie in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter A. Abbott (New York: America Press, 1966), 119, note 31. Grillmeier and Beumer both point out that the Theological Commission, in its responses to proposed changes in the text, insisted that the text implied no restriction of inspiration or inerrancy to certain portions of Scripture. For an argument to the

If this be true, it follows that the Bible, inspired as a whole to guide the church in the way of salvation, is a document of revelation. The church does not interpret it from a merely human point of view, as a document of science or secular history. To understand what God wanted to communicate for the sake of our salvation, we must read the Scripture, as a work composed under the influence of the Holy Spirit, with the help of that same Spirit (DV 12). If the interpreter stops at the merely philological or empirical level, without rising to the perspective of faith, the resulting exegesis will be deficient, with the result that the word of God will not be found in the sacred text. But once the interpreter adopts the perspective of faith, reading the Bible from within the living, worshipping, praying church, the whole Bible can be seen as revelatory and as the word of God. In its total significance p. 117 it communicates what is salvifically important about God and God's ways.

With reference to the theme of the present paper it must be asked whether the Bible is a constitutive element in the conferral of revelation or whether it simply transmits a revelation already given. In the light of the preceding paragraphs we can say that it both transmits past revelation and completes it. As noted above, the particular revelations that had occurred in the course of salvation history, including the apostolic age, were recorded in the Bible, which consequently serves as a channel of transmission. But when so recorded the revelations acquired added full significance as components of a single revelation and became available for the guidance of God's people. Since Christian revelation is by its very nature organic, public, and enduring, the production of the inspired text is integral to the very bestowal of revelation. By God's grace, the church in its formative period was able to express its faith in an original manner that could enlighten all future generations. In producing normative documents of faith by which the church of later ages was to measure itself, the apostolic church was able to make itself, for the sake of posterity, a 'historically tangible concretization of God's grace in Christ'.<sup>23</sup> The production of the Scripture therefore pertains to the process by which the church is constituted as a self-perpetuating community of faith.

## 5. POST-BIBLICAL TRADITION

The church's acquisition of a full set of canonical Scriptures was not accomplished in a moment, but it would seem that by the middle or end of the second century the main questions had been settled. Debates concerning the precise limits of the canon continued, of course, down through the fourth century, and have erupted from time to time since that date. Only with the passage of time did the councils of the church (beginning late in the fourth century) seek to achieve complete agreement on the canon. For present purposes, however, we may regard the canon as substantially settled in the practice of the church some time before the councils issued their decrees.

If the late second century is an acceptable date (and I recognize the plausibility of other dates), one may say with Oscar Cullmann and others that the church drew up its biblical canon at a time when oral tradition was becoming unreliable, as may be seen, for instance, from the surviving fragments from Papias, who accepted many later legends as though they were apostolic traditions.<sup>24</sup> Cullmann combines this assertion with another, which is more controversial. He regards the adoption of the canon as a great act of

---

effect that Vatican II disavowed the idea of biblical inerrancy see Oswald Loretz, *The Truth of the Bible* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 92-95 and passim.

<sup>23</sup> Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, 48-49.

<sup>24</sup> Cullmann, *Early Church*, 89.



humility by which the church submitted all its judgments to the norm of Scripture, as though the last word were that of Scripture.<sup>25</sup> This position rests upon a theory of the formal sufficiency and clarity of [p. 118](#) Scripture that Catholics find unconvincing. The acceptance of the Scriptures as a trustworthy guide does not logically demand the rejection of any other guide, at least where the two do not conflict. In its proclamation the church has used its authenticated tradition conjointly with Scripture and not in opposition to it.

Cullmann's position, to be sure, contains an element of truth. By the time the canon was drawn up, tradition as a distinct quarry of revealed truth was disappearing from view. In the first few generations the apostolic churches, under the direction of their bishops, were accepted as authoritative witnesses to particular teachings and practices instituted by the apostles. As late as the sixteenth century the Council of Trent rejected the Protestant *sola scriptura* by asserting that the church was perpetually bound to unwritten traditions that had been passed down from the apostles as it were from hand to hand (Session IV, DS 1501).

The Council of Trent refrained from giving examples. In the conciliar discussions mention was made of practices such as infant baptism, the sign of the cross, and turning toward the East in prayer, and of beliefs such as the perpetual virginity of Mary and the identity of Anne as Mary's mother.<sup>26</sup> Many of the Fathers at Trent spoke as though some revealed truths were contained in tradition alone. But with the introduction of more critical methods in history, increasing numbers of Catholic theologians came to the conclusion that at our present distance from the apostolic age, we have no way of historically verifying the apostolic origin of doctrines and practices that are not attested by the New Testament.

Aware of this difficulty, Vatican II adopted a somewhat different concept of tradition, partly drawn from the Tübingen theologians of the nineteenth century. Unlike Trent, which had spoken only of traditions (in the plural), *Dei Verbum* spoke of tradition in the singular.<sup>27</sup> Tradition, for the recent council, consisted not in particular truths but in a dynamic process of transmission under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. By continuously handing down the faith received from the apostles 'the Church, in its teaching, life, and worship, perpetuates and transmits to all generations all that it is and all that it believes (DV 8). This is seen as progressing in the Church, bringing about a growth of understanding that moves forward to the day when the words of God reach their fulfilment in the Church' (ibid.).

This global, dynamic, non-verbal concept of tradition differs markedly from the atomized, static, and oral view usually (but somewhat too simplistically) attributed to the Council of Trent. Far from entering into competition with Scripture, tradition disposes the faithful to apprehend more fully and accurately what is implied in Scripture. By dwelling in [p. 119](#) the faith-community and participating in its living heritage, the Christian believer becomes more responsive to what authors such as Cullmann call the interior witness of the Holy Spirit.<sup>28</sup>

As an example of what is known only with the help of tradition, and not by Scripture alone, *Dei Verbum*-mentions 'the full canon of the biblical books' (DV 8). This statement

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, 'On the Interpretation of the Tridentine Decree on Tradition', in Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger, *Revelation and Tradition* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), 50-68, 73-78. See esp. 61.

<sup>27</sup> The only exception is in a quotation from [2 Th. 2:15](#) in DV 8.

<sup>28</sup> Cullmann, *Early Church*, 97.

need not and should not be understood as though the apostles or their associates had provided a full list of the canonical books, which was then handed down by word of mouth. As Karl Rahner shows, this hypothesis is historically unfounded and is difficult to reconcile with the known facts about the history of the canon. The meaning is rather that the post-apostolic church was in a position to judge which books were pure expressions of the faith because the church already possessed the apostolic faith, thanks to the tradition that had been handed on. In Rahner's apt expression, the church had acquired a certain 'connaturality' with the authentic revelation through its participation in the living tradition of faith, and was thereby equipped to discern the books of the apostolic age that embodied the truth faith.<sup>29</sup> The decision regarding the canon is an early instance of what Catholic theologians call the development of doctrine.

Without seeking to settle the question raised at the beginning of this article, that of the 'material sufficiency' of Scripture, Vatican II seemed to favour the view that the totality of revelation is somehow contained both in Scripture and in apostolic tradition. A number of passages from Vatican II suggest that there are no truths contained in Scripture alone or in tradition alone. 'Sacred tradition and sacred Scripture are in close connection and communion, for both of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, merge together in some fashion and tend toward the same end' (DV 9). 'Tradition and Scripture together form a single deposit of the word of God, entrusted to the Church' (DV 10). They are so intimately connected with each other, and with the magisterium, that none of the three can stand without the other two, but all together contribute effectively to the salvation of souls (ibid.).

With regard to the revelatory character of tradition, a distinction should be made between tradition in its apostolic and post-apostolic phases. In each case we have to do with apostolic tradition (tradition stemming from the apostles), not with merely ecclesiastical traditions (those originating with the church). In the apostolic period the tradition was still developing under the active influence of the Lord, who was at work through the Holy Spirit, completing the revelation. In the post-apostolic stage we have to do with tradition as the transmission of a revelation that is already complete.

Even in its post-apostolic phase tradition is not a merely human process of transmission. In every generation tradition is sustained by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit makes the documents of revelation, so to speak, come alive, so that the [p. 120](#) church can hear God's revealing voice in the Scripture. Thanks to tradition, says the Council, 'the Holy Spirit is active, making the living voice of the gospel resound in the Church, and through it in the world, bringing believers into the fullness of the truth, and making the word of Christ dwell in them in all its richness' (DV 9). Tradition enables the word of Scripture to become effective as revelation for its readers today, rather than being a document of merely historical interest.

## 6. CONCLUSION

With reference to the question proposed for this paper, we may say that the first schema of the Vatican II Constitution on Revelation was rejected partly because it seemed to give the impression that Scripture and tradition were the basis of revelation, rather than the reverse. While the schema could be defended as describing the order of discovery, the Council preferred to follow the genetic or causal order. In successive chapters of the final text it reversed the order of the schema, taking up first revelation, then tradition, and finally Scripture. This order is fundamentally correct insofar as Scripture presupposes

---

<sup>29</sup> Rahner, *Inspiration in the Bible*, 67–72.

tradition, while tradition presupposes revelation. But the public, historical revelation that lies at the basis of Christian faith was not complete until it was proclaimed in the apostolic tradition and formulated in the inspired language of Holy Scripture. Even then, the apostolic tradition and the canonical Scriptures still had to be recognized and interpreted in the tradition of the church in order for the revelation to be actual in later generations. The relationship, therefore, is not linear but rather circular. Revelation gives rise to tradition and Scripture, but Scripture and tradition, in turn, transmit revelation and make it resound in the minds and hearts of believers today.

---

Dr Avery Dulles, SJ teaches at Fordham University, Bronx, NY, USA. p. 121

# Scripture and Tradition: An Evangelical Response

Henri Blocher

It is almost too great an honour to be called on to respond to such a distinguished scholar as Dr Dulles, whose fame has reached my shores. Yet I am grateful indeed for it and for the opportunity to learn further from our exchanges. Though difficult, the task is not impossible: the balance and clarity of the paper render it feasible, and also the fact that I was not disconcerted by the development of the argument as I easily recognized a perfect expression of the moderate conservative stance, the one favoured by the highest authorities in the Church.

The lack of consensus in the Evangelical-Roman Catholic relation makes itself apparent at the outset of our enterprise. There is no Evangelical document which would enjoy in our community a status comparable to that of *Dei verbum*. The relatively high degree of spiritual and doctrinal consensus among Evangelicals is not nearly enough to change their taste for independence and, even, a mild organizational anarchy. Since Evangelicals understand themselves to be the true heirs of the Protestant Reformation, our point of reference is the Reformers' teaching, and the various confessions which issued from the Reformation, especially the fuller ones, the *Confessio helvetica posterior*, and the Westminster Confession. In some respects, they match the Council constitutions. In recent times, the Chicago Statement of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy—Summit I (October 1978) stands as a landmark for the majority view within the World Evangelical Fellowship constituency (without commanding a unanimous approval): the leading theologian behind its wording, Dr James I. Packer, now of Regent's College, Vancouver, is probably the best-known, and loved, systematician in the Evangelical world. The symposia emanating from the largest and most prestigious divinity schools<sup>1</sup> also give

---

<sup>1</sup> D.A. Carson & John D. Woodbridge (of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School), ed., *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983) and *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986); Harvie M. Conn (of Westminster Theological Seminary), ed., *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic. A Tradition. A Challenge, A Debate* (Grand Rapids: Baker Bk H., 1988). In French, we may add Paul Wells, ed., *Dieu parle! Etudes sur*

an influential indication of Evangelical views. However, I cannot hide the fact that referring to these texts is a more subjective p. 122 choice than Dr Dulles' turning to the *Acta Synodalia*.

## I. THEOPNEUSTOS GRAPHÈ

When minds meet, there is no need for much elaboration. But I greet with joy and gratitude the large measure of agreement between Dr Dulles' exposition of the nature of Scripture, Revelation, Inspiration, and Evangelical conviction. What he says beautifully of Christ as the Word and fullness of Revelation (pp. 107–108), of the Bible as 'the *written* word [of God] that comes about through divine inspiration (p. 114), of Revelation and inspiration as closely connected (p. 114f), of inspiration as different from mantic forms and mechanical dictation (p. 114), even of natural revelation—not natural theology—(p. 109), harmonizes well with the beliefs dearest to Evangelicals. We are closer here (and this is no surprise) than Evangelicals are to Liberal Protestants.

Occasionally, we would bring a nuance to the statements as they stand. Are nuances the seeds of more obvious differences? While accepting the interlacing of deeds and words in divine revelation (pp. 106ff), and rejoicing at the refusal to reduce 'the content of revelation to historical events' (p. 107), some of us would still wish for a stronger distinction between them and a stronger emphasis on the revelatory function of the words. The primary function of God's acts is to *effect* salvation and judgment, to create and to transform, to undo the enemy's work—to alter existence; if God is revealed in them, as he truly is, it is an added advantage. When he *tells* us the meaning of his doings, how his character is reflected in them, and when he describes himself, the primary function is to confer knowledge. It is not symmetrical.

Similarly the acceptable definition of the aim of inspiration 'in such a way that they [the biblical writers] wrote all that God intended' (p. 114); could be stronger: it does not spell out that God intended them to write his own word, himself being the primary author. Presumably, Dr Dulles would endorse this elucidation as he definitely maintains that the Holy Scriptures *are* the word of God, and staunchly resists Dr Raymond Brown's denial (n. 21, p. 115). Yet, I have the uneasy feeling that the emphasis on divine authorship is weaker than it used to be—in this centenary year, we may recall *Providentissimus Deus* ...

The mention of Dr R. Brown revives a serious concern of Evangelicals. While we appreciate strong dogmatic statements of the truthfulness and divine authority of Scripture, we observe that a high proportion of Roman Catholic scholars, in the biblical and dogmatic fields, fully share the critical views of their Liberal colleagues—views that appear to be destructive of biblical authority and truthfulness, p. 123 as these Liberal colleagues will readily grant or openly claim. Abbé René Laurentin tells of the sally of a wellknown and representative Roman Catholic theologian: 'The annoying thing, in the resurrection accounts, is the empty tomb ...'<sup>2</sup> The discrepancy between the actual handling of Scripture among university professors and the official bibliographic dogma raises doubts in Evangelical minds as to the real import of the latter. The phrase 'a creative interpretation' applied to the apostolic proclamation of Christ (p. 113) is not designed to allay their fears.

Along the same line, Dr Dulles is happy with the 'satisfactory compromise' which was reached, by the Council, on biblical inerrancy (p. 116). I must confess that I should

---

*la Bible et son interprétation*. (Aix-en-Provence: Kerygma, 1984), in which the present writer contributed two chapters.

<sup>2</sup> René Laurentin, 'Vérité des Evangiles de l'Enfance', *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 105 (1983) p. 696.

categorize the studied ambiguity of the final wording rather among liabilities than among assets. Surely Oswald Loretz' understanding of the truth of the Bible typically agrees with Liberal opposition to Evangelical faith, but even the more conservative reading of the 'compromise' falls short of the needed confession in the eyes of most Evangelicals. Not only is 'that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation' strangely undefined (Bultmann could claim he found it), but who are we to put *a priori* limits to the truth-aspects of God's Word? If biblical assertions are 'asserted by the Holy Spirit' how could he be mistaken even in minor matters of dates and geography? Evangelicals have debated these issues painstakingly, and painfully, and would wish that greater care be exercised as to the consequences of divine authorship.

## II. TRADITION AND TRADITIONS

If Evangelicals are so vigilant against any theory that would undermine the authority of Scripture, the reason is obvious: the stakes for them are high, because of the *Sola Scriptura* principle. Although it is found *expressis verbis* in St Thomas Aquinas—*Sola canonica scriptura est regula fidei* was his comment on [John 21](#)<sup>3</sup>—the role of Tradition in Catholic theology produces a very different situation.

Not that the positions are entirely antithetical. Evangelicals welcome the majority rejection of the two-sources language (p. 104), the affirmation 'that the totality of revelation is somehow in Scripture' (p. 119), and, on other points, they would not necessarily reverse the Roman Catholic choice.

As taught by Cullmann's *la Tradition*, I would suggest that the various meanings of 'tradition' be clearly distinguished. The first meaning, that of the New Testament *paradosis*, p. 124 refers to the unalterable deposit of faith, to be handed down without adding or subtracting. I would hold it to be materially identical with the New Testament itself, and in this sense, I could subscribe to a *Sola traditione* principle (as equivalent to *Sola Scriptura*).

The second meaning implies Christian reality and experience as the living context within which the biblical word may be truly understood—the *traditio realis* which goes with the transmission of words and texts. Evangelicals, in our opinion, may acknowledge the positive role of this tradition. Language does not function in a vacuum. There is a non-verbal reality that accompanies the preaching and teaching. Yet, I would surely insist that *the* medium of grace is the Word, and the church, as Luther said, *creatura verbi*. The non-Evangelical theologians Ebeling and Juengel rightly stress the discovery of this mediation of the sole Word of God as the newness of the Reformation. It refers to the realities of Christian life, of church life, but it possesses the efficacy—a spiritual efficacy of a highly personal character. Roman Catholic emphasis on the tradition of things seems to be bound with that on the sacraments being not signs only (visible words) but instrumental causes of grace—in Evangelical eyes, this detracts from the reign of the Word.

The third meaning raises still more problems. It is the 'global, dynamic, nonverbal concept of tradition' (p. 118), with the key-note of growth, 'partly drawn from the Tübingen' school (p. 118), and, I presume, from Newman's heritage. We often meet in the works of Catholic theologians a plethora of metaphors from plant and animal life to explain how hints not bigger than mustard seeds in the New Testament and early

---

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1988) p. 18 (see n. 5) from *On the Gospel of John*, lesson 6 on [John 21](#). Cf. the *Summa theologica*, I<sup>a</sup>, Q. 1, art. 8, ad 2<sup>m</sup>: 'Auctoritatibus autem canonicae Scripturae utitur proprie, ex necessitate argumentando. Auctoritatibus autem aliorum doctorum Ecclesiae, quasi arguendo ex propriis, sed probabiliter.'

documents have grown into the majestic terebinths of Mariology or other doctrines regarded as suspect by Evangelicals. We suggest that these metaphors are given undue prominence, and function as if they were proofs, proofs which they cannot be. Their use smacks of vitalism (the Tübingen spirit bears a Romantic stamp), against Newman's proposals.<sup>4</sup> XXth century discussions on the *sensus plenior* show that difficulties are still being felt with the vitalistic idea of development—how can control be exercised?

Dr Dulles regards the decision on the canon as an illustration of the third meaning of tradition (p. 119). But Evangelicals will probably remain unmoved and unconvinced as old lines of controversy are again drawn on this topic. After Roger Beckwith's and F.F. Bruce's major works on the canonical issue,<sup>5</sup> Evangelicals may feel they have good p. 125 grounds for a dissenting opinion: for a Hebrew canon practically closed long before Jamnia (contrary to p. 112), for a distinction, in New Testament quotations between canonical works and apocrypha and pseudepigrapha (never quoted *as Scripture*), for a view of New Testament canonization nearer to that of Cullmann (p. 117) and which claims that the canonical *principle* was there from the beginning.

The reminder of Cullmann's thesis brings to light the heart of the issue: whether the coupling of Tradition (in the third sense mainly) with Scripture, as it is established in Roman Catholic doctrine, be compatible, in actual fact, with the humble submission of the church under the Word of her sovereign Lord. In other words, we are concerned (as Dr Vandavelde puts it) with the critical 'over-against' of the Word and the church. Or again, even with a merely interpretative tradition, we may ascribe to tradition only a ministerial, not a magisterial, role: otherwise the church will always be able to dodge the really painful truth, will accommodate the Word of God to her own perspectives and horizons. How could the church correct her tradition under the judgment of the Word if she ought to value them *pari pietatis affectu et reverentia*? In a radical sense, the issue is that of [Matthew 23:8-10](#): among the disciples of Jesus, there cannot be an ultimate teaching authority, fatherhood, rectorship. We remain mere disciples.

Obviously, the mission and status of the church is very much the issue, as surfaced also in the Catholic—Protestant dialogue in France: is the church, essentially, sanctified or sanctifying? The relationship of church and Scripture is also at stake: in the famous controversy between Rahner and Congar, the latter tried to maintain a clearer 'over-against' of Scripture and apostolic office, over-against the church.<sup>6</sup> Evangelicals would go further down the line of Congar, and would consider the Word of Scripture as *proclaimed* to the church rather than *produced* by the church (p. 117); they would associate that viewpoint with the truth that 'ith the end of the apostolic period ... the era of constitutive revelation came to a close' (p. 110), a discernment which does not bear the whole fruit they hope for.

### III. UNDERLYING FACTORS

---

<sup>4</sup> Jean Stern, *Bible et Tradition chez Newman. Aux origines de la théorie du développement* (coll. Théologie 72; [s. l.] Aubier, 1967) pp. 170–172.

<sup>5</sup> Roger T. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and its Background in Early Judaism* (London: S.P.C.K., 1985); F. F. Bruce, *op. cit.*; also David G. Dunbar, 'The Biblical Canon', in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon, op. cit.*, pp. 295–360 (notes pp. 424–446); briefer and rather theological, Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., 'The New Testament as Canon', in *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic, op. cit.*, pp. 165–183.

<sup>6</sup> Yves Congar, 'Inspiration des Ecritures canoniques et apostolicité de l'Eglise' *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques*. 45 (1961) pp. 32–42, reprinted in Yves Congar, *Sainte Eglise. Etudes et approches ecclésiologiques* (coll. Unam Sanctam 41; Paris: Cerf, 1963) pp. 187–200.

A supposedly brief response cannot even initiate any in-depth analysis of the more basic motives that lie under the divergence we have just surveyed. I am so bold, however, as to make a few suggestions in this respect.

The *assessment of the effects of human sinfulness*, both in natural and regenerate man, seems to account for some of our differences. The Reformers openly suspected the medieval tradition of a semi-Pelagian [p. 126](#) philosophy of sin, and vehemently fought perfectionism. Evangelicals feel that the ultimate trust put in church tradition underestimates the power of sin among the redeemed themselves; they would repeat St Anselm's refrain: *Nondum conderasti quanti ponderis sit peccatum ...* Dr Dulles himself mentions Rahner's criticism of the optimistic emphasis of the Council (n.5, p. 30). Evangelicals feel that they remain heirs of St Augustine—although I would grant that one side of Augustine is involved here, without the context of his Neo-Platonic, that is virtually monistic, ontology. I suggest that the *coram Deo* covenant structure replaces the great scale or 'chain of Being' and makes Evangelical Protestants sensitive to the radical claims of divine holiness and righteousness.

The emphasis on *divine transcendence* or freedom is not very great. Evangelicals resume the prophets' fight against idolatry and superstition, against any mixture of human and divine, against any limiting of God's freedom. The exclusive *sola* answers to monotheism, and the impression is there that Stoic and, above all, Neo-Platonic influences have added pantheistic overtones to part of the tradition. Roman Catholic theologians are wont to detect an Old Testament flavour in Protestantism—which, in a way, is true; but the argument would be that there is no convincing New Testament evidence to change this orientation. I consider it to be significant that Yves Congar had to confess to a 'temptation' of the monophysite type in Catholic theology and popular piety.<sup>7</sup>

The *view of time* also produces deep differences. As it appears to me, Roman Catholic thought sees time as a continuous flow, an unbroken process in which the past is maintained in the present (the role of relics is significant). Protestants would stress the *kairoi*, and would point to irrepeatable events; the unity of history is achieved in the plan of God, which transcends history. Hence the Evangelical love for the *tetelestai* of [John 19:30](#), and the *ephapax* theme in the New Testament, which applies also to the faith 'once for all delivered to the saints' ([Jude 3](#)). Hence my reluctance to adopt the words of *Sacrosanctum concilium*: 'to carry on the work of salvation' (p. 113). The significance of the Ascension has often appeared to be minimized in Roman Catholic theology. This difference as to continuity obviously affects the issue of tradition.

It is our hypothesis that the different sense of historical fulfilment is tied to the very *understanding of salvation*. Where Evangelicals (and the Bible, they think) consider the problem of radical guilt, to be atoned once for all by the perfect Substitute, in dramatic-judicial categories, the hellenization of Christianity puts in the centre the spiritualization of the flesh, the divinization of human nature. Auguste Lecerf used to say that the antithesis [p. 127](#) of nature and grace (to be overcome) replaced that of sin and grace. In Dooyeweerd's categories, the 'ground-motive' Nature-Grace, which came into full bloom with scholastic thought, replaced the biblical motive Creation-Fall-Redemption which Calvin recovered.

Does this insight cast light upon our differences? It can warn us, at least, against narrow argument and petty cavil—and provide possibilities of a better mutual understanding, and of mutual help towards a truer grasp of the grace of the Lord we all confess, Jesus Christ the Word of God and the Saviour of the world.

---

<sup>7</sup> Yves Congar, *Sainte Eglise*, *op. cit.*, p. 624; cf. p. 79 n. 2: 'Il y a dans l'enseignement ordinairement donné aux fidèles sur ce qui concerne l'Eglise, un véritable danger de monophysisme.'

# Justification Between Scripture and Tradition

George Vandavelde

## INTRODUCTION

This consultation between representatives of the Roman Catholic Church and the World Evangelical Fellowship is a happy occasion. All who love the Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, of which there is only One (however differently its nature and unity may be conceived), and who are deeply committed to the mission of the church in our world cannot but be pained by the divisions that make it difficult if not impossible for the world to see and believe that Jesus was sent by the Father.

To many Evangelicals, consultations with representatives of 'Rome' seem like a huge leap beyond conversations among representatives of different strands of Protestantism. Indeed, in view of the historical and confessional gap, many Evangelicals would give a very low priority to conversation with the Roman Catholic Church. While it makes good sense to give more immediate and concerted attention to one's nearer neighbours, one's Protestant siblings, cousins, and nieces (witness the WEF), a case can be made for giving at least equal attention to conversations with Rome. Giving priority to our immediate cousins usually means that in practice we never get to what is ranked second or third. Yet there is ample reason to end such neglect.

From an historical perspective, the Roman Catholic Church is our mother. Certainly for Calvin and Luther the Roman Catholic communion was simply 'the Church', which they wished to reform and restore. Even after the break they considered this Church as their mother.<sup>1</sup> If problems with siblings and cousins deserve our attention, how much more do problems with our 'mother'? The modern practice of disowning one's parents by 'parental divorce' is not a viable option within the church. Sooner or later in our journey, Paul's question begins to haunt us: is Christ divided? Whatever the weight of these missiological, historical, and Christological arguments for consultations may be, Christ's

---

<sup>1</sup> Luther, see Oberman, *Dawn*, Calvin, see reply to Sadeleto. In my teen years a book that made a deep impression on me was written by Hegger, who had left the Priesthood in the Catholic Church. The title: *Moeder, Ik Klaag U Aan*, 'Mother, I accuse you.'



injunctions demand that we do not talk *about* an entire community of fellow believers—especially when that talk is critical<sup>2</sup>—without talking *with* that community.<sup>3</sup>

Although the issues of tradition, the authority of Scripture, and justification by faith are obvious topics for consultations between Roman Catholics and Evangelicals, one may wonder whether such confessional-theological subject matters are the best place to begin a discussion. Often so-called ‘non-theological factors’ play a more direct and obvious role in relations between Christian communions. In a setting where the Roman Catholic Church is dominant, Evangelicals often feel marginalized, if not oppressed. In a relatively new suburb of Manila, for example, an Evangelical Protestant group is prevented from worshipping in a facility which was built by the developer for the use of all Christian communions. On the other hand, often in these and other situations, Roman Catholic believers express great concern over the ‘proselytizing’ strategies of Evangelicals, who approach the Roman Catholic believers as ‘sacramentalized but not evangelized’. Other practical Evangelical concerns would provide equally urgent topics of discussion: the syncretism manifest in popular religion, the role of Mary, papal authority. It is not surprising that the Evangelical statement on contemporary Roman Catholicism, which is in part the occasion for the present consultation, does not deal with justification by faith until the seventh chapter—*after* dealing with issues such as Rome’s approach to other churches, religious liberty, Mary, and the Papacy.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, beneath and through concerns about specific issues, Evangelical-Catholic relations are often marred by misunderstanding, suspicion, and distrust.

Nevertheless, the topics before us are eminently worthy of common scrutiny. As the German Lutheran-Roman Catholic Working Group puts it, ‘Every consensus not based on a real consensus on the doctrine of justification is built on sand.’<sup>5</sup> Applying this to our initial discussions, one might say, positively, that a deeper understanding of one another’s approach to and comprehension of the chosen topics will be highly beneficial for the mutual relations between the two faith communities.

If any encouragement on this journey be needed, the words of [p. 130](#) George Carey, now Archbishop of Canterbury, provide just that:

If I may be so bold as to address my fellow Evangelicals, I venture to say to them that as on this issue of the doctrine of justification by faith we should note the great desire of Catholic theologians to understand and learn from Protestants, so we too must endeavour to understand Catholic perspectives and enter into sympathetic dialogue. It’s all too easy to hide behind precious shibboleths of our faith, signposts of our historical pilgrimage—but our journey is to Christ and with Christ. Surely if our ecumenical theology is done in

---

<sup>2</sup> As in Paul G. Schrotenboer, ed., *Roman Catholicism: A Contemporary Evangelical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> As was done in Basil Meeking and John Stott, *The Evangelical Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission, 1977–1984* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986). Hereafter *ERCDOM*.

<sup>4</sup> By far the most space is devoted to a discussion of the ‘place of Mary’, *Roman Catholicism*, pp. 3141 (‘The Place of Mary’), 87–93 (‘John Paul II and Mary’).

<sup>5</sup> Karl Lehmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Lehrverurteilungen—kirchentrennend? I: Rechtfertigung, Sakramente und Amt im Zeitalter der Reformation und heute* (Freiburg, i. Br.: Herder, 1986), 43. Cf. George Tavard, *Justification by Faith: An Ecumenical Study* (New York: Paulist, 1983), pp. 119–111.

his light and for his glory, we shall move away from the bitternesses of the past into the unity of the Spirit which is God's desire for his broken Church.<sup>6</sup>

## TRADITION

### Vatican-Genevan Convergence

Since the paper by Avery Dulles will deal directly with the issue of Scripture and Tradition, the focus of this paper will be the doctrine of justification by faith—with the issue of Scripture and tradition as its context. This context will be provided by a brief consideration of two key documents, one Catholic, the other Protestant, which were promulgated at about the same time. The first is the 'Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation' (*Dei Verbum*) of the Second Vatican Council, written in 1963, discussed, revised, and adopted in 1964. The second is the document 'Scripture, Tradition, and Traditions', of the Fourth Conference on Faith and Order, which was held in Montreal in 1963.

While Trent's teaching that the truth of the gospel is 'contained in the written books and unwritten traditions ...' (DS 1501)<sup>7</sup> could be interpreted as espousing a two-source theory of revelation,<sup>8</sup> Vatican II clearly gives primacy to the Scriptures. Here an entire original draft schema that was called 'On the Sources of Revelation' (*De Fontibus Revelationis*) was rejected. In its place came a new schema. It too joins Scripture with tradition by a simple 'and'. Furthermore, *sola Scriptura* is rejected. Yet it does so with particular reference to the certainty of faith. As to revelation itself, the Council avoids the notion of two 'sources' of revelation. Scripture and tradition are said to 'flow from the same divine well-springs' and 'in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same end' (DV, 9). Elsewhere sacred Tradition and sacred Scripture are said to form 'one Sacred deposit of the word of God' (DV, 10). Although the task of authentically interpreting the word p. 131 of God is accorded to the official teaching office of the church, the Council insists that the *magisterium* does not stand 'above the word but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on ...' (DV, 10).

Clearly, this is a vast improvement on the original schema. Yet, from a Protestant-Evangelical perspective, the continued juxtapositioning of Scripture and tradition, the call to treat them with 'the same sense of devotion and reverence' (DV, 9), and the inclusion of both Scripture and tradition in 'the word of God' that is said to be supreme over the church is troublesome. For Evangelicals much depends on whether the tradition that is to be venerated is strictly interpretative, as many claim. In that case Scripture is in effect supreme, for authentic interpretation proves to be such when it truly serves that which is interpreted. But then, how can one have the *same* sense of devotion and reverence for Scripture and tradition? And how can the 'Sacred Scripture together with Sacred Tradition' be called 'the supreme rule of faith' (DV, 21)?

---

<sup>6</sup> George Carey, 'Justification and Roman Catholicism', in J. I. Packer, *et al.*, *Here We Stand: Justification by Faith Today* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1986), p. 136.

<sup>7</sup> While the Denziger Schönmetzer numbering will be used, it will be cited as translated in *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, ed. J. Neuner and J. Poupis (New York, Alba, 1982).

<sup>8</sup> Yves Congar, drawing on the work of Joseph Geiselman, argues that in substituting the simple *et* for the *partim-partim* terminology contained in the first draft, the Council decided only that Scripture and tradition are 'the two forms under which the Gospel of Jesus Christ is communicated ...', without determining their interrelation (*Tradition and Traditions*, p. 165).

The World Conference on Faith and Order in Montreal distinguished between Tradition, tradition, and traditions. By 'Tradition', in the upper case, it meant 'the Gospel itself, transmitted from generation to generation to the church, Christ himself present in the life of the Church'. By 'tradition', in the lower case, it meant 'the traditionary process', i.e. the process of handing down the faith. 'Traditions', in the plural refers to 'the diversity of forms of expression and also to what we call confessional traditions, for instance the Lutheran tradition or the Reformed tradition' (50).<sup>9</sup> Traditions are historical manifestations of the one Tradition (47)—though they can also be impoverishments or distortions of it (48).

In this two-fold possibility—manifestation or distortion—the pressing problem of the relation of tradition and interpretation to normativity confronts us once again. Simply to insist on the interpretative, and therefore subordinate, role of tradition does not solve the problem at hand. The intent of that insistence is to ensure that the word of God, rather than human traditions, governs life. Yet the Word that holds sway can be no other than an *interpreted* word. History is replete with examples of appeals to the Scriptures for the defence of certain practices, racism, for example, when in fact a cultural ideology governs the interpretation. The Scriptures that are meant to lead all human thoughts captive to Christ are in constant danger of themselves being taken captive by human thought. This dilemma is evident in these deliberations by the Commission on Faith and Order:

The Tradition in its written form, as Holy Scripture ... has to be interpreted by the Church in ever new situations. Such interpretation of the Tradition is to be found in the crystallization of tradition in the creeds, the liturgical forms of the sacraments and p. 132 other forms of worship, and also in the preaching of the Word and in the theological expositions of the Church's doctrine. A mere reiteration of the words of Holy Scripture would be a betrayal of the Gospel which has to be made understandable and has to convey a challenge to the world. The necessity of interpretation raises again the question of the criterion for the genuine Tradition. Throughout the history of the Church the criterion has been sought in the Holy Scriptures rightly interpreted. But what is 'right interpretation'? (50 & 51)

In answer to this question, the report considers one obvious suggestion: 'right interpretation ... is that interpretation which is guided by the Holy Spirit.' True as that answer is, the Report immediately concedes that 'this does not solve the problem of criterion'. It then suggests that what is needed is a hermeneutical principle. Interestingly enough, it allows almost a dozen candidates to pass the reviewing stand—each of them representing a specific *tradition!* Thus, the report has come full circle: from Tradition to the need of interpretation, to need of right interpretation, to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to a hermeneutical principle, and finally, to the variegated principles offered by various traditions. Tradition appears to be a closed, perhaps vicious, circle. Who or what can deliver us out of this labyrinth?

Evangelicals too are increasingly aware of the important place of tradition. They are likely to smile in self-recognition upon hearing the comment, 'It has been the tradition in my church not to attribute any weight to tradition.'<sup>10</sup> While remaining critical of the Roman Catholic position, Clark Pinnock, for example, acknowledges that 'Protestant as

---

<sup>9</sup> 'Scripture, Tradition and Traditions', in P.C. Rodger and Lukas Vischer ed. *The Fourth Conference on Faith and Order, Montreal 1963*, (New York: Association Press, 1964), pp. 50–61. Parenthetical numbers in the text refer by paragraph to this document.

<sup>10</sup> *The Fourth Conference on Faith and Order, Montreal 1963*, P. C. Rodger and Lukas Vischer ed. (New York: Association Press, 1964), p. 51.

well as Catholic beliefs are ecclesiastically shaped' and speaks of 'a reawakening of a deep respect for tradition as an interpretive guide and doctrinal safeguard'.<sup>11</sup>

The 'Evangelical Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission' of about a decade ago indicates the mutual appreciation of the role of tradition. Pointing to the danger of arbitrary 'individualistic exegesis', the report grants that 'The Scriptures must be interpreted within the community of Christ, which is the Church.' From there it is a small step to acknowledging that this interpreting matrix includes that which is handed down from the past: 'Many of our leaders belong to the past. Both Evangelicals and Roman Catholics have inherited a rich legacy of tradition. We cherish creeds, confessions and conciliar statements. We peruse the writings of the Fathers of the Church. We read their books and commentaries.'<sup>12</sup> p. 133

### Authority—Christ's and the Texts

Before moving to the topic of justification there is a basic point that needs to be highlighted. It concerns the concept of authority itself. Invoking 'the authority of Scripture' readily conjures up the notion of a 'court of appeal', often the highest, or last, court of appeal. This metaphor, of course, immediately places us in a polemical, quasi-judicial setting. Here debate, controversy, adversaries, argument, and judgment are the stock-in-trade. This is neither surprising, nor necessarily illegitimate. From earliest times the church has been embroiled in debate, for example, over the nature of Christ, the trinity, grace and free will. In the midst of subsequent schisms, debate within the broken church seems to have become the order of the day. Little wonder, then, that questions concerning valid sources of authority and legitimate courts of appeal themselves generate heated debate.

Yet, we need to step back from these associations for a moment and place the issue of 'authority' in a larger context. The *Scriptura* which the Reformers prefixed with *sola* testify to authority of a different kind. They speak of one who, on completing his redemptive mission, declares that all authority is given to him. This is crucial. It means that the source and seat of authority is Christ. Further, that authority stands as the link between his completed mission and his continuing mission: go and make disciples. In other words, the heart of authority resides, not first of all in a book, but in a person. The living *locus* of such authority is the mission field (which lies first of all in our own backyards). The theological discussion table is only a derivative *locus*. The authority about which the church is primarily concerned, then, is that of Christ. Though that point seems obvious, it has momentous implications for our discussion. For the question at stake for all partners in a consultation such as this is not first of all, 'What source of authority do we use?' But, 'How is the unique authority of the Author of life and new life most effectively fostered among God's people?' It is in this context that the issue of the authority of Scripture and the role of tradition has its crucial significance.

With the link between the authority of Scripture and the Author of salvation, we arrive immediately at the heart of the Reformation. The solas that soon began to function as polemical weapons arose out of the struggle of a soul seeking the presence and peace of the gospel in a church situation that placed major obstacles on the pathway to peace.

---

<sup>11</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, 'How I Use Tradition in Doing Theology', *TSF Bulletin* (September-October, 1982), pp. 3, 4. See also the response by Avery Dulles in the January-February, 1983, edition (pp. 5-6).

<sup>12</sup> ERCDOM, p. 22. By contrast, the WEF statement on Catholicism seems to acknowledge the role of tradition among evangelicals only *de facto* and *in malem partim*: '... often we have also set our evangelical traditions above Scripture. In many instances our lip service to biblical authority contradicts the predominant place we give to our denominational and historical baggage' (*Catholicism*, p. 48).

Justification by faith was not first of all a theological statement but an experience of forgiveness and peace that had been blocked by the practice of and promises surrounding penance. In struggling his way through practical issues concerning the role of the church in 'mediating' salvation, Luther rediscovered the centrality of the Scriptures. But its centrality stood entirely in the service of the centrality of Christ and his authority.

Biblical authority, therefore, is crucial to the Reformers, for the sake of, in the service of, Christ's p. 134 authority. This inextricable relationship and irreversible priority becomes all the more significant in that the Scriptures do not mediate Christ's authority as a bridge between the teachings of a long dead founder and subsequent generations of followers. The claim to 'all authority' is followed by the assurance of presence: 'I will be with you ...' In other words, the Reformation was not a debate concerning two disparate principles—one 'formal', the other 'material'—namely, *sola Scriptura* and *sola fide*. Rather the struggles summed up in these slogans converge in the *sola gratia* which is found only in Christ. 'When the Reformation spoke of the "sola Scriptura", it meant to keep alive the question concerning the relationship with the Lord through the Gospel.'<sup>13</sup> It is his authoritative and healing presence that is at stake. The issues revolve around the presence and revelation of Christ today.<sup>14</sup> The question is, how does Christ 'choose to reveal himself' (Mt. 11:27) today, to whom, and how can we know? The issue of the Reformation concerns the manner and means of Christ's presence.<sup>15</sup>

## JUSTIFICATION

Turning now to the doctrine of justification, it may be well to ponder the following Catholic catechetical instruction:

Q. What is justification?

A. It is a grace which makes us friends of God.

Q. Can a sinner merit this justifying grace?

A. No, he cannot; because all the good works which the sinner performs whilst he is in a state of mortal sin, are dead works, which have no merit sufficient to justify.

Q. Is it an article of the Catholic faith, that the sinner, in mortal sin, cannot merit the grace of justification?

A. Yes; it is decreed in the seventh chap. of the sixth session of the Council of Trent, that neither faith, nor good works, preceding justification, can merit the grace of justification.

Q. How then is the sinner justified?

A. He is justified gratuitously by the pure mercy of God, not on account of his own or any human merit, but purely through the merits of Jesus Christ; for Jesus Christ is our only mediator of redemption, who alone, by his passion and death, has reconciled us to his Father.

---

<sup>13</sup> G. C. Berkouwer, *Vatikaans Concilie en Nieuwe Theologie* (Kamen: Kok, 1964), p. 119.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Ratzinger is entirely right, therefore, when he points out that we cannot deal with Scripture and tradition as such, but must go 'behind' them to the over-arching reality of revelation, the 'inner source, ... the living word of God from which scripture and tradition spring and without which their significance for faith cannot be understood' (Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger, *Revelation and Tradition*. Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1966, p. 34).

<sup>15</sup> See Ratzinger's formulation: 'The question of the way in which the word of revelation uttered in Christ remains present in history and reaches men is one of the fundamental questions which split western Christendom in the age of the Reformation' (*ibid.*, p. 26).

- Q. Why then do Protestants charge us with believing, that the sinner can merit the remission of his sins? p. 135
- A. Their ignorance of the Catholic doctrine is the cause of this, as well as many other false charges.<sup>16</sup>

Consultations and dialogues are built on the conviction that ignorance at this level is not of the variety that Pope Pius IX, in a different context, considered to be both invincible and inculpable (DS, 28651). Certainly after the publication of the report of the US Lutheran—Catholic dialogue,<sup>17</sup> ignorance regarding the mutual understanding of justification by the heirs of this divisive controversy is obviously ‘vincible’ and therefore culpable. ‘Anyone who wishes to deal with the dialogue between Protestant and Roman Catholic theologians on justification will have to make this document his point of departure.’<sup>18</sup> If this is so, those engaged in an Evangelical—Roman Catholic Consultation have good reason to make this dialogue the centrepiece of discussion.

First we will present the essential points of convergence or consensus, then the remaining points of difference and divergence. Subsequently, we will try to analyse and assess the nature, and possible grounds, of the agreement and disagreement. We will then conclude with some remarks on the significance of the remaining differences.

### Convergences

The US dialogue concludes with what it calls ‘a fundamental affirmation’. It expresses a basic conviction in both positive and negative terms: ‘our entire hope of justification and salvation rests on Christ Jesus and on the gospel whereby the good news of God’s merciful action in Christ is made known: we do not place our ultimate trust in anything other than God’s promise and saving work in Christ’ (157). In the previous section, the report articulates the core of this agreement in twelve points. It affirms that Christ ‘is the source, centre, and norm of Christian life’, that he is such as God’s free gift. It uses juridical language by maintaining that ‘to be saved one must be judged righteous and be righteous’ (156). In a final ‘declaration’, some of these points are reiterated, especially the primacy of grace and the gift character of grace (161).

This agreement is reason for rejoicing. Yet, the report itself is candid as to what has been achieved and what has not. On the basis of the agreements, it speaks of having reached ‘fundamental consensus on the gospel’ (164). Yet, the document also grants that this consensus is not simply an agreement on justification by faith which the Reformers espoused. The report summarizes the Reformed view succinctly: ‘God accepts that sinners are righteous for Christ’s sake on the basis of faith alone’ (157).

Taking the affirmation of the ‘fundamental p. 136 consensus on the gospel’ at face value, this discrepancy between the consensus and the reformational doctrine of justification by faith comes as somewhat of a surprise. For both Luther and Calvin, it would be impossible to contemplate a gap between the gospel and justification by faith. They are identical. Or, more accurately, justification by faith articulates most pointedly the gospel as *gospel*. This is clear even when Luther describes his breakthrough in understanding the meaning of the righteousness of God’:

---

<sup>16</sup> Stephen Keenan, *Doctrinal Catechism*, pp. 138–139.

<sup>17</sup> H. George Anderson, et al., eds., *Justification by Faith: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985). The dialogue report was published in various forms, among them in *Origins* 13 (1983): 277–304. The document will be cited by paragraph numbers, which appear in parentheses in the text.

<sup>18</sup> Alister McGrath, ‘Justification: the New Ecumenical Debate’, *Themelios* 13 (1988): 43.

Then, finally, God had mercy on me, and I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that gift of God by which a righteous man lives, namely, faith ... Now I felt as though I had been reborn altogether and had entered Paradise.<sup>19</sup>

The difference between the consensus on the gospel and the reformational understanding of justification becomes somewhat more clear when in its chapter on 'Reflections and Interpretations', the US document describes differences between Lutherans and Catholics on several issues (pars. 97–121). One concerns 'forensic justification'. To safeguard the unconditional character of God's grace, Lutherans understand justification as the imputation of Christ's righteousness. This is considered to be an alien righteousness, that of Christ, by which a sinner is accounted righteousness by faith (par. 98). Though Catholics also insist that grace is unconditioned, i.e., originates entirely in God's merciful will, they do affirm 'conditions' that are the effect of God's grace. These play a role in the process of justification in that they 'condition the created effects of his powerful decrees' (par. 99).

In a subsequent paragraph this difference is formulated in terms of the relation between 'the remission of sins and the transformation wrought by grace'. Catholics have generally seen the infusion of grace as the basis for forgiveness, while for Lutherans God's gracious act of justifying sinners is the ground for continuous renewal (par. 101). This difference carries over into the approach to the Lutheran adage 'simul justus et peccator'. Catholics are wary of this expression, for in spite of the continuing presence of sins in the justified, grace does take hold and can be called 'inherent righteousness' (pars. 102–102). In other words, in a Christian, grace inheres and has primacy in a way that sin does not.

Further clarification regarding what is not included in the fundamental consensus is provided by the section dealing with the role of faith. *Sola fide* is affirmed within the Catholic tradition by appealing to the Tridentine denial that 'nothing prior to the free gift of faith merits justification and that all God's saving gifts come through Christ alone' (105; cf DS, 1532). At the same time it reaffirms the Catholic view that to be justifying such faith needs to be animated by love (par. 105). By contrast, the Lutheran view of p. 137 faith is described as living faith, which, by clinging to Christ and the gospel promise, alone justifies. 'Love always springs from such faith, but is among the works of the law, which do not justify' (106). From this perspective, Lutherans express their concerns about the Catholic approach. Primarily they fear that on this construction Pelagian notions of cooperation reassert themselves. It is interesting to note that Catholic attestations that such cooperation 'is itself a gift of grace' fail to allay Lutheran fears (par. 106).

Similar differences come to expression on the two other substantive points, namely, 'merit' (pars. 108–112) and 'satisfaction' (109–116). Regarding merit, Lutherans fear that it leads to an undermining of the 'unconditional character of God's word' (110).

### **Contrasting Perspectives**

These points of difference are not simply enumerated on their own. The great merit of this report lies in pushing beyond these particular issues to an underlying pattern or approach. The document speaks variously of 'contrasting concerns and patterns of thought' (94), 'different patterns of thought and discourse' (96), and 'contrasting theological perspectives and structures of thought' (121). The significant issue for any difference, but especially underlying differences, is their status. The report is rather

---

<sup>19</sup> WA 54, 1983, as cited in Hans Hillerbrand, ed., *The Reformation: A Narrative History Related by Contemporary Observers and Participants* (Grand Rapids: Baker), 1964, p. 27.

tentative on this score. It suggests that they ‘may in part be complementary and, even if at times in unavoidable tension, not necessarily divisive’ (94).

The US document delineates these differences in a helpful way. First of all it concerns a difference in focus or emphasis. Lutherans focus on the ‘absolute priority of God’s redeeming word in Jesus’ to sinners. This summoning grace excludes all human conditions; only faith in the address of promise is required for the fulfilment of the promise (95). The contrasting Catholic concern is then formulated in a highly interesting way: ‘Catholics, while not rejecting the absolute priority of God’s saving action, are generally speaking more concerned with acknowledging the efficacy of God’s saving work in the renewal and sanctification of the created order, an efficacy which Lutherans, for their part, do not deny’ (ibid.). This formulation is striking in that what one emphasizes the other does not wish to deny. In fact, as stated, this is far too weak. Lutherans insist that the gospel message ‘does what it proclaims ...; it effects the reality of which it speaks’ (88). The ‘sole’ Lutheran concern, one might say, is the full efficacy of grace. The key to this formulation lies, of course, not so much in a lesser or greater emphasis on the efficacy of grace—‘more concerned’ versus ‘do not deny’—but on the manner of this efficacy and whether the effect as described (‘the renewal and sanctification of the created order’) constitutes ‘justification’.

This difference concerning the manner and scope of justification can be contrasted as a ‘transformationalist’ and a ‘declarative’ or ‘proclamatory’ p. 138 model of justification.<sup>20</sup> The former refers to the transformation and renewal of life that is brought about ‘through God’s infusion of saving grace’ (par. 96).<sup>21</sup> Here the document appeals to the adage, ‘(G)race does not destroy but perfects nature.’ The manner of justification is infusion; its content and scope, ‘sanctification’. The Lutheran approach, by contrast, focuses on justification understood as God’s declaration of righteousness in Christ, and, as such, justification is strictly distinguished from sanctification.

### **Justification by Faith as Criterion**

So far we have considered only the discussion on the doctrine itself. The document pays considerable attention to an equally important issue, namely, its use. The question here concerns the role of justification by faith as a criterion in the church. This reflects the traditional Lutheran insistence that justification by faith constitutes the ‘*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*’. Must all else in the doctrine and the life of the church be tested for its compatibility with the doctrine of justification by faith?

In the dialogue, Lutherans and Catholics come to what it calls ‘incomplete convergence’ (152). Catholics agree on the need to test the practices, structures, and theologies of the church by the extent to which they help or hinder ‘the proclamation of God’s free and merciful promises in Christ Jesus which can be rightly received only through faith’ (153). The *incomplete* character of this convergence lies in the application of this criterion, namely, ‘which beliefs, practices, and structures pass the test’ (ibid.). This incomplete convergence raises interesting questions. On the one hand, the measure of convergence is momentous, for the formulation of the content of the criterion (‘the proclamation of God’s free and merciful promises ...’), is a direct quotation from a

---

<sup>20</sup> The term ‘transformationalist model’ is contrasted in the report to a ‘model of simultaneity’ (pars. 8, 25, 154, 158; cf. 96). Par. 90 speaks of the ‘proclamatory character of justification’ (cf. the description in pars. 25, 96, 158, 159). George Carey uses the terms ‘transformation’ and ‘declaration’ to describe this contrast; see ‘Justification and Roman Catholicism’ in J.I. Packer, et al., *Here we Stand: Justification by Faith Today* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1986), pp. 121–122.

<sup>21</sup> Earlier it described this process as ‘a progressive transformation under the power of grace’ (par. 25).



paragraph articulating the *Lutheran* understanding of justification by faith (28)—which, interestingly enough, lies *outside* the consensus (157). On the other hand, this disagreement on whether ‘purgatory, the papacy and cult of the saints’ pass the test (153) raises questions concerning the reason for the disagreement. Is the reason a different understanding of the yardstick or a different understanding of the matters tested, or both? In any case, it is clear that the agreement concerns justification only as *a* criterion, not *the* criterion for the authenticity of the church (see 160).<sup>22</sup> p. 139

It is striking that while some hail this consensus as an ecumenical landmark,<sup>23</sup> others speak of an ‘impasse’.<sup>24</sup>

The central issue that continues to vex the dialogue on justification concerns differences regarding the interrelation of God’s grace and human response. Roger Haight provides a lucid description of this difference:

The reasons for the differences between Lutheran and Roman Catholic theologies of grace ... lie below the surface within fundamentally different paradigms of interpretation. The theological tradition from Augustine to Aquinas sees grace working in and transforming human freedom. In Luther, human freedom is minimized to leave complete room for the total priority and gratuity of God’s gracious forgiveness. Grace is identified as Christ and God’s Word, and faith’s passivity means that human justification is always the justice of another, Christ, with whom the Christian is united. In contrast to this, a constant underlying theme in Trent’s Decree on Justification, while granting the priority and gratuity of grace, deals with human responsibility and freedom.<sup>25</sup>

Haight presents the two different paradigms as wishing to do justice to both the priority and gratuity of grace. The important difference then lies in the role given to human freedom and responsibility. But perhaps the description of grace on both sides in terms of ‘gratuity and priority’ is too general to pinpoint the difference adequately. This can be demonstrated by examining the way in which the primacy of grace is articulated from the viewpoint of this general conception of grace.

### **The Radicality of Sin and the Eccentricity of Faith**

The obvious way to safeguard the primacy of grace from the general viewpoint is to assert its priority and primacy. Within this framework, Trent sounds its own *sola gratia*. Even the beginning of justification ‘must be attributed to God’s prevenient grace through Jesus Christ’, which ‘awakens’ and ‘assists’ the one turning to God (DS 1525, 1553), and once in the state of grace, Christ’s strength ‘precedes, accompanies and follows’ the believer’s good works. (DS 1546). Furthermore when the five causes of justification are enumerated human activity comes into view only insofar as baptism is called the ‘sacrament of faith’. The focus, however, is on God’s action. The final cause is God’s glory; the efficient cause, the merciful God; the meritorious cause, the satisfaction of the cross of Christ; the instrumental cause, baptism; the only formal cause, the justice of God which becomes ours as a gift. Trent insists, moreover that, nothing is prior to justification ‘whether faith or

---

<sup>22</sup> Gerald Forde, one of the participants in the dialogue, makes this point. ‘Justification by Faith Alone: The Article by Which the Church Stands or Falls?’ in Joseph A. Burgess, ed., *In Search of Christian Unity: Basic Consensus/Basic Differences* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), p. 65.

<sup>23</sup> Alister McGrath, ‘Justification: the New Ecumenical Debate’, *Themelios* 13 (1988): 43.

<sup>24</sup> Gerhard Forde, p. 68.

<sup>25</sup> Roger Haight, ‘Sin and Grace’, in Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin, eds., *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, Vol. II (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 120.

works, merits the grace of justification' (DS 1532) and warns against reliance on or glory in self 'instead of in the Lord', who 'wants His own gifts to be their merits' (DS 1548).

Contemporary ecumenical dialogues p. 140 pick up and reassert this priority and primacy of grace.<sup>26</sup> This gives rise to the question: what then was at stake in the reformation debates? The issue is not, as Haight suggest, differences over the degree of human involvement in salvation, with Protestants wishing to minimize the human factor. This turns the issue into one of quantity. Rather, the issue is, what is the quality, the nature, of the human 'factor'? On this issue, the Reformers' judgment is intrinsically linked to their understanding of justification as the 'cutting edge' of salvation, i.e., the point at which those enmeshed in sin are placed in a situation where they are fully 'right with God'.

It is in relation to that key issue that Luther, for example, radically excludes human contribution. This is summed up most aptly when he insists that 'what precedes grace is not a disposition but indisposition and rebellion'.<sup>27</sup> Paradoxical language often fails to clarify. Yet, on this issue one can hardly avoid it. Faith, though crucial (*sola fide*), is by nature self-discounting. This is so because it arises in a situation of non-faith, worse, of enmity. As such, it is entirely other-directed, namely to the mercy of God. This mercy includes the judgment, the saving diagnosis, that human beings outside of God's grace are not simply incomplete, but lost. Faith does not meet the justifying God partway. Rather, it springs from justification. It is entirely 'derivative'.<sup>28</sup> Or, to use an odious term, faith is utterly parasitic.

This self-discounting, other-directed, derivative character of faith runs like a golden thread through Calvin's elaboration of salvation in the *Institutes*.<sup>29</sup> Especially poignant is his depiction of faith with respect to sight and hearing:

Therefore, righteousness must either depart from us or works must not be brought into account, but faith alone must have place, whose nature it is to prick up the ears and close the eyes—that is, to be intent upon the promise alone and to turn thought away from all worth or merit of man (III, xiii, 4).

Elsewhere he insists that 'every particle of our salvation stands thus outside of us'. Accordingly, he asks, '(W)hy is it that we still trust or glory in works?' (III, xiv, 17). This of course echoes the familiar Lutheran *extra nos* theme, but it is especially significant in Calvin because the heart and soul of his theology lies not in the *extra nos* as such, nor in the *pro nobis* but in the *in nobis*. At the heart of his soteriology is the theme of union with Christ. Yet at critical points in the discussion p. 141 regarding the human role in justification by faith he is adamant about the *extra nos*.

What explains *this* 'minimalization' of the human 'factor'? Certainly not a desire to eliminate human action. After all, a basic summons sounds throughout Calvin's work, namely, the summons to faith. It is not a question of minimalization, maximalization or

---

<sup>26</sup> C-M (UK), ARCIC II, L-C VII.

<sup>27</sup> Heiko A. Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation: Essays in Late Medieval and Early Reformation Thought* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), p. 97. More striking still is the conclusion, defended under his tutelage—totally contradicting the nominalist maxim 'facere quod in se est, deus non denegat gratiam': 'the man who does what is in him sins' (ibid., 98).

<sup>28</sup> Carl E. Braaten, *Justification: The Article by Which the Church Stands or Falls* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), pp. 26, 27.

<sup>29</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969). This work will be cited in the text by book, chapter, and paragraph number.

elimination. In fact, in summing up the causes of justification, Calvin, in contrast to Trent, speaks directly of faith as the ‘formal or instrumental cause’ (III, xiv, 17). The identification of this ‘cause’ is all the more striking, occurring, as it does, in the same paragraph where he insists that every particle of our salvation lies outside ourselves.

As mentioned earlier, the point is not the degree of human involvement but the futility and sinfulness of human action outside of Christ. Rather than considering the human action as a co-determining factor in justification, Calvin sees the sinner, dead, unrighteous, lost. To speak of human activity before justification as a bridge, however, narrow, is meaningless for Calvin: ‘... whatever a man thinks, plans, or carries out before he is reconciled to God through faith is accursed, not only of no value for righteousness, but surely deserving condemnation’ (III, xiv, 4). It is on the basis of this grave judgment on the human condition that he extols the gratuity of grace: ‘By this confession we deprive man of all righteousness, even to the slightest particle, until by mercy alone, he is reborn into the hope of eternal life ...’ (III, xiv, 5). What the gracious God finds, in Calvin’s view, is not human potentialities—however damaged, weakened, or wounded—but death. ‘For Scripture everywhere proclaims that God finds nothing in man to arouse him to do good to him but that he comes to man in his free generosity. For what can a dead man do to attain life?’ (*ibid.*). As Carl Braaten puts it from a Lutheran perspective, ‘... we have no remaining capacity to trigger off the event which effects justification.’<sup>30</sup> If this is an accurate depiction of the human situation, by itself the emphasis on the priority and gratuity of grace fails to plumb the peculiarity of grace and faith—even when the gift character of faith itself is underscored. For, as G.C. Berkouwer succinctly formulates the matter: At issue is not the *origin*, but *function* of faith.<sup>31</sup>

We have explored Calvin’s understanding at some length to attempt to demonstrate that the point of the Reformers’ understanding of justification is not adequately captured in a somewhat general affirmation of the primacy and gratuity of grace. Rather justification by faith was designed to deliver ‘the death blow to all human co-operation at the very beginning, the root, of salvation’.<sup>32</sup> What is the nature and significance of the different p. 142 approaches to justification? It can indeed be described as one of emphasis. While the one emphasizes the drama of the threshold situation between death and life, the other emphasizes the process of renewal across the threshold. Let us for the sake of the argument grant that this is an accurate depiction.<sup>33</sup> The question remains, does this difference in emphasis not reflect a different estimation of the human condition this side of the threshold, and therefore of the radicality of the required operation called grace? Further, when ‘grace’ is affirmed to be necessary in preparation for justification, how is it that a ‘grace’ other than that of ‘justification’ is necessary to overcome the initial inertia? It is in the act of justification that the devastating (and therefore saving) diagnosis of the sinful condition is delivered as well as the remedy for sin. What grace or human action

---

<sup>30</sup> Carl E. Braaten, *Justification: The Article by Which the Church Stands or Falls* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), p. 27.

<sup>31</sup> G. C. Berkouwer, *De Sakramenten* (Kampen: Kok, 1954), p. 249; cf. *idem.*, *Geloof en Rechtvaardiging*, pp. 45, 188.

<sup>32</sup> Klaas Runia, ‘Justification and Roman Catholicism’, in D. A. Carson, ed., *Right with God: Justification in the Bible and the World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), p. 114.

<sup>33</sup> It is in fact highly one-sided, since the Reformers were equally concerned (Calvin for that matter was *primarily* concerned) about the new life in Christ.

can there be 'before' this justification that prepares for the threshold experience? What other than justification can be the 'creative cause of faith'?<sup>34</sup>

Let us suppose that the foregoing describes significant differences more or less accurately. The identification of these differences cannot mean the end of the discussion. The more important question is, how significant are these differences? Do they justify the 'splendid isolation' in which the two faith communities live? Do remaining differences regarding justification justify continuing division?<sup>35</sup> What is the significance of differences among communions in comparison to our common foundation, namely, Jesus Christ?

## JUSTIFICATION, SCRIPTURE, AND TRADITION

### Justification as Judge

Exploring this question forces us to look beyond justification and biblical authority. More accurately, it forces us to look at the interconnection between these and the 'lived reality' of being the church of Jesus Christ. Jean-Marie Tillard is convinced that 'justification by faith' is not *the* basic divisive issue. 'It is related to a more fundamental issue. The problem lies in the relation between Christ, Church and the Word of God.'<sup>36</sup> What Tillard has in mind is the 'instrumental role' of the church in salvation. Once more we are very close to the issue of Scripture and Tradition. Tillard maintains that it is 'impossible to hear the Word of God without hearing it in the voice of the Church'.<sup>37</sup> Though coming from God, the Word 'is revealed through a process in which the community itself, in the Old and the New Covenant, is profoundly involved and p. 143 plays an important role.'<sup>38</sup> The 'basic divisive problem', according to Tillard, 'is the conception of the nature of the Church'.<sup>39</sup>

In considering the possibility that the underlying differences are ecclesiological, it is crucial to keep in mind Tillard's statement that the issue of justification is 'related' to a more fundamental issue. If we do not observe this relation, the danger is great that we discuss issues in isolation, leaving one behind in order to move to another. To lose the connection is to fail to reap the full fruit of ecumenical discussions. In fact, as Pesch suggests, taking seriously the ecclesiological consequences of the doctrine of justification is the condition for speaking of harmony regarding the doctrine itself.<sup>40</sup>

What are the ecclesiological consequences of the doctrine of justification by faith? Here its criterion function returns. According to Pesch, the 'office of judge' (*Richteramt*) is constitutive for the justification doctrine.<sup>41</sup> Invoking this doctrine as the criterion for the life of the church, Pesch raises some incisive questions. He asks, for example, whether, for its members, the church does not make itself a demanded 'work' in such a way that it in

---

<sup>34</sup> See Braaten, *Justification*, p. 38.

<sup>35</sup> Otto Hermann Pesch, *Gerechtfertigt aus Glauben: Luthers Frage and die Kirche* (Freiburg, im Br.: Herder, 1982), p. 32–33: 'Wir sind uns in der Rechtfertigungs lehre nicht einig. Zu Fragen bleibt: sind wir uns kirchentrenned uneinig?'

<sup>36</sup> J.-M. R. Tillard, 'We Are Different', *Midstream* 25 (1986): 281.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 282.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 283.

<sup>40</sup> *Gerechtfertigt aus Glauben*, p. 33.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

fact identifies itself with the grace of God that comes wholly from the outside.<sup>42</sup> Although such questions seem harsh, Pesch calls the critical function of this doctrine a liberating force. This comes into play whenever the church in its influence on believers concretely hinders, or even prevents, their living 'by faith alone'.<sup>43</sup> Pesch summarizes the critical force of this doctrine as ensuring the 'self-relativizing' of the church.<sup>44</sup> He gives this criterion broad scope and radical sway: All church structures and all official authority relations—even if we were to have them from Jesus' own mouth—must nevertheless remain radically relative. They are relative with reference to that which is the church's very *raison d'être*: the relativity of the instrument with reference to that for which it is used and with reference to the one who uses it.<sup>45</sup> The alternative to giving the doctrine of justification this judging function, according to Pesch, is a church which '*fundamentally* and in its own *self-understanding* withdraws from the judging criterion of the justification article'.<sup>46</sup>

George Tavard is, if anything, even more radical in the application of this criterion. On its basis, he insists, 'the entire edifice of Catholic thought since the sixteenth century stands in need of reconstruction'.<sup>47</sup> Not only thought is subject to this criterion. As 'the core of the Gospel', justification by faith necessarily becomes the touchstone of all subsequent affirmations and proclamations. p. 144 In its light the Church must reform itself. Sacramental theology and practice, liturgical worship, ethical principles and their applications, and the structure and nature of ministerial authority must be reviewed, reassessed and, where necessary reconstructed.<sup>48</sup>

Here we arrive at the point where authority of Scripture and the doctrine of justification by faith converge. This becomes crystal clear by the way in which Tavard, in the next sentence, appeals to Vatican II: 'This may well be done in the spirit of Vatican Council II, which declared, "The magisterium is not above God's Word ..." (DV, 10)'.

I have cited Catholic theologians at some length to indicate how radically altered the present situation is from that of the sixteenth century. One cannot dismiss these as merely minority voices. Pesch and Tavard, though not representative of all Catholic theology, are hardly minor figures. Furthermore, one cannot minimize their views as merely 'theological opinion'. The movement towards the suspension of the mutual doctrinal condemnations at the time of the Reformation is taking place under the official auspices of the Catholic (and Lutheran) church. Moreover, Catholic theologians are not 'freelancers'. The Vatican Decree on Ecumenism officially calls theologians to the task of reforming the church: '... their primary duty is to make an honest and careful appraisal of whatever needs to be renewed and achieved in the Catholic household itself, in order that

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., pp. 41–42.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 50; because the latter is no option, Pesch concludes that we are one in the doctrine of justification (pp. 59–51).

<sup>47</sup> George H. Tavard, *Justification: An Ecumenical Study* (New York: Paulist, 1983), p. 110.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

its life may bear witness more loyally and luminously to the teachings and ordinances which have been handed down from Christ through the apostles.’<sup>49</sup>

### Textual ‘Over-Against’

As noted earlier *Dei Verbum*’s insistence on the subservience of the magisterium to the Word, as well as the Ecumenical Degree’s call for reform on the basis of the tradition handed down from Christ through the apostles, would be more reassuring to Evangelical ears if the primacy of Scripture in discerning authentic tradition were clearly identified.

Even if one accepts the organic interrelationship between revelation, Scripture, and tradition, and thus rejects every simplistic *sola Scriptura* appeal that wrenches the written word from its living matrix of revelation and tradition, the Scripture must be accorded its unique ‘over-against’ role.<sup>50</sup> This is crucial, for this status of Scripture is the concrete index of the fact that, by virtue of its transcendence and holiness, God’s grace is not at our disposal.<sup>51</sup> God’s revelation is, indeed, given into our hands and is meant to be handed on. Yet, to ensure that it is *God’s* revelation that is handed on, a norm, a criterion is needed. James B. Torrance raises the critical question in this regard: ‘In what way does Revelation come to us through tradition? There are right ways and wrong ways of interpreting this, and this is where the ecumenical debate lies today.’<sup>52</sup> He insists that ‘it is one thing to say that the Church is the sphere of the Spirit of truth (“... who leads us into all truth”), or to say that the Church is possessed by the Spirit. It is another to say that the Church possesses the Spirit and therefore possesses the truth in herself.’<sup>53</sup> Presumably, no one in the Roman Catholic tradition would make such claims. The real question is: what are the best safeguards against acting as if one were the possessor?

On this issue, Matthias Handel’s massive study of the role of Scripture in Faith and Order documents provides some helpful insights. He emphasizes that the church stands first of all in a ‘hearing and receiving tradition’. If the church aspires to an appropriate reception of tradition, it must open itself ever anew to the witness of Scripture.<sup>54</sup> This means that the church constantly places itself under the judgment of Scripture.

The heirs of the Reformation must always be prepared to face the ‘radical question’ it asks Rome. Yves Congar formulates this question as follows: ‘Does the Catholic Church not identify itself with the norm, situating it within itself? Consequently, it has no confrontation, nor Lord, no dialogue except with itself.’<sup>55</sup> In the same vein, K.E. Skydsgaard argues for the importance of maintaining a clear distinction between the

---

<sup>49</sup> *Unitaris Redintegratio*, 4; on this issue, see Margaret O’Gara. ‘On the road toward unity: The present dialogue among the churches’, *Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings* vol. 48; 1993, pp. 18–40, esp. 32–50.

<sup>50</sup> See Hendrikus Berkhof, *The Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979, p.83) (p.88 in Dutch edition).

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Siegfried Wiederhofer, ‘Grundprobleme des theologischen Traditionsbegriffs’, *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 112 (1990): 2021.

<sup>52</sup> James B. Torrance, ‘Authority, Scripture and Tradition’, *Evangelical Quarterly* 87 (1987): 246.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 247.

<sup>54</sup> Matthias Haudel, *Die Bibel und die Einheit der Kirchen: Eine Untersuchung der Studien von ‘Glauben und Kirchenverfassung’* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), p. 378; cf. 391. The phrase ‘hörenden und empfangenden Tradition’ is that of Anton Houtepen. I have access only to the English edition: ‘Reception, Tradition, Communion’, in Max Thurian, *Ecumenical Perspectives on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: WCC, 1983), p. 150.

<sup>55</sup> Yves Congar, *The Word and the Spirit*, tr. David Smith (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), p. 33.

Word of God and tradition, understood as human response: 'The history of the Church has shown that they must necessarily be carefully distinguished, otherwise the Church would become its own legislator, and finally its own Lord.'<sup>56</sup> The over-against of the Word of God, which the supremacy of the canon is meant to maintain, targets subjectivism of whatever type. From the point of view of the Reformers, the Roman Church appears to fall into a collective subjectivism: the church as a whole led by the official teaching office, determines the truth—witness the decisions of 1854 and 1950 regarding Mary. From the Catholic point of view, Luther appears to fall into an individualistic subjectivism: a solitary individual dares to claim that his interpretation is the true interpretation of the p. 146 Scriptures—witness the ongoing divisions in the church.<sup>57</sup>

It is striking that even in literary theory the integrity and primacy of the text needs to be asserted against its post-modern dissolution. Walter A. Davis, for example, insists that it is still possible to say [for example], that Shakespeare measures me rather than the other way around; that the great writers offer us the possibility of a humanity we can attain only through the most strenuous efforts of self-overcoming: and that it is a good thing to be 'the humble servant of the text' (rather than 'the force that brings the text into being') when the text has the power to lead us beyond the narrow range of our self-serving beliefs and our self-protective emotions.<sup>58</sup>

If it is crucial to maintain the givenness, primacy, and normativity of the text in the case of the literary greats of our culture, it is *a fortiori* true of a text that the church has received as canon, as rule and norm for her faith.

### **Canon within Canon as Criterion?**

We have moved from justification by faith as central criterion for the authenticity of faith and the church to the role of Scripture as judge of tradition. This shift raises the question concerning the relationship between Scripture and its content. Specifically, the question arises whether the authority of Scripture in relationship to tradition is adequately maintained by the right reception and a thorough-going application of 'justification by faith'. More specifically still, is it in fact not Scripture, but a specific content of Scripture that is the decisive criterion for faithfulness to the gospel? Certainly, Luther's difficulties with the recalcitrant epistle of James suggests an appeal to 'a canon within the canon'. In that case, it is again not the Scriptures but a specific interpretation of Scripture that becomes the criterion of authenticity. Thus another—Lutheran—tradition becomes the measure of Scripture.

Perhaps a distinction between 'necessary' and 'sufficient' criteria is helpful. Arguably, justification by faith is a necessary criterion, a judge that calls into question all church practices that in any way detract from the sheer gratuity and radicality of grace. Justification by faith, however, is not a sufficient criterion for guiding the church. This is clear from the New Testament itself. Not even all of Paul's letters elaborate justification by faith. Furthermore, quite apart from James (which need not be understood as incompatible with Romans), other letters do not so much as mention this doctrine. The example of the First letter of John is instructive.

---

<sup>56</sup> K. E. Skydsgaard, 'Tradition as an Issue in Contemporary Theology', and 'Traditions', in *The Old and the New in the Church* (London: SCM, 1961), pp. 33–34.

<sup>57</sup> Joseph Lortz describes the Protestant approach as 'ein starker Dogmatismus im Subjektivismus, ein subjektiver Dogmatismus'. Quoted in Heiko Oberman, *Dawn of the Reformation*, p. 285, n. 57.

<sup>58</sup> Walter A. Davis, 'Offending the Profession (After Peter Handke)', *Critical Inquiry* 8 (1984): 716–717.

Obviously one does not find the doctrine of justification by faith articulated in this letter. At the same time, it is filled with a variety of criteria for testing the authenticity of the Christian community. They p. 147 range from keeping Christ's commandments or word, to loving one's brother, to committing sin or denying that one commits sin, to remaining with the community, to having the Spirit, to confessing that Jesus has come in the flesh.

Even this partial list of John's tests of authenticity suggests a bewildering variety of criteria. Yet there is a common strand and a common anchorage. The common strand consists of guarding that which the community has heard from the beginning (2:24; 4:6; 5:6-12). The common anchorage is Jesus Christ come in the flesh (3:22-23; 4:2-3; 5:1). Of course, the thread is connected to the anchor: What we have seen with our eyes, heard with our ears, touched with our hands—that we, as faithful witnesses, declare to you. In other words, the key to the authenticity, the apostolicity of the church is none other than the person Jesus and his mission, including especially his death and the shedding of his blood (3:16; 4:10; 5:6). This central theme is communicated by the apostolic testimony. In receiving the Scriptures as canon the church recognizes this vital strand and indispensable anchor.

Today the fullness of Christ as testified to in the Scriptures is the measure of the church. Justification by faith, therefore, is a necessary criterion. It ensures that the cutting edge of the gospel, as we called it earlier, truly cuts to the quick all pride, presumption, and claims to authority that do not administer the authority of Christ—everything that observes his promised presence and the radicality of his mission *for* and *through* the church.

Justification by faith cannot, however, be a sufficient criterion for the authentic life and walk of the people of God, the body of Christ. Salvation in Christ is too rich, too deep and broad, to be captured by the soteriological cutting edge of the gospel articulated in Justification by Faith. In the absence of a single, well-defined principle as criterion of authenticity, it becomes of the utmost importance that the church clearly affirms and submits to the Scripture as supreme norm.<sup>59</sup> Without this, there is no defence against tradition becoming more than interpretive, more than receptive. Without the over-against of the Scriptures the church succumbs to p. 148 the illusion that it is exempt from the call of *semper reformanda*.

To insist on a clear affirmation of and submission to the primacy of Scripture as norm is not necessarily to revert to a simplistic pitting of Scripture against tradition. As indicated earlier, scriptural authority does not function without interpretation, and interpretation takes place within a tradition. But if, as we confess, the Scriptures and their meaning are not at our disposal, the church needs to submit constantly to the correction and the reproof of these writings.

---

<sup>59</sup> Carl J. Peter has pleaded for a 'critical principle' in addition to justification by faith. He calls it the 'Principle of Respect for the Divine in its Concrete Realizations'. (Carl J. Peter, 'Justification by Faith and the Need of Another Critical Principle', *Justification by Faith: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII*, ed. H. George Anderson, et al., p. 310). This other principle refers to what many Roman Catholic theologians rightly point out, namely, that Revelation always involves human mediation (see the citations from Tillard above, as well as the fine discussion of this issue by Joseph Ratzinger in *Revelation and Tradition*, pp. 26-49). In the light of this, Wiederhofer speaks of a dialectic relationship between these two aspects of revelation (*op. cit.*). Important as it is to recognize that in a significant sense revelation *includes* the recipient, it is crucial to recognize that revelation comes *to* the church. The 'inclusion', in fact, plays a proper role only in the recognition of the primacy and supremacy of the 'coming to'. Peter's idea of a *complementary* principle and Wiederhofer's elaboration of a *dialectic* relationship suggests a state of equilibrium or reciprocity which does not do justice to the 'imbalance' of the 'coming to'. The insistence on the supremacy of Scripture as norm is an attempt to respect this 'imbalance'.



## A Response to George Vandevelde

George H. Tavard

Professor Vandevelde's paper looks at the possibility of a dialogue between contemporary Evangelicals and Catholics on the doctrine of Justification, which was one of the major points of contention in the sixteenth century between the Reformers and the leaders and theologians of the Roman Catholic Church. In this perspective the paper outlines the teaching of the Council of Trent on Justification, along with those of Lutheranism and of John Calvin, who has himself been the chief source and model of the Evangelical interpretation of Scripture.

It also suggests an original approach to Justification, from the point of view of the relation between Scripture and Justification, the two poles of the Reformation which, borrowing language from Aristotle, Lutheran theologians came to call its formal and material principles. Accordingly, the paper surveys the Catholic understanding of Tradition and of its role in the interpretation of Scripture, and it seeks for the point where the Evangelical reading differs from the Catholic one.

This approach is promising if it brings the two parties, if not yet to a solution of differences, at least to a better mutual understanding, which is a necessary first step in the process of a fruitful dialogue. This approach assumes that the fundamental problem between Evangelicals and Catholics lies precisely in the way Justification (along with its sequel, sanctification) is related to Scripture in the theological methods of the two parties, Catholics placing Tradition alongside of Scripture, if not as a complement, at least as a necessary principle of interpretation, Evangelicals starting from the *Scriptura sola* of the Reformation.

There is here a hidden difficulty. In spite of what could have been expected from the heirs of the scholastic traditions who were present at Trent, the Council that marked the start of the counter-reformation did not use the Aristotelian language of form and matter in this area. It assumed in passing, and without stressing it, a scholastic analysis of p. 150 sacraments in terms of matter and form (as in the decree of session 14, in 1551, on 'extreme unction' DS, n.1695). But it did not view the Christian life and doctrine in a hylomorphic perspective. It did not speak of a formal and a material cause of faith, of justification, of salvation, or of orthodoxy. At the fourth session (1545) the books of Scripture were recognized as the source of correct doctrine. And since Scripture records apostolic traditions, these—written or unwritten—were recognized at the same time; and they were said to be held 'with the same affection of piety'. The council did not identify any of the 'unwritten traditions' that were thus placed on a par with the Scriptures. Yet it narrowed the field of these traditions through three qualifications: the traditions must refer to doctrine (not to points of discipline, that may change with circumstances); they must derive from the apostles themselves (traditions that arose later having no apostolic

authority); and they must have reached all the way to the present (obsolete traditions remaining obsolete).

At the sixth session (1547) the 'Justification of the impious' was described as the fundamental grace, imparted in baptism, that is the beginning of Christian life and sanctification. While evidence for the doctrine of Justification was found in Scripture (that is cited through the entire decree), no attempt was made to relate Justification and Scripture in terms of matter and form. Indeed, as is noted by George Vandeveld, chapter 7 lists five causes of Justification: final (the glory of God), efficient (God), meritorious (satisfaction by the cross of Christ), instrumental (baptism), and formal ('the justice of God which becomes ours as gift'). Yet nowhere does the council speak of the relationship between Scripture and Justification in terms of mutual causality.

Had the Tridentine fathers adopted a hylomorphic standpoint inspired by the philosophy of Aristotle, they presumably would have seen Justification as the form (in keeping with the determination that the *justitia Dei* that is freely bestowed on sinners acts as the formal cause of their Justification) and Scripture as the matter (in keeping with the fact that Scripture is constituted by material writings, that need to be, so to say, reshaped by the discovery of their meaning, in the light of Christian experience). This, however, is the reverse of the standard Lutheran language concerning the two principles of the Reformation, according to which Scripture is the form and Justification the matter.

This discrepancy in the philosophical perspective of medieval and Lutheran scholasticism may be symptomatic of common misunderstandings between Catholic theologians and the followers of the Reformation. If Justification is the formal principle, it is the justifying, gratuitous action of God in regard to sinful man (the *impious* of the Council of Trent) that regulates the reading of Scripture, God's salvific action in Christ provides the correct hermeneutical key. The way to know this salvific action is necessarily twofold. One may 'hear' about it, since p. 151 faith 'comes from hearing' (as noted in ch. 6 of Trent). Yet one may truly grasp the meaning of this message, the gospel, only under the impact of salvific grace, notably, though not exclusively, as grace is experienced in the sacraments, that are then properly called 'sacraments of faith'. The experience of salvation, as described, let us say, in the epistle to the Romans, may then act as a 'canon within the canon' (a modern expression that was of course not used at Trent). It provides the key to the understanding of Scripture. In this case, however, Scripture must be taken in the medieval sense of *sacra pagina*, as that which has been written for our salvation in the books of divine revelation.

If, however, the formal and material principles are reversed, as happened in Lutheran theology, it is Scripture that informs Justification. Yet form is still by definition the spiritual principle and matter the material that is shaped by the form. In this case Scripture cannot be taken in its materiality, as a text to be read. If it is the active principle of the divine action by which the sinner is saved through faith, it can be no other than the revealing and saving Word of God, which infinitely exceeds the letter in which it is expressed. The letter of Scripture, *pagina*, has authority only when, in Calvin's language, its sense is attested by the interior testimony of the Holy Spirit. The letter needs to be understood in the Spirit. Such an understanding is not given or guaranteed by transmission (tradition) or by the decisions of an institutional magisterium, but only by the Spirit, whose witness is given in the hearts of the faithful. In order to avoid private interpretations that can well be contradictory, the faithful, including ministers and teachers, should always eagerly compare their reading of Scripture with the witness of the other believers. By the same token, however, in order to be the material principle that will receive the form of the Word of God, Justification cannot remain an unthematic experience of God's grace. It has to be embodied in a doctrine, a confession, a formulation,

to which the Word of God, read in Scripture or preached from Scripture, will give life. And such a doctrine may logically act as the standard of belief, the heart of the gospel, *articulus stantis vel cadentis ecclesiae*.

Thus it is that two different perspectives have characterized the theologies of Catholicism and those of the Reformation. But the situation at the end of the twentieth century is not that of the sixteenth. Contemporary dialogues between Lutherans and Catholics (especially at the international level and the national dialogues in the USA and in Germany) have achieved such a high degree of understanding and even agreement that one may now envisage a joint declaration that the anathemas of the sixteenth century regarding Justification—in the Council of Trent and in the *Formula of Concord*—have become truly obsolete, however justified they may have been in their time.

However, there has been no ongoing systematic dialogue between Evangelicals (in the American sense of the term) and Roman Catholics. And it is not to be expected that Evangelicals, belonging as they p. 152 do to a wide range of Churches, should be convinced simply by the findings of Lutheran/Roman Catholic research. The decree of the council of Trent on Justification therefore remains a stumbling block for a large part of the Christian world, as it still does for the more conservative forms of Lutheranism that remain outside the Lutheran World Federation.

George Vandevelde's effort to pinpoint the problem between Evangelicals and Catholics today is solidly based on the available documentation. It is formulated with great sensitivity to the issues as these appear on both sides. As I see it, however, the central question today between Evangelicals and Catholics is neither Justification nor Scripture/Tradition as these were debated in the sixteenth century. For Evangelicalism owes more to Calvinism than to Lutheranism. And the historical debate between Lutherans and Catholics that was the setting for the Council of Trent took place before the full development of Calvinism as a doctrine and as an ecclesial organization. Insofar therefore as it varies from the Lutheran/Catholic discussions, the problem refers in part to the differences that distinguish Lutheran and Calvinist theological emphases and interpretations. Unfortunately, while Luther's theology has been the object of extensive studies by Catholic authors in this century, neither Calvin nor the Calvinism of the seventeenth century—the inspiration for much of contemporary Evangelical thought—has been widely investigated in Catholic circles, in spite of a few pioneering studies, notably by Alexandre Ganoczy.

There is still, I believe, a great confusion among ecumenically-minded Catholics about the Evangelicals and their theology. And this is not entirely the Catholics' fault. On the one hand, Evangelicals have often over-simplified the positions of the Reformers and misunderstood the teaching of the Council of Trent, especially in regard to the apostolic traditions. On the other hand, the 'clear affirmation of and submission to the primacy of Scripture as norm', that lies, as George Vandevelde points out, at the core of Evangelicalism, becomes ambiguous when biblical interpretation wavers between classical readings that come from Luther or Calvin and modern readings that were pioneered by Liberal Protestants.

Admittedly, Evangelicals may well be confused by Roman Catholic theologians, and even by the treatment of Revelation, Scripture, and Tradition at Vatican Council II (decree *Dei Verbum*). In the first place, some of the sequels of Vatican II in the Catholic Church show that the lessons of the Council, though officially received, are not yet fully operative. And this puts in question the actual process of authority in the concrete life of the Catholic Church. In the second place, Catholic theologians are not of one mind in regard to the nature of the issues in the ecumenical dialogues.

Thus I do not myself think that a satisfactory solution can emerge from the recognition of a second principle ('respect for the Divine in its Concrete Realizations'), as was argued by the late Carl Peter in a p. 153 perspective that was largely inspired by Paul Tillich's wish to balance 'the Protestant principle and the Catholic substance'. For we would then be back at the question of the mutual relations between two principles, and we might again differ about which should be the form and which the matter. In fact, the search for an underlying principle has exercised the minds of many scholars in the last decades, thanks to a recurring, yet to me fallacious, interest in unearthing 'the basic difference' between Protestantism and Catholicism. Such a search assumes that the truth of a church or a confession of faith does not lie on the surface of what is taught and affirmed, but in some subconscious or metatheological assumption. Yet this runs counter to the axiom that Bossuet found at work in the Reformed Churches of his time, and which he approved as a basic principle of dialogue: 'It is a maxim that has been constantly established among them, that in this matter one should not consider the consequences that one may draw from a doctrine, but simply what is confessed and affirmed by the person who teaches it' (*Exposition de la doctrine catholique sur les matières de controverse*, section II).

The problems that divide Evangelicals and Catholics can be solved only on the basis of a deeper study, to be done in common, of what Justification by faith entails for the life, the structure, and the ongoing purification of the church that was envisaged at Vatican Council II (*Ecclesia ... sancta simul et semper purificanda: Lumen gentium*, n.8). But no joint investigation can be truly fruitful unless it is inspired by a sincere desire for reconciliation. And this may still be the largest hurdle.

---

**Dr George Tavard of the Augustinians of the Assumption, has taught Theology in Catholic and Methodist Seminaries. He is the author of 46 books and presently a member of the Dialogue of the Catholic Church with the World Methodist Council. p. 154**

# **Meeting Between Representatives of the World Evangelical Fellowship and The Roman Catholic Church**

*Venice, Italy, 21-25 October 1993*

## **WEF PARTICIPANTS**

Professor Henri Blocher  
Faculté de Théologie Evangélique  
Vaux-sur-Seine, France

Dr Pablo E. Perez  
Atlanta, GA, U.S.A.

Dr Paul. G. Schrottenboer  
1677 Gentian Dr. S.E.

Grand Rapids, MI 49508, U.S.A.

Dr George Vandeveld  
Institute for Christian Studies  
Toronto, Ontario  
Canada

## **CATHOLIC PARTICIPANTS**

Rev Avery Dulles, SJ  
Loyola Faber Hall  
Fordham University  
Bronx, NY, U.S.A.

Revd Timothy Galligan  
Pontifical Council for Promoting  
Christian Unity  
00120 Vatican City State, Europe

Bishop Jorge Mejia  
Pontifical Council for 'Justice and Peace'  
00120 Vatican City State, Europe

Rev Karl Muller, SVD  
D-53754 Sankt Augustin, Germany

Rev John Redford  
Director  
B.A. (Divinity) Programme  
Maryvale Institute  
Birmingham B44 9AG, England

Rev Thomas F. Stransky, CSP  
Rector, Tantur Ecumenical Institute  
P.O. Box 19556  
IL-91194 Jerusalem, Israel

Professor Lawrence J. McKinley  
Fordham University  
Bronx, NY, U.S.A. [p. 155](#)

# **The New Catechism and Christian Unity**

**Richard John Neuhaus**

*Reprinted with permission from Theology Today July 1996*

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is the authoritative reference or baseline for understanding Catholic faith, sacramental practice, moral doctrine, and prayer. As the title suggests, the chief purpose is catechetical, to provide a doctrinal framework from which the church in various parts of the world might develop regional catechisms and other educational materials. Much to almost everybody's surprise, however, the *Catechism* itself became an immediate best-seller, with more than forty million copies sold to date, and thus it has established itself as the text consulted by clergy and laity alike for a reliable word on questions of Catholic faith and life.

While one suspects that few Catholics and even fewer non-Catholics have read all eight hundred pages, the *Catechism* has also established itself as an ecumenical reference of great importance. This is strikingly evident, for instance, in current discussions between Catholics and evangelical Protestants. The 1994 declaration that Charles Colson and I initiated on rapprochement between Evangelicals and Catholics has provoked numerous articles and several books from the evangelical side, both sympathetic and hostile to the initiative. In those responses and in the 1995 book of essays *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission*, it is obvious that the *Catechism* has provided a common ground on which agreements and disagreements can be engaged.<sup>1</sup>

For thinking about Christian unity, the *Catechism* is an indispensable baseline, but other texts necessarily come into play. There is, for example, the very impressive product of the several theological dialogues of the last quarter century, especially with Anglicans and Lutherans. While the dialogue volumes are not authoritative in that p. 156 they have not been formally 'received' by the several parties, they do suggest points of convergence and consensus that can be tested by reference to texts such as the *Catechism*. The authoritative source of Catholic ecumenism, of course, is the Second Vatican Council, notably *Lumen Gentium* ('Dogmatic Constitution on the Church') and *Unitatis Redintegratio* ('Decree on Ecumenism'). This entire body of teaching is further developed in the 1995 encyclical on ecumenism, *Ut Unum Sint* ('That They May All Be One'). So, all these points of reference in a continuing clarification and development of doctrine are encompassed in this brief reflection on 'The Catechism and Christian Unity'.

Orthodoxy, both upper case and lower case, is at the heart of Catholic teaching on Christian unity. The reader of the *Catechism* will note the numerous references to the Orthodox Church and the absence of direct reference to the churches and communions derived from the sixteenth-century Reformation in the West. The careful reader will recognize that the classic concerns of the Reformation, although not mentioned, are very much taken into account. These historic disputes are not addressed directly because the *Catechism* intends to be a positive setting forth of Catholic teaching, as is explained by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger and Christoph Schönborn (the chief editor of the *Catechism*) in *Introduction to the Catechism of the Catholic Church*.<sup>2</sup>

The priority of East-West relations in the Catholic Church's view of the ecumenical imperative is longstanding. *Ut Unum Sint* repeatedly emphasizes that Catholics can settle for nothing less than the restoration of the full communion that was formally broken in 1054. In the *Catechism* and elsewhere, this pontificate has underscored that, as the second millennium has been the millennium of Christian divisions, so we should look forward to the third millennium as the millennium of Christian unity. This necessarily involves healing the breach of the sixteenth century between Rome and the Reformation. Here, too,

---

<sup>1</sup> Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus, eds., *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission* (Waco: Word, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger and Christoph Schönborn, *Introduction to the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1994).

orthodoxy (lower case) is the key, for the only unity that can be trusted is unity in the truth.

With the churches that comprise the Orthodox Church, it is suggested that there are no church- dividing disagreements on the constituting truths of apostolic Christianity. It is not too much to say, somewhat paradoxically, that the chief obstacle to full communion between East and West is the absence of full communion between East and West. Of course, there are long- standing differences regarding jurisdiction, especially when it comes to what the Catholic Church has claimed for the universal and immediate jurisdiction of the Bishop of Rome as the successor of Peter. But the *Catechism* implies and *Ut Unum Sint* makes explicit a bold initiative in suggesting that the Catholic Church is ready, indeed eager, to join with others in rethinking how p.157 the Petrine ministry can be exercised in a way that more effectively serves the unity of all Christians.

The dogmatic claims regarding the papacy cannot be compromised. No room for doubt is left on that score. It is precisely the uncompromised and uncompromisable strength of those dogmatic claims that makes it imperative that the ministry of Peter be exercised in a way that better secures the unity of all Christians. The Anglican and Lutheran dialogues have strongly affirmed a 'Petrine ministry' as part of Christ's intention for his church. Of course, it is not self- evident how one gets from Petrine ministry to papal primacy. It is therefore of great significance that Rome lifts up the first millennium, before the separation of East and West, as a period that may provide models for the exercise of the papal office in the future. The argument is that the Petrine ministry belongs to all Christians, that for reasons historical and functional, that ministry is exercised by the Bishop of Rome, that it has sometimes been exercised in a way that has served disunity rather than unity, and that all Christians should be part of thinking through how it might be better exercised in the future.

I am confident that we would not go wrong in understanding the Holy Father to be saying that unity is more important than jurisdiction. Christians in the East have been waiting a thousand years to hear a Bishop of Rome say that, and now it is being said. What exactly that might mean for the governance of the churches of the East, and what implications it might have for the way in which papal jurisdiction is exercised in the West—these are questions to be worked out in the years ahead. The historic breakthrough of this pontificate is that it has put these questions on the table.

Some Orthodox who have been reading the *Catechism* and related documents have been taken aback by the urgency and scope of Rome's proposals for reconciliation. Bartholomew, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, like his immediate predecessors, has been responsive to the bold initiatives of Rome. But he is not the 'Pope of the East' in a manner comparable to the role of the Bishop of Rome in the West. The jurisdictional dynamics in Orthodoxy are famously, some would say notoriously, fissiparous, and it is almost impossible to overestimate the deep- seated suspicions that many Orthodox have of Rome. The Catholic Church is viewed as the nine- hundred- pound gorilla on the ecclesiastical stage, and the Orthodox have nurtured for centuries memories of what they believe to be their abuse and betrayal at the hands of Rome. The situation is not helped by the current insecurities of Orthodox churches, notably of the Russian Church, still emerging from decades of persecution and of morally compromising accommodation under Communist regimes.

In restoring full communion with the West, the Ecumenical Patriarch and other Orthodox leaders cannot get out too far ahead without risking new conflicts, even schisms, within Orthodoxy. In the last two years, the monks of Mount Athos—who have no canonical authority but possess p.158 enormous moral influence—have taken the lead in opposing the rapprochement that has been achieved to date. In very blunt language, they

have made statements putting Bartholomew on notice and have come close to suggesting that he and others are selling out Orthodoxy to its traditional enemy. Nonetheless, the *Catechism* and, most particularly, *Ut Unum Sint* support the perception that this pope has no higher hope than that his pontificate will witness, if not the restoration of full communion with the East, the irrevocable setting of the Church's course toward that end.

The Catholic commitment to Christian unity is, it is repeatedly said, 'irrevocable'. Ecumenism is not something optional; it belongs to the very nature of the Catholic Church. This is a truth too little appreciated by conservative Catholics, also in this country. That the ecumenical movement is viewed with a measure of suspicion is understandable. The modern ecumenical movement began with the Edinburgh Missionary Conference in 1910 as an essentially Protestant affair and later gave birth to institutions such as the World Council of Churches (WCC) and National Council of Churches (NCC). While the Faith and Order wing of the WCC made important theological contributions over the years—contributions that are generously recognized by Rome—those institutions sometimes promoted a theological liberalism and left-leaning political activism that alarmed conservative Catholics.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that many Catholics watched with anxiety as the Church, following the Second Vatican Council, seemed to be 'joining' the ecumenical movement. The reality, of course, is that the Catholic Church has not joined the ecumenical movement. It has reconstituted the ecumenical movement. It is not too much to say that the Catholic Church is the centre of the movement toward Christian unity in our time. This is in part because of sheer size. Of the 1.8 billion Christians in the world (approximately one third of the world's population), more than a billion are Roman Catholic, more than 200 million are Orthodox, and most of the others are part of the maddeningly diverse Protestant world of 'evangelicalism'. The 'classical' Reformation traditions (for example, Lutheran, Anglican, Calvinist), commonly referred to as mainline Protestantism, and which make up the core constituency of the WCC, constitute perhaps 100 million Christians in the world, and are generally in decline. There is no way in which the World Council of Churches could have absorbed the Catholic Church; and the Catholic Church's understanding of itself would have made it difficult, if not impossible, to join as a member church among other member churches.

The last point engages the theological reason why it is more accurate to say that the Catholic Church, in its turn toward the quest for Christian unity, has reconstituted rather than joined the ecumenical movement. The ecclesiology of Vatican II is that the church of Jesus Christ 'subsists' in the Catholic Church in a singular way. The Catholic Church is not simply a church among the churches—it is not even [p. 159](#) the biggest or the best or the oldest or the grandest of the churches. Rather, it is, quite simply, the church of Jesus Christ fully and rightly ordered. That may sound arrogant to non-Catholics and even to some Catholics, but the pertinent question is whether it is true. It may also sound exclusivist and profoundly anti-ecumenical, but in fact it is not. Just the opposite is the case.

The additional teaching of Vatican II, reiterated in the *Catechism*, is that all who are Christians are 'truly but imperfectly' in communion with the Catholic Church. All those who are, as the New Testament puts it, 'in Christ' are necessarily, however imperfectly, in communion with the body of Christ that is the church. Christ the head and the church that is his body cannot be separated. Where Christ is, there, however imperfectly expressed, is the church. Christ and the church are coterminous. The goal of ecumenism is not to create a unity that does not exist but to bring to fulfilment a unity that is the gift of God already given. In *Lumen Gentium*, the Council readily acknowledges that the saving and sanctifying grace of God is present outside the boundaries of the Catholic Church. At the



same time, it emphasizes that these gifts of God have built into them a gravitational pull toward unity with the Catholic Church.

Ecumenism does not relativize or diminish the unique claims of the Catholic Church. On the contrary, it is the unique status of the Catholic Church that makes ecumenism mandatory. Ecumenism is not a programme of the Catholic Church; ecumenism is in the nature of being the Catholic Church. The Church cannot be true to itself unless it is ecumenical. It follows that to be an orthodox Catholic is to be an ecumenical Catholic. The Extraordinary Synod of the Council, held in 1985, made clear that the ecumenical mandate is indelibly imprinted on the Church's mind and mission.

The same message is driven home in *Ut Unum Sint*: 'At the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church committed herself *irrevocably* to following the path of the ecumenical venture, thus heeding the Spirit of the Lord.' And again: 'This unity, which the Lord has bestowed on his Church in which he wishes to embrace all people, is not something added on, but stands at the very heart of Christ's mission. Nor is it some secondary attribute of the community of his disciples. Rather, it belongs to the very essence of this community... To believe in Christ means to desire unity; to desire unity means to desire the Church; to desire the Church means to desire the communion of grace which corresponds to the Father's plan from all eternity. Such is the meaning of Christ's prayer: "*Ut Unum Sint*".' Finally: 'Thus it is absolutely clear that ecumenism, the movement promoting Christian unity, *is not just some sort of 'appendix'* which is added to the Church's traditional activity. Rather, ecumenism is an organic part of her life and work, and consequently must pervade all that she is and does.' Most Catholics, to put it gently, have not internalized this commitment to ecumenism. Non-Catholics can hold Catholics to their ecumenical obligation by appealing [p.160](#) to the ecclesiology of the *Catechism*.

A sense of imminence marks Catholic thinking about the healing of the breach between East and West. Not so with respect to healing the breach between Rome and the Reformation. While the Magisterium (teaching authority) recognizes that much progress has been made in theological dialogues, especially with Lutherans and Anglicans the *Catechism* reflects the understanding that it cannot be assumed with Protestants, as it can be assumed with the Orthodox, that there is already a secure foundation for full communion. *Ut Unum Sint*, for instance, lists five areas where much work is needed 'before a true consensus of faith can be achieved'. They are (1) the relationship between Scripture and sacred tradition, (2) the eucharist as real presence and sacrifice, (3) the sacrament of ordination and the meaning of apostolic ministry, (4) the Magisterium or teaching authority of the Church, and (5) Mary as mother of God and icon of the Church.

Some may be discouraged by that list, since these are issues that have been in dispute between Protestants and Catholics for almost five centuries. The difference at the edge of the third millennium is that they are now the subject of a common exploration as 'we look at one another in the light of the Apostolic Tradition'. The difference now is that the exploration begins from the premise that we are brothers and sisters in Christ. The difference now is that we mutually ask forgiveness for sins against unity in the past and encourage one another, above all, to conversion to Christ, which of necessity is conversion to the unity of his body, the church. The difference now is that a reconstituted ecumenical movement seeks no unity other than unity in the fullness of truth revealed by God. The difference now is the irrevocable pledge of the Catholic Church to join with all Christians in striving for the fulfilment of the prayer of our Lord that they may be one.

There is no denying that the high hopes of Edinburgh in 1910 have met with many and bitter disappointments. More recently, decisions in the Anglican communion regarding ordered ministry have cast a deep shadow over hopes for ecclesial reconciliation between Rome and Canterbury. It may be said that, in the West, ours is a moment of diminished

ecumenical expectations. Precisely in such a moment of diminished expectations, the Catholic Church pledges, and asks others to pledge, a redoubled devotion to Christian unity. For Catholics, it is not a matter of choice, as is made unmistakably clear in the ecclesiology of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

---

**Richard John Neuhaus is President of Religion and Public Life, a research and education institute in New York City. Among his books are *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission* (edited with Charles Colson, 1995) and *Doing Well and Doing Good: The Challenge to the Christian Capitalist* (1992). p. 161**

# Changing Patterns in the Church's Ministry in the Age of the Reformation

Richard B. Norton

*Reprinted with permission from Hayama Missionary Seminar, 1974*

Preface: The purpose of an historical paper in the Hayama Seminar is to open up an area of church history which will have a direct bearing on the conference theme. Of several possibilities I have chosen the age of the Protestant Reformation, but with this choice I realize that I am tackling an area which in no wise can be adequately treated within the time limits set for this presentation.

Basically I shall develop this essay by, first, taking a look at the concept of ministry in the so-called 'classical Reformers' (by which I mean Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, etc.,) and then, secondly, looking at the concept of ministry in the so-called 'Radical Reformation' (by which I mean the scattered groups on the left which rejected the mainstream reformation attempts). To set the stage, by way of introduction, I shall try to draw a simple picture of the Medieval Church, and to draw the essay to a conclusion, I will try to raise some points relevant to our discussion today.

## INTRODUCTION

### Ministry in the Medieval Church

A traveller crossing Europe, say in 1517, would have found himself at almost any point in his journey within sight of the spire of a great cathedral, a monastery chapel, or a village church. In a word, as the church dominated architecturally all the buildings clustered about it, so the church dominated all medieval life. But what was this church of which we speak? Medieval theologians would most likely have defined it simply as 'the community of the faithful'. But in using the term 'faithful' the emphasis would have fallen on 'obedience' rather than on 'faith', though to be sure, it was not without reason that the Medieval Age has been called 'the Age of Faith'. To get immediately to the heart of the matter, the church on the eve of the Reformation was the clergy. Without the properly

ordained cleric there was no church; and with the cleric, in spite of his character and even though there p. 162 were no laymen, there was the church.

Now, this distinction between clergy and laity, which had gradually come to be implicit in the third and fourth centuries, is now in the Medieval Age made explicit. Christopher Brooke, a Professor of Medieval Church History, says there was no more fundamental division in medieval life than that between upper and lower clergy. 'The official view of the Church was that the cleric and lay were utterly different in status and function, and must be kept apart'.<sup>1</sup> The 'community of the faithful' was led by an entrenched hierarchy in which there were numerous grades of clerics, each with rights and duties, all headed up in the bishop, and finally in the Pope at Rome. And this hierarchy held the keys which unlocked or barred heaven's door to the laity.

### **The Ministry of the Clergy**

So first let us look at the clergy. In this age ministry meant very simply the ministry of the 'set apart, ordained' clergy. In two ways the laity were constantly reminded that their spiritual leaders were different from the rest of the church. In the first place, the clergy were forbidden to marry and so were a distinct 'order'. And secondly, perhaps to save them from worldly temptations, the clergy were given special dress, which may have enhanced their prestige, but only set them further apart from the faithful.

But right here we confront an interesting paradox. If it is a fact that the clergy were a 'set apart' order, it is also a fact that, as Roland Bainton has pointed out,<sup>2</sup> functions which in the earlier centuries had been strictly denied to the clergy, gradually came to absorb much of their time. Let us note two or three examples. First, the growth of the church's land holdings—the church had indeed prospered in this world's goods—forced the clergy to become business administrators. This was probably the only time when clerics have been more adroit at business than laymen. Secondly, the clergy were increasingly drafted by the ruler or local prince to handle affairs of government. Indeed, in some places bishops actually became territorial rulers. In both cases clergy were thrust into such functions by virtue of the fact that in a society where there was little education, the clergy probably had the best of what was available. But a third function might be added here. From the Crusades onward the clergy became increasingly involved in the machinery of war, sometimes in serving the state, but more often in simply preserving the holdings of the church. To be sure, it was mostly the upper clergy—bishops, abbots, etc.—who became involved in business administration and the affairs of state, nevertheless responsibilities assumed by the upper clergy filtered down to the lowest levels. What this meant was, of course, that the p. 163 clergy which had been 'set apart, ordained' for a unique function in the church actually had little time to do those things for which they had been called.

Many of the aspects of ministry which in the early church had belonged to the whole Christian community, by the fourth century had been appropriated by the clergy. To take but one example, consider the prophetic ministry—the right to preach and to teach the Word. Gradually what had been once the responsibility of the whole church through its elders came to be vested primarily in the bishop. And as the bishop became involved in all manner of other activities, preaching and teaching decreased in the Medieval Church, though, to be sure, there were other factors involved. The Medieval Church had a few great

---

<sup>1</sup> Christopher Brooke, 'The Church of the Middle Ages' in *The Layman in Christian History*, ed. by Neill & Weber (London, SCM Press, 1963), p. 113.

<sup>2</sup> Roland Bainton, 'The Ministry in the Middle Ages' in *The Ministry in Historical Perspective*, ed. by Neibuhr & Williams (N.Y. Harper & Bros., 1956), p. 86.

preachers, but the fact remains that the general ignorance of baptized Christians in matters of faith can be traced basically to the demise of the sermon in weekly worship, with no comparable place for instruction' ever found. The brutal truth is that the church on the eve of the Reformation was a church which did not hear, and thus did not know the Word.

But if the prophetic ministry had suffered an eclipse, the contrary was true of the priestly ministry. Above anything else the clergy were 'ordained' priests. In so far as the priest had a pastoral ministry among the laity, it came to clearest focus in the performance of the sacraments. The sacraments numbered seven and touched the life of the faithful at every crucial point of their existence from the cradle to the grave. The supreme sacrament was the Lord's Supper, known simply as the 'Eucharist'. Though laymen may have communed not more than once a year, still they were usually present at the mass in time to see the sacred host elevated. Close to the Eucharist was the sacrament of penance, which perhaps more than the Eucharist, impinged on the daily life of the faithful. We cannot forget that it was the sale of indulgences which angered Luther, and led to his posting of the Ninety-five Theses. In a word, through the ministry of the sacraments the church became a church in servitude to the established priesthood.

### **The Ministry of the Laity**

So much for the ministry of the clergy, but what of the laity in the Medieval Church, a church dominated by the clergy? Let us not forget that even as there were faithful Christians among the clergy, so also among the laity, were men and women deeply committed to the gospel. But there was the tradition for those who had been grasped by the gospel to make their way into a monastic 'order', and there to find an area of service, often quite apart from the real world. What this meant was that in the church out in the world there would be few left who had a genuine sense of commitment to serve Christ and their neighbour in any profound way. The nominal Christian in the world was called simply to be faithful in attendance at the mass, and to be obedient to the traditions of the church as they were interpreted to them by p. 164 their clergy. Not an altogether happy picture.

But by the sixteenth century laymen were beginning to take a greater interest in what was going on in society in general, and in the church in particular. Even so, such laymen were a small minority. Several movements within the church of the 12th and 13th centuries tended to bring laymen into more conspicuous positions in the life of the church. The establishment of universities did much to encourage education, and led to the creation of several lay professions. And of course the Renaissance in the mid-15th century with its emphasis on humanism and the freedom of the individual, increased the laity's interest in church and world.

However, to understand the Protestant Reformation, we must recognize the fact that laymen from the late 12th century were beginning to demand a ministry of their own. Several movements reflected this new spirit. To take one, consider the movement centred in Peter Waldo. Waldo, a layman in Southern France, had discovered the gospel for himself, and was anxious to preach as a layman. The movement spread quickly among the laity. But the hierarchy, scared of an awakened laity, rejected such movements and ruthlessly persecuted the Waldensians. By the time of St. Francis Assisi, the church was beginning to recognize its error, and so baptized his movement and kept it within the church. But other lay movements were not so kindly treated, and many suffered martyrdom for their right to fulfil a lay ministry, though they were encouraged to fulfil it with a monastic order. By the late Medieval Age such lay ministries were not being limited to prayer within the cloister, but were reaching out to positive service in the world. Clearly

by the time of the great Reformers, the laity were awakening and were beginning to move, demanding greater roles within the life of the church. And as lay aspirations were articulated, it gradually became clear that there was also a certain tendency for anti-clericalism. Now let us turn directly to the Protestant Reformation.

## I. MINISTRY IN THE CLASSICAL REFORMATION

It goes without saying that we all recognize the many differences, some very important, which separate the mainline Reformers, one from the other. Nevertheless, because the overlap is so great, it is possible to distil what might be called the 'classical' position, though admittedly always with certain attendant dangers. I shall first attempt to set forth the 'classical' view of the church, and then proceed to examine the meaning of ministry, looking on the one hand at the ministry of the laity, and on the other hand at the ministry of the clergy with reference mostly to Luther.

For the major Reformers the central concept used to describe the Church was the 'communion of saints' (*communio sanctorum*) taken, of course, from the historic creeds. Now, the 'saints' were not those few superior Christians who, because they had in their lifetime supposedly worked miracles, had p. 165 been canonized by the church, but rather were all those Christians throughout the ages who had accepted the love of God in Christ, been forgiven and justified by faith, and had been baptized into Christ's one Body, the church. Luther purposely sought to get away from using the word 'church', (*ecclesia*) for its many connotations, he felt, only blurred its true meaning. Rather, he preferred to speak on the reality of the church as 'a holy, Christian People' (*Santa catholica Christiana*). In a word, all the Reformers sought to discourage emphasis on the church as an institution in order to direct attention to the people who composed the church. But equally important was the emphasis on the term 'communion'. For Luther, it was the gathering of 'the holy People of God' into one body, and not isolated individuals, however much they had been 'justified by faith'. But 'communion' carried the deeper meaning of a holy people who were in fellowship with one another, as well as with the Lord of the church. So Luther was exceedingly concerned about the reality of the 'community of Faith' here on earth, i.e., the 'visible' church; though of course he also believed in the 'invisible' church. But it was Calvin who did more to distinguish the two, and to emphasize the invisible character of the church as that body of believers known only to God. However, as time went on, especially after 1536, Calvin too took a more positive attitude toward the visible community of faith here on earth.

All of the Reformers, in one way or another, sought to set forth what each believed to be the 'marks' (*notae ecclesiae*) by which the true church could be distinguished from the false, although all were quick to add that these 'marks' did not mean that everyone in such a church was a true believer. The classical Reformation usually placed these 'marks' as either two in number, or at most, three. Here we turn to Luther's famous pamphlet, *On the Councils and the Churches*, 1527, where he lists not two or three but seven ways to distinguish the true community of the saints. Writes Luther: 'First, this Christian, holy People is to be known by this, that it has God's Word ... We speak, however, of the external Word orally preached by men like you and me.'<sup>3</sup> And, 'where God's Word is purely taught', writes Luther in another pamphlet, 'there is also the upright and true Church.'<sup>4</sup> And again,

---

<sup>3</sup> *On the Councils & the Churches*, Cf. Kerr, *A Compend of Luther's Theology* (Phila., Westminster Press, 1943) p. 126.

<sup>4</sup> *Table Talk*, No. 369; op. cit., p. 135.

‘Wherever, therefore, you hear or see this Word preached, believed, confessed and acted upon, there do not doubt that there must be a true ecclesia sancta catholica, a Christian, holy People, even though small in numbers.’<sup>5</sup> So sure is Luther of the power of the Word to create the church that he goes on to add: ‘If there were no other mark than this alone, it would be enough to show that there must be a Christian Church there.’<sup>6</sup>

Again, all the Reformers were united in placing the sacraments— p. 166 understood by them to be baptism and the Lord’s Supper—second (Luther treats them as the second and third ‘marks’ of the church). ‘Where baptism and the Sacrament (the Lord’s Supper) are, there must be God’s People and vice versa’, says Luther.<sup>7</sup> But it is not enough that the sacraments ‘be rightly administered according to Christ’s institution’, it is imperative that they ‘be believed and received’.<sup>8</sup> As in the case of the Word, the active, positive reception on the part of the Christian community is emphasized. In receiving the sacraments ‘the Church exercises itself in faith, and openly confesses that it is a Christian People’.<sup>9</sup>

But beyond these two—the pure preaching of the Word, and the right administration of the two sacraments—there is often added a third—the correct use of discipline. Luther, in discussing the ways by which the true church is recognized, next takes up the question of discipline under the rubric of ‘the Keys’, which are to be used both publicly and privately in calling Christians to repentance and amendment of life. Luther says, ‘Christ decrees in [Matt. 18](#) that if a Christian sins, he shall be rebuked, and if he does not amend his ways, he shall be bound and cast out; but if he amends, he shall be set free. This is the power of the keys.’<sup>10</sup> But it is Calvin who without doubt placed the greater emphasis on discipline as that means whereby, on the one hand, the purity of the church is maintained, and on the other hand, those who have fallen victim to the world’s temptations and have strayed from the faith are redeemed. Even so, Calvin stopped short of making discipline one of the ‘marks’ of the church. For him discipline belonged to the organization of the church, but not to the definition of the church.

There can be no question that the Reformers placed genuine emphasis on the role of the church. Therefore, it should not be surprising when we hear both Luther and Calvin take the traditional stand of the Roman Catholic Church in teaching that outside of the church there is no salvation, no forgiveness of sins: ‘I believe’, says Luther, ‘that no one can be saved who is not found in this congregation, ... I believe that in this congregation and nowhere else there is forgiveness.’<sup>11</sup> Now, if one thoroughly understands what the Reformers meant by the church, one will know that it was poles apart from the traditional view of their day. And it is precisely against the Reformers’ understanding of the church that we must wrestle with their concept of ministry.

### **The Ministry of the Laity: The Priesthood of all Believers**

The Reformers were all deeply concerned about the laity. Luther’s most creative works—his translation of the Bible, catechisms, liturgy, hymns, etc.—all were directed toward the

---

<sup>5</sup> *On the Councils & Churches*, op. cit. p. 127.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>11</sup> *Brief Explanation of the Ten Commandments, the Creed & the Lord’s Prayer*, Cf. Kerr op. cit., p. 124–125.

needs of the laity. And p. 167 we should not forget that Calvin's *Institutes* certainly in their first editions, were specifically for the layman. In a word, if the Medieval Church was a church of the clergy, the Reformers meant the church to be the church of the laity. This concern for the laity in the church comes to clearest focus in the doctrine of the 'Priesthood of All Believers', and is set forth perhaps more clearly in Luther's 'three great manifestos' of 1520.

All the Reformers in developing their concept of the priesthood of all believers resorted to those passages of Scripture familiar to us all, though each developed his thought in his own way. In general we may say that the classical view rested on two pillars; on the one hand, each Christian has been given ample gifts by the Holy Spirit for his own particular ministry, and on the other hand, this ministry is specifically a ministry in the world, i.e., in the Christian's daily walk. In a word, the Reformers were clearly attacking two medieval errors: one, that only a choice few had been given gifts for ministry, and two, that those so blessed could best fulfil their ministry apart from the world in a specialized vocation, i.e., in a monastic 'order'.

The heart of Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers was the simple teaching that all baptized Christians are priests. Here are several representative quotes: 'As many of us as have been baptised are all priests without distinction.'<sup>12</sup> And again, 'Let everyone, therefore, who knows himself to be a Christian be assured of this, and apply it to himself—that we are all priests, and there is no difference between us, that is to say, we have the same power in respect to the Word and all the sacraments.'<sup>13</sup> And again, 'There is neither priest, nor layman, canon or vicar, rich or poor ... for it is not a question of this or that status, degree or order.'<sup>14</sup> Simply put, justified by faith, through baptism all Christians are incorporated into the death and resurrection of Christ, and so into the one fundamental Christian estate.

To sum up this teaching on the priesthood of all believers, I can do no better than to quote the German Dogmatician, Brunotte's four points, recorded in Gordon Rupp's excellent essay,<sup>15</sup> as follows:

- (1) Before God all Christians have the same standing, a priesthood in which we enter by baptism through faith.
- (2) As a brother of Christ, each Christian is a priest and needs no mediator save Christ. He has access to the Word.
- (3) Each Christian is a priest and has an office of sacrifice, not a mass, but the dedication of himself to the praise and obedience of God, and to bear the cross.
- (4) Each Christian has the duty to hand on the Gospel which he has himself received.

Calvin's basic emphasis is not so p. 168 different as to merit time here. Since the Reformer's clearly visualized this ministry of the laity being fulfilled in the world, we thus come to their idea of 'vocation'. For all the Reformers each Christian had a vocation. For Luther, as Ralph Morton puts it, 'Men are called to his service in all activities of their lives—in their daily occupations as well as in their religious activities, in their homes as

---

<sup>12</sup> *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Cf. Kerr, op. cit., p. 137.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>14</sup> Luther's Gloss on Galatians, Cf. Gordon Rupp, 'The Age of the Reformation' in *The Ministry in Historical Perspective*, p. 138.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

much as in the Church.<sup>16</sup> The ministry is clearly a ministry of the Word, of bringing the Word to bear on daily life, but this ministry is interpreted differently by Luther and Calvin. Luther, who saw little hope of the whole of society being saved, saw the Christian's vocation as that of being a 'little Christ' to his neighbour, bringing to bear the forgiveness man has in the gospel to his neighbour. Calvin, who took a more positive view about the salvation of society, saw the Christian serving the Word in such a way that the Kingdom could be at least partially realized here and now. It is important to note that all the major Reformers placed a significant emphasis on the Christian family as a primary place where Christians fulfil their vocation. It is also important to note, that whereas ministry is increasingly opened up to the male, in truth, though perhaps not intentionally, women are reduced primarily to a role in the home, whereas the Medieval Church had at least given them the possibility of a genuine vocation outside the home in monastic 'orders'.

Now, all this would seem to indicate that the Reformers envisioned a laity set free from the old structures to serve God and man in a way the church had not known for more than a thousand years. Indeed, in a controversial passage in the Preface to the *German Mass*, Luther in 1526 hints at the possibility of more private assemblies where 'those who mean to be real Christians' might meet in houses for prayer, worship, the Sacraments, discipline, etc.<sup>17</sup> One might jump to the conclusion, as the radical left-wing reformers did, that the classical Reformers, at the early stage of the Reformation, looked forward to the time when there would be no need for a 'set apart, ordained' clergy, but this is not the case. Widely read in this same period in the Rhineland, France and England was a patristic handbook, called the *Unio Dissidentium* which had a section in it called 'that all Christians are priests, kings and prophets, but not all are ministers of the Church'. Yes, the 'Classical Reformation' also placed an important emphasis on the ministry of the clergy. To this ministry we now turn.

### **The Ministry of the Clergy**

In the document already mentioned, *On the Councils and the Churches*, in which Luther discussed the basic 'marks' of the church, after discussing the pure preaching of the Word, and the right administration of the Sacraments, and the handling of the 'Keys', i.e., of discipline, he adds three other ways whereby p. 169 the true church can be recognized, the fifth of which runs as follows: 'The Church is known outwardly by the fact that it consecrates or calls ministers ... the whole group cannot do these things (i.e., the Word, the two sacraments, and discipline) but must commit them, or allow them to be committed, to someone.'<sup>18</sup> And again, 'The priests, as we call them, are ministers chosen from among us, who do all they do in our name.'<sup>19</sup> Or again, 'Priests, bishops and popes are neither different from other Christians nor superior to them, except that they are charged with administration of the Word of God and the Sacraments, which is their work and office.'<sup>20</sup> Thus Luther, as did the other Reformers, provided for a 'set apart, ordained' clergy.

Now, this special ministry, like the ministry which the laity has, is rooted in the free gifts which the Holy Spirit has given to all Christians. The point, of course, is not that the

---

<sup>16</sup> T. Ralph Morton, *Community of Faith* (N.Y., Assoc. Press, 1954), p. 65.

<sup>17</sup> Donald Durnbaugh, *The Believers' Church* (N.Y. Macmillan Co., 1968), p. 139.

<sup>18</sup> *On the Councils and the Churches*, Cf. Kerr, op. cit., p. 129.

<sup>19</sup> *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Cf. Kerr, op. cit., p. 137.

<sup>20</sup> *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility*, Cf. Kerr, op. cit., p. 137.



whole laity do not have the right to preach, administer the sacraments, and take responsibility for discipline. But rather, so that the church may fulfil its mission in an orderly way, as a single body integrated about its head, Jesus Christ, certain Christians are given gifts which are for the building up of the whole body.

Luther, it should be pointed out, is not as concerned with any contradiction between the ministry of the laity and clergy, as he is with the fact that this special ministry is not to be construed as a priesthood of the Roman variety. Luther writes: 'The churchly priesthood which is now universally distinguished from the laity and alone called a priesthood, in the Scriptures is called ... a ministry, an office, an eldership, etc.'<sup>21</sup> The priesthood grew out of the church's organization, and is not in Scripture, says Luther. 'It was the custom years ago, and ought to be yet, that in every Christian community, since all were spiritual priests, one, the oldest or most learned and most pious, was elected to be their servant, officer, guardian, watchman, in the Gospel and the sacraments, even as the mayor of a city is elected from the whole body of its citizens.'<sup>22</sup> As for the polity of the church, whereas Luther in his younger years tended to take a freer view, letting it depend more on time and circumstances, Bucer and especially Calvin, deduced it more specifically from the Scriptures, rooting it not only in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, but also in the lordship of Christ over the church. However, in the end Calvin's view was not too far distant from that of Luther's. Neither wished to establish the structure of the church in the sixteenth century too slavishly on an imitation of the primitive church.

A delineation of the specially set apart ministry is not necessary here. Suffice it to say that in both Luther and Calvin it took roughly the same p. 170 form. Calvin, however, set forth finally four levels of ministry, which we might note here.<sup>23</sup> Pastors came first, and were supremely responsible for the Word and the Sacraments. Next came teachers who were to instruct the faithful in sound doctrine. Incidentally here Calvin includes the whole gamut of education whose chief end is to prepare the people to hear the gospel. Teachers have nothing to do with the sacraments nor with discipline. In reality these two offices—pastors and teachers—often blurred even in Calvin's own thinking. Elders were to care for the life of the faithful with special emphasis on the cure of souls and on proper discipline. Deacons stood last and were charged with serving the poor and the sick, both within and without the church, thus freeing the pastors to fulfil their rightful ministry of the Word.

As to how the special ministry, i.e., the clergy, were to be chosen, the principle was clear enough: the ministers are chosen by the whole church. Indeed, in 1523 Luther affirmed the right of a Christian congregation in defined circumstances to depose a preacher and to call another who would preach the gospel.<sup>24</sup> But the principle so clearly articulated was observed more by its breach than by its fulfilment. In truth, in the classical Reformation churches the ministry was chosen in the first instance by the leaders of the Reformation and then were presented to the congregation for its approval. But as the vague line separating church and state became even vaguer, increasingly clergy were chosen, if not outwardly, at least with the tacit consent of the magistrates of the state or city.

---

<sup>21</sup> Answer to the SuperChristian ...; Cf. Kerr, op. cit., p. 138.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>23</sup> *Institutes* IV: 3:4–9; Cf. Kerr, *A Compend of the Institutes of the Christian Religion by John Calvin* (Phila., Presbyterian Board of C.Ed., 1939), p. 163ff.

<sup>24</sup> Rupp, op. cit., p. 142.

To draw this part to a conclusion we must say something about the contradiction which stands at the heart of the conception of ministry in the 'Classical Reformation'. Gordon Rupp, a first-rate scholar of the Reformation, puts the question thus: 'Why didn't the classical reformation maintain this new emphasis on Christian solidarity and on the initiative of the laity?'<sup>25</sup> He then goes on to ask why one branch of the Reformation became a dominated pastor's church while the other branch bred a Christian radicalism? The Classical Reformation articulated all the scriptural principles upon which the Radical Reformation were to build the 'free church'. But somehow in Lutheranism and in the Reformed Church these basic principles came to be overshadowed and eclipsed. Rupp answers his own question thus: 'The answer must be sought in history itself rather than in theology, and with regard not to one doctrine but to the wholeness of the theological pattern and to that mysterious imponderable ... the "ethos" of a great communion.'<sup>26</sup> Though the Reformers did place genuine emphasis on the doctrine of the laity, the laity were not a great dominant theme of debate—'the real dogfight was about the ministry, p. 171 and it was carried on by clerics in the main',<sup>27</sup> says Rupp.

### III. MINISTRY IN THE RADICAL REFORMATION

A word must be said here by way of introduction about the use of this term, 'Radical Reformation'. We are not dealing here with a homogeneous 'left-wing', but with many small groups of great diversity and vitality. These groups arose in most cases quite independently of each other. Some placed a great emphasis on the Bible, others almost rejected it, giving primary place to the Holy Spirit. Many led the strictest moral lives, while a few went so far as to practise polygamy. Most took the path of non-resistance, but some were ready to use force to accomplish their aims. Some moved toward mysticism, but the most were down-to-earth realists. In other words, we have here what we would expect to find when all tradition is cast to the winds. But it is not fair to judge any movement by the extreme radicals on the fringes, as many scholars have done in the past.

Clearly we should not think of the Radical Reformers as a second generation movement rebelling against the classical reformers. In point of time, they existed from the very beginning of the Reformation, appearing very early in Wittenberg. Though the earliest groups are found in South Germany and Switzerland, it was the Hutterites of Moravia and the Mennonites of Holland who did the most to mould the 'Anabaptist' tradition. The term 'Anabaptist' was given to them by their adversaries, because they rebaptized their followers. They chose to call themselves simply 'Baptists'.

In wrestling with Anabaptist thought it is unfair to force it into the same framework we have used above in discussing the 'Classical Reformation', rather I shall start where their own Confessions of Faith began. Let me add here that I am drawing heavily from two books which I commend to you all: Franklin Littell's *The Anabaptist View of the Church*, and Donald Durnbaugh's *The Believers' Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism*.

First, I would like to point out several things about their concept of the church, and then move to a discussion of the 'marks' of the church, and then in that context touch on ministry. Without question all shades of Anabaptists were in agreement in starting with the church itself as crucial. But the Anabaptists came to a discussion of the church

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

empirically rather than theologically as did the Reformers. They started with the observable fact that the church had somewhere in history lost its true character and purity. Thus they spoke of 'the Fall of the Church', and usually placed this 'fall' in the Constantinian era. The obvious mark of the fallen church was the fact that it was a territorial church supported by the State.

Secondly, it was the task of Christians to rediscover the true church, i.e., the church before the Fall. Since the Reformers did not recognize the Fall and so valued the whole history of the church no matter [p. 172](#) how far it had fallen away from the ideal, their basic purpose was the reformation of the church. They admitted the branches of the tree were diseased and needed to be cut back to the trunk, but they believed the trunk to be solid. The Anabaptists, on the other hand, rejected any reformation of the church. They chose to use the word 'restitution'. Since the Roman Catholic Church could not be reformed, their task was to return to the original church and to its primitive, pristine character. For them the trunk of the tree was also diseased. The answer was to cut back to the very roots. Thus Anabaptists rejected not only the Catholics but also Luther and Calvin. To the Anabaptists the Reformers were 'half-way men', and their churches 'half-way churches'. The great reformers had failed to carry out their own principles. The Radical Reformation sought to carry out the job which had been left unfinished. But here scholars raise an interesting question: Should this radical movement be considered a variant form of traditional Protestantism, or a new and third type apart from either Protestant or Roman Catholic? Littell calls one 'the Church of the Reformation', and the other 'the Church of the Restitution'.<sup>28</sup>

Third, the pattern of the 'restituted church' is to be found in the N.T. In a word, the message and example of the N.T. Church is taken to be binding on the church of every age, therefore its recovery is of supreme importance.<sup>29</sup> As we have already noted, Luther and Calvin both sought to take the N.T. pattern seriously, but not to be bound by it. Both firmly believed in historical development and so took history seriously in a way the Anabaptists could not. Thus in Classical Reformation thought we find no clear-cut break with the Medieval Church so far as the concept of the church is concerned, whereas this break with the past is a hallmark of the Radical Reformation. Basically, the Reformers accepted what was not contrary to Scripture, whereas the Anabaptists accepted only what was clearly taught in Scripture, and commanded by Scripture.

Fourth, and last, the restituted church was for the Anabaptists the 'communion of saints'. It should not surprise us that the Anabaptists took the same term to describe the church which the Reformers used. Indeed, throughout our discussion we shall see that they use the same Scriptures to support their position. The 'communion of the saints' was a very 'visible' community for the Anabaptists. They never got hung up on Calvin's distinction between the 'invisible' and the 'visible' church. The 'saints' were saints in the N.T. sense—men and women who sought to follow their Lord as closely as possible, and were ready to suffer the cost of discipleship.

Now, let us look more carefully at the church itself, i.e., the 'communion of saints' in mainline Anabaptist thinking. Anabaptists accepted the so-called 'three marks' of the church taught by the great Reformers, but [p. 173](#) since they came to the whole question of the church from a quite different angle, their interpretation was different. How did they view the 'marks' of the church? The Schleithem Confession of 1527, in its seven articles, represents the main thinking of Anabaptists.

---

<sup>28</sup> Franklin Littell, *The Anabaptist View of the Church* (Boston: Starr King Press, 1958), p. 79.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

The first 'mark' of the 'communion of saints' is believer's baptism, for by this alone the true church is constituted.<sup>30</sup> In a word, entrance into the church is through the conversion experience. Therefore baptism is viewed differently than in the classical Reformers. Regeneration is not the result of baptism, but viceversa—so taught Menno Simons. Baptism is not an instrument of grace, not the medium of forgiveness and the new life, rather it is the expression of the fact that grace has already been at work. Thus everyone who comes to baptism has already experienced the new birth. Since this prerequisite experience is lacking in the infant, Anabaptists demanded their followers be re-baptized. This emphasis on adult baptism—believer's baptism—tempered everything else that could be said about the church.

The church, i.e., the 'communion of saints' is thus a voluntary association of Christians, in which each Christian has made his own decision for Christ. This ruled out immediately the whole traditional parish system. By decision Christians entered into a covenant relationship with God, and what is equally important, with all others who have been baptized upon a confession of faith. It is precisely here that the ground-work is laid for the Anabaptist concept of the ministry of the laity. Entering into a covenant relationship with God and with other believers is the highest expression of discipleship short of martyrdom. Within this covenant relationship believers find their ministry, and it is the same ministry for all. Baptism is thus a levelling experience. One comes out of the water an equal to everyone else, and from that moment on ministry begins. On the one hand, the Christian is a priest to his fellow believer, and on the other hand, a missionary to all unbelievers.

The earliest Anabaptists may have placed great emphasis on the individual's personal experience, but as faith matured, group consciousness grew. Encouraged to think things through alone, the Christian was increasingly encouraged to test his personal faith with the group with which he was in covenant relationship. Let it be clearly understood that mainstream Anabaptists took the church seriously as the 'communion of saints'. Interestingly, the 'keys' about which Luther spoke often are also found in Anabaptist thinking, but they are of two sorts: the 'keys of David' which unlock the Scriptures. and the 'keys of Peter' which open up forgiveness to the repentant. It is part of the ministry of every Christian that he uses these keys in interpreting the Scriptures to each other and in extending forgiveness.

The second mark of the 'community of saints' is spiritual government, or what Hubmaier called, 'fraternal discipline'. Anabaptists recognized the need for discipline in [p. 174](#) order to maintain the integrity of the community. Indeed, discipline stood very close to believer's baptism. Discipline rested in the end upon the threat of expulsion from the community, on what was called the 'Ban'. The ban was rooted in the N.T. ordinance of [Matt. 18](#), which makes us responsible for our brother's sins. All discussion of spiritual government began with the ban. Discipline was taken seriously because the purity of the Christian community was taken seriously. By the power of the Spirit which ruled in the community everyone was expected to live a life above reproach. This involved separating oneself from the rest of the world. The community gathered by believer's baptism was thus a separated community. There was a distinction between the children of light and the children of darkness. But it should be noted that the attitude taken toward the world varied from one group to another, and was not as negative as it is often made to sound.

Now, it is in the above context that we come to the ministry of the clergy, if we dare use the word here. In the earliest groupings true democracy reigned. Government was government by consensus. Everything was done in accord with the voice of the whole

---

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 83ff.

group. Responsibilities were shared by all, not necessarily according to the person's talents, rather everyone took his turn. Every form of ministry was open to all. In such a community there would be no need for the professional 'clergy', certainly not for clergy supported by rents and tithes. But the movement grew under the Holy Spirit. Littell says: 'As the center of authority shifted from the protesting individual conscience to the newly gathered congregation governed by the Holy Spirit in the midst, a new principle of leadership came to the fore.'<sup>31</sup> In many groups this simply meant the group electing one of their own number to be pastor. In the community at Waldshut in 1525, when Hubmaier resigned as priest, he was immediately elected pastor. Here we have the very beginning of true congregationalism—the principle that each congregation was free to choose its own pastor. The leader so chosen became the servant of the whole group. Through him discipline was carried out, as well as the cure of souls. In all ways he was subject to his congregation, and never acted apart from them.

In most cases this pastor earned his own living, or at least part of it, after the example of Paul. But very early it became permissible for him to receive support from his congregation, never in the form of salary, but rather as free will gifts. Menno Simons boasted that he had lived from brother to brother for years and had never gone hungry. Among the Hutterites grew up a regular leadership. There we find three types of officers: first, the shepherd or pastor of the flock. Next came the 'missioner', the servant of the Word, and last, stewards who fulfilled the role of deacons.<sup>32</sup> These leaders were chosen by the congregation on authority of the exact p. 175 same passages which Luther or Calvin would quote

A third and fourth mark of the church can be quickly touched on. The third mark of the 'community of saints' was selfless sharing. It was here true community was most apt to break down. The sum of Anabaptist teaching was simply this: 'A Christian should not have anything apart from his brother; both were pilgrims and walked the martyr's way, and their citizenship was in another city other than the city of this world.'<sup>33</sup> This principle of community was not rooted in some eschatological ideal, rather for most Anabaptists it was simply an expression of discipleship. The community found in Acts became their model, but not all groups interpreted Acts in the same way. Selfless sharing characterized all groups, but the concept was pressed farthest among the Hutterites who practised a type of communism where everything was held in common. Among the Hutterites individualism was looked upon as a sin. For them community of goods was a mandate. And those who held back were barred from the Lord's Supper. Now, the Lord's Supper was the fourth 'mark' of Christian community, and though it was important it was treated quite differently than among Lutherans and Reformed Christians. It was supremely a symbol of fellowship, and hardly a means of grace. Here the Anabaptists were deeply influenced by Zwingli who treated the Supper as a simple memorial of the death of Christ. For most Christ was not present in the elements.

With this I shall bring this paper to a close. I feel that there is more than enough material here to stimulate discussion about ministry in our day. Of course, the three great questions which faced the church in the Reformation Age were the same three with which we are wrestling. What is the role of the laity—the ministry of the laity? Do we need in our day a 'set apart, ordained' clergy? And if that question is answered in the affirmative, then what is the ministry of the clergy? And tangled up with these three questions is the

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

difficult one, what is the meaning of ordination? And aren't all Christians ordained for service?

---

Rev Richard B. Norton served as a missionary in Japan. [p. 176](#)

## Evangelical Theology Today

Mark Noll, Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., and David Wells

*Reprinted with permission from Theology Today January 1995.*

The first difficulty faced by anyone who assesses the state of evangelical theology today is that the combination of 'evangelical' with 'theology' provokes tolerant smiles among those casual religious spectators who conflate evangelicalism and fundamentalism. To these folk, if fundamentalist theology is an oxymoron—like elementary Greek, or student teacher, or Dutch treat—so is evangelical theology. Any discussion of evangelical theology must therefore help these spectators to get serious.

The second difficulty, more famous and more wearying, is trying to clear a little of the smog around the term 'evangelical'. Evangelicalism, like pornography and the political thought of Presidents of the United States, is easier to recognize than to define.

Accordingly, it is nowadays usual to find 'evangelical' used as a mute substantive that gains its voice only when coupled to another, and more clarifying, adjective. Accordingly, these days we have fewer and fewer plain garden-variety evangelicals. What we have instead is a lot of fancy evangelical hybrids: radical evangelicals, liberal evangelicals, liberals who are evangelical, charismatic evangelicals, Catholic evangelicals, evangelicals who are Catholic, evangelical liberationists, evangelical ecumenicalists, ecumenicalists who are evangelical, evangelical feminists, young evangelicals, and orthodox evangelicals. The concept *evangelical* has become so promiscuous, has enjoyed so many bedpersons, has been equally and unequally yoked so often, that its self-concept has broadened into that of a commune.

### WHO IS AN EVANGELICAL?

To say that people are evangelicals, therefore, says little about what they [p. 177](#) are likely to believe, although the tag says more if they are older and less if they are younger. But for those who find this assessment unduly agnostic, let us attempt a description. Suppose we call *evangelical* those Christians who possess at least two of the following seven characteristics, but in any case one of the first three:

(1) Members of a denomination that derives from the Protestant Reformation, these Christians heartily affirm the saving gospel of Christ, the authority of Scripture, and the priesthood of all believers.

(2) Members of a denomination that derives from eighteenth-century revival movements in England or America (the Wesleys, Whitefield, Edwards), they show zeal for conversion, piety of life, evangelism, and social reform.

(3) If Catholic, they are neo-Pentecostal and much concerned with the authority of Scripture, salvation by faith in Christ, holiness of life, and social justice.

(4) If intellectuals, they harbour antipathy to modernist naturalism, Kantian idealism, and secular humanism. If not intellectuals, they nonetheless harbour antipathy to the last of these.<sup>1</sup>

(5) Though members of no organized church, they display an impressive array of the other characteristics in (1)–(3) above.

(6) If they are Americans, they show signs of having been influenced by American popular democratic culture: they tend to be optimistic, populist, individualist, and inclined to like patriotic hymns. Moreover, in at least twenty per cent of their religious speech, half of these American evangelicals employ, separately or in combination, the diminutive ‘just’ and forms of the verb ‘to share’.

(7) They are members or supporters of alliances, associations, mission societies, Bible schools, evangelistic ministries, or other agencies marked by what George Marsden calls ‘a zeal to proclaim the biblically revealed gospel of salvation from sin through the atoning work of Christ’.<sup>2</sup>

As one can see, matters here are not simple. When we call a certain person *evangelical* it is possible, but not easy, to discover what we are claiming about the person in question. To assess the state of evangelical theology accordingly requires a certain amount of effort.

## THE INTELLECTUAL FAILURE OF AMERICAN EVANGELICALS

Several years ago, the three of us proposed and received a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts to complete a three-year project called ‘Constructive Steps Toward an **P. 178** Evangelical Theology’. The grant was sought and awarded to allow work on two related projects: (1) an interconnected set of books aimed at laying the groundwork for a more effective evangelical theology and (2) a series of colloquia and seminars, involving both evangelicals and non-evangelicals, aimed at furthering the learning process between evangelicals and the non-evangelical world—especially the Christian non-evangelical world.

Why does groundwork need to be laid for a more effective evangelical theology? The reason is that, for all their dynamism and success at a popular level, modern American evangelicals have largely failed in sustaining serious intellectual life. They have nourished millions of believers in the simple verities of the gospel, but have often abandoned the universities, the arts, and other realms of high culture. Active enterprises like feeding the hungry and living simply, sitting in at abortion clinics and promoting family values, launching coffee break ministries and televangelism projects—these are the sorts of tasks at which evangelicals expend great energy.

But these endeavours are seldom accompanied by first-level intellectual effort. Indeed, intellectually, evangelical theologians and ministers have only just begun to span the yawning chasm between modern modes of thinking and the traditionalistic worlds of their congregations, where forms of thought have changed little over the last century.

---

<sup>1</sup> On these first four characteristics, see also *Christian Faith and Practice in the Modern World: Theology from an Evangelical Point of View*, edited by Mark Noll and David Wells (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), pp. 3, 6.

<sup>2</sup> The quote in (7) is from George Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 2; characteristics (6) and (7) are from *Evangelicalism and Modern America*, edited by George Marsden (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), pp. xi–xii.

Let us add immediately that the traditionalism just mentioned is largely intellectual and theological. In many other respects, evangelicals have become remarkably worldly, accepting without debate, without question—often without notice—the assumptions, practices, and worldview of the larger American culture.

Examples abound. Evangelicals who attend the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California may be told that Lent is really only an acronym for ‘Let’s Eliminate Negative Thinking’. They may also hear the Los Angeles Dodgers’ Tommy Lasorda, a celebrity guest, describe his wins and losses (that is, he wins games and loses weight) and attribute his successes on both scores to the one Lasorda calls ‘The Great Dodger in the Sky’.

Evangelicals who visit the First Assembly of God in Phoenix find a church situated on seventy-two sunny acres. The campus resembles a golf club, and its church boasts a weekly Sunday attendance of about ten thousand. Everything is aimed at captivating people who apparently are otherwise happy only at amusement parks and variety shows. A reporter who visited First Assembly described its minister’s plans to build a replica of Jerusalem nearby, ‘with camels and everything’, as well as an amphitheatre with ‘prayer gardens and caves’. In this dramatic evangelical church, wondrous things happen. Its preacher punctuates his sermons with such eye-popping antics as sudden ascensions to the skylights via invisible wires. He once illustrated the prophecy of John the Baptist that the axe is now laid to the root of the tree by pulling a chain saw to life, walking over to a couple of potted trees on stage, and [p. 179](#) buzzing his way through them as the congregation roared its delight.

In other evangelical churches, skydivers drop in during sermons, body-builders break boards at high moments in the service, and prayer warriors trot out in combat fatigues to do battle with the darker powers.

The confluence of traditional theology (the pastor of First Assembly would probably reject theistic evolution as worldly) with general Babylonian captivity to pop culture tends to drown aspiring evangelical theologians who are both serious and creative. This confluence drowns them for heresy in case they propose an unaccustomed thought and for old-fashioned irrelevance in case they propose any real thought at all—that is, any thought that cannot fit within two lines of overhead projection. And this is true no matter if we conclude that the regnant problem at First Assembly is better categorized as schlock addiction than as heresy.

In its hey-day, during the sixteenth-century Reformation and the pietistic revivals of the eighteenth century, evangelical theology was razor-sharp and genuinely profound. Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Thomas Cranmer in the sixteenth century; Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley in the eighteenth were genuinely effective theologians. They had a deep grasp of the Scriptures, they steeped themselves in the enduring traditions of the church, and they examined sensitively (sometimes exploiting, sometimes combating) the best thinking of their own day. The result was theology that communicated powerfully, theology that spoke with authority from the Scriptures to the world in which these theologians lived.

By contrast, evangelical theology today is much weaker. Evangelical commitments to Scripture have been troubled by decades of controversy—first with liberal Christians and the secular academy over the Bible’s inspiration and, then, with other conservatives over the exact nature and scope of biblical authority.

In addition, evangelical willingness to enter the deep mines where the church’s treasures have been stored across twenty centuries has been spotty. Here an interesting and recent corrective is the systematic theology of Thomas Oden, who works the border between mainline and evangelical Protestantism (he is perhaps an evangelical liberal or postliberal, or maybe an ecumenical evangelical—in any case another of those oxymorons



like jumbo shrimp, marital bliss, and airline food). Oden has been making it his business to seek among the church fathers and mothers the grand ecumenical tradition that can at once unite and educate us. In so doing, Oden offers an in-flight correction for much evangelical theology that has been in the habit of jetting nonstop from Scripture to the 1990s, as if we had no need, along the way, of struggling with Augustine, Ockham, Thomas, Calvin, Schleiermacher, or even Barth. So, beyond its troubled relation to Scripture, twentieth-century evangelical theology has often thinned itself down from lack of sustained attention to the grand theological tradition. Like much of the rest of American culture, Christian p. 180 evangelical culture has been excessively fascinated with the present.

Third, besides their troubled relation to Scripture and their neglectful relation to the grand theological tradition, evangelicals have engaged the intellectual world of the late twentieth century only sporadically. Too often, modern developments in philosophy, in the history and philosophy of science, in the social sciences, and even in theology from non-evangelical sources are either ignored, or else caricatured and rapidly dismissed. Sad to say, evangelicals sometimes achieve these last diminishments by publishing those theological and philosophical *charts* they are so fond of—the kind in which all atheists get slotted as naturalists and their worldview characterized as ‘despairing’; in which humanists’ view of humanity is that ‘man is an empty bubble on the sea of nothingness’. And so on.

## A THEOLOGICAL MALAISE

One result of contemporary American evangelicalism’s troubled relation to Scripture, to the history of theology, and to modern intellectual history is theological malaise. Of course, where the general intellectual landscape is concerned, evangelicals can surely claim a number of tall trees. Many of the leading historians of American church history are evangelicals. Evangelical philosophers have risen mightily to world prominence: Two of them in recent years have been invited to give Scotland’s Gifford Lectures. Evangelical social scientists and literary scholars often join these philosophers in doing some pretty fine theology. The point is that evangelical *theologians* have not been very conspicuously successful in providing powerfully biblical, historically learned, and culturally engaging theological works.

We say this despite the fact that right now the publishing of evangelical systematic theology is enjoying a bull market—a development that mirrors one in the larger Christian world. (In his 1991 presidential address for the American Theological Society in Princeton, Gabriel Fackre listed about forty recent systematic theology projects, of which perhaps half might be fairly identified as evangelical.) Some of the evangelical offerings are competent refurbishments of older theological formulas. Some are solid, workmanlike, plainly written textbooks for seminary use, such as Millard Erickson’s widely adopted *Christian Theology*. Several contemporary evangelical theologies are, moreover, ecumenically sensitive. This is particularly true of Fackre’s own *The Christian Story*, Thomas Oden’s *Systematic Theology*, and Geoffrey Wainwright’s *Doxology*, whose special interest in liturgy as a source and norm for theology takes us pretty deeply into the grand tradition from the fourth century, East and West, that all Christians share.

Among the recent evangelical theologies, we can find a good deal of intelligent work. It is no slur on the considerable accomplishments of these contemporary evangelical theological writers to say that what we are *not* getting these days is something of the stature of Karl Barth or Reinhold Niebuhr or Paul p. 181 Tillich—let alone of John Calvin

or Thomas Aquinas or St. Augustine. Indeed, we are not getting theology of final stature from *anyone*, evangelical or not, with the possible exception of Pannenberg.

In any case, whatever its merits, even the best of contemporary evangelical theology will go unnoticed by most of the culture—as Barth, Tillich, and Niebuhr did not. Worse, even the best of it will go largely unnoticed in evangelical churches. Evangelical lay people do read intellectually sophisticated religious writing, but typically by nontheologians. They are especially fond of occasional works by C. S. Lewis and G. K. Chesterton, an Anglican and a Catholic. Beyond them, they pick up recent titles in spirituality and (sometimes significantly theological) books on hot topics, such as gender issues.

But who reads evangelical theology written by evangelical theologians? Seminary students and other theologians. With few exceptions, that is the whole audience, even in churches where real attention is paid to traditional forms of worship and serious efforts are made to catechize and teach.

At the sump level of the evangelical church, where wild eschatological speculation, wooden proof-texting, and anti-intellectual sermonizing reign; where worship has degenerated into a religious variety show hosted by some gleaming evangelist in a sequined dinner jacket and patent leather dancing slippers who introduces as special music a trio of middle-aged women in pastel evening gowns with matching muffs for their microphones—at this sump level, things are, of course, much worse. This is the level at which, Richard Lovelace once remarked, we need to tell some people who think they’ve been saved to get lost.

## CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

What accounts for the loss of audience, forcefulness, and impact of much evangelical theology? Here a definite diagnosis may be presumptuous. So we content ourselves with making some observations, thinning out in a few cases to speculations. These will be relevant especially to evangelicalism, but several have broader application as well.

Among those factors that have contributed to evangelical theological malaise is an institutional one. Evangelical higher education has made rapid strides since World War II. Yet it is still an immensely fragmented enterprise. Independent colleges, seminaries, and Bible schools all compete on their own for students, financial support, and a place in the sun. Some of these institutions appear to be in perpetual transition. Many are poorly funded or under unusually strong pressure from constituencies and are, hence, unable to offer the longterm stability that disciplined learning requires.

A second, and related, feature of evangelical life that retards scholarship has to do with the movement’s intellectuals. In recent decades a small, but steadily growing, number of intellectuals has answered the call to scholarship. These scholars have devoted themselves to evangelical truths and to serving the evangelical [p.182](#) community, but they have also grown increasingly appreciative of Christian influences from beyond evangelicalism and increasingly open to helpful insights from the general university world. Unfortunately, because they are heirs of the activist evangelical traditions, because they may be attached to institutions under heavy pressure from constituencies, these scholars often find their work divided between academic engagement with their intellectual peers and heavy demands in popular journalism and itinerant speaking.

This diffusion of energies is especially noticeable at evangelical seminaries where theologians are much tempted and, in some cases, nearly coerced to devote a disproportionate amount of their energies to filling pulpits or publishing popular religious materials. Such assignments do help the church, but pursuit of them takes time and energy and reduces the likelihood that these theologians will also write a first-rate

scholarly book of theology. As a consequence, the realm of first-order thinking, which can exert a tremendous, albeit indirect, influence on modern life remains largely untouched by evangelical insight.

We believe, however, that reasons for the contemporary malaise in evangelical theology are much wider than these. We noted above that evangelicalism sometimes displays an odd combination of tepid theological traditionalism with aggressive embrace of certain forms of popular culture. Few contemporary Christian groups, as Martin Marty observed a few years ago, have become more worldly than fundamentalists. If fundamentalists count as a subset of evangelicals and if certain nonfundamentalist evangelicals get contaminated by such worldliness, not surprisingly one can find in conservative Protestant settings altogether too much by way of what Marty calls ‘Christian bodybuilding and beautyqueening’, rock music ‘with a Jesus gloss on it’, and entrepreneurs ‘hawking a complete line of Christian celebrity cosmetics and pantyhose’—all this in combination with considerable suspicion of the Synoptic problem.

The spectacle is one in which the powers that might maintain integrity against all the corrupting influences of modernity—namely, the serious appropriation of Scripture, the intelligent study of great ecumenical and then Reformational confessions, and the blending of these together with other intellectual sources into vigorous contemporary theology—these powers often get marginalized in evangelicalism today while TV culture, entertainment culture, the cult of self-absorption, and various other anti-intellectualist forces cut their great swathes through the church, mowing down the small prophetic protests raised against them. This is, perhaps, the heart of the contemporary evangelical tragedy.

Vignettes may be helpful to gain purchase on it. Take the case of a confessionally rooted theological seminary. (We have a particular one in mind, but the following description will be more widely familiar.) This seminary maintains a fairly classical curriculum. To secure the M.Div. degree, students must [p. 183](#) demonstrate knowledge of Greek and Hebrew plus one modern foreign language. Admission prerequisites include substantial numbers of courses across the humanities and social sciences, and, in particular, hefty doses of philosophy and literature. The seminary’s graduation requirements for the M.Div. degree stipulate substantial numbers of courses in systematic theology, historical theology, philosophical theology, as well as in Old and New Testament—all this besides the courses in church and missions and besides student forays into field work. In short, this seminary prescribes lots of core courses and allows comparatively few electives and almost no lollipops.

For decades, students at this seminary accepted requirements like these as proper training for ministry. But in the last fifteen years or so, the seminary began to get students who would listen to a lecture on the doctrine of God, look around curiously during student discussion of it, and then turn to the professor and say seriously, ‘Look, why do we have to study any of this stuff in order to be ministers?’ Further discussion of this student’s question (rarer, by the way, among second career students than among those born during the Vietnam War) would then yield a distressing conclusion: Some evangelical seminary students really believe that they can minister the riches of the faith for years without having to think hard about the doctrine of the Trinity, or the meaning of providence, or the claim that God is both immanent and transcendent. Such students do not object particularly to the way a professor teaches the doctrine of God; they object to the whole project of learning the doctrine of God. They really see no link between thinking about its topics, on the one hand, and readiness for ministry, on the other. Surely they can think of no reason why any lay person would need a deeply formed view of God.

Further, as observers sometimes remark, in confessional subcultures two generations ago lay people read theology. If they were Christian Reformed, for instance, they might have read such Dutch Calvinist theologians as Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck. They read them sufficiently well that a minister in, say, the 1930s did well not to confuse the logical order of the divine decrees, or stray anywhere near what sounded like Arminian works' righteousness. If a minister did this, or was guilty of what was called in those days 'a wrong emphasis', a farmer or butcher would undertake to correct him and might do a pretty good job of it, too.

Those days have gone. The grandchildren of our butcher or farmer appear to be largely innocent of theology. It's not quite that, theologically speaking, they confuse Monteverdi with Montovanni, but few—including leaders of the church—read and think about theological matters beyond the most elementary, except when these bear explicitly on some blood-warming practical issue like the ordination of women.

The sad fact is that much evangelicalism, in James Hunter's characterization of it, has been cognitively bartering with modernity and has come away impoverished— p. 184 in fact, has been taken to the cleaners. Voyages of self-discovery, the desire to get rich or get happy, the neglect of old arts like reading and thinking, the professionalization of the clergy so that they are no longer ardent students of Scripture and its interpretation but rather ersatz managers and therapists—all of these moves garnished with a D.Min. degree, so that, as a minister's social prestige drops, the number and kind of his advanced degrees rises to compensate; the loss of appetite for great, stately hymns and their replacement by pop songs from the Christian Billboard's Top Ten Singles; the democratizing of the church to such a degree that learned opinion is immediately suspect as an elitist putdown—these and similar unhappinesses make serious theology in the church uphill work. We evangelicals have to face the fact that we are going through a time when we are suffering a serious trivializing of the Christian faith and a serious diminishment of interest in its theological expression. To paraphrase Carl F. H. Henry, we are going through a time in which, in too many settings, 'a high five for Jesus' has taken the place of the Apostles' Creed and 'Five Ways To Pump Up Your Ego Whenever It Loses Pressure' has supplanted reflection on the nature of God.

## **THE REJUVENATION OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY**

What to do? In the face of these developments, what kind of theology now needs to be written? Which procedures for teaching theology need to be tried? What general religious practices seem likely to aid theological rejuvenation? Of course, answers to such questions depend in part on factors over which none of us exercises control. New appropriations of theology by lay people, for example, await success in getting people to read and think again, getting people to walk over to their TV set and pull an enormous condom over it. Getting people to read and think again and to practise safe TV will take a much broader cultural offensive than can be mounted by all the theologians and seminaries put together. Still, several observations and proposals seem to us apt:

(1) The first observation is that the rejuvenation of evangelical and, indeed, all grand tradition theology is, frankly, a huge task that will require tough-minded engagement with modern intellectual culture, fresh study of Scripture that proceeds somewhat independently of the guild of biblical scholarship, open and faithful discussions across denominational boundaries with other serious-minded and traditionally oriented Christians, and rededication to harvesting the fruits of church history and then pressing them into the varietal that is theology. This rejuvenation, in other words, must proceed on many fronts. It is far too large to be accomplished through just a few grants or a few

teams of scholars. It will rather need the disciplined energy of a great number of serious Christian thinkers for decades.

'Tough-minded engagement with modern intellectual culture' means abandoning a practice of all too many evangelicals in the past—namely, that of characterizing the [p. 185](#) intellectual enemy in a few largely unfair descriptive sentences and then presuming to blow him away with a few equally inadequate attack sentences. God, said C. S. Lewis, 'pays us the intolerable compliment' of taking us seriously. Those of us who claim God's image need to follow suit. We have to love our intellectual enemies enough so that we can state their positions better than they can—with the possible exception of Richard Rorty.

Fresh study of Scripture to fuel and curb our theology ought to proceed 'in some measure independently of the guild of biblical scholarship'. Obviously, all traditional systematic theology is dependent on biblical theology that is dependent on raw biblical scholarship. Systematic theologians must be students of the likes of Gerhard von Rad on wisdom in Israel, Stephen Westerholm on *Israel's Law and the Church's Faith*, and of Terence Fretheim on how Exodus theology is really creation theology at least as much as redemption theology.

Scripture scholarship often yields important and redolent fruit, and evangelical theologians must harvest it. But Scripture scholarship, like theology, also succumbs at times to the repetition of certain fashionable anti-traditional clichés. When biblical scholars tell us that the Gospel of Mark is myth; or that, since he does not mention it, Paul clearly knew nothing of the empty tomb tradition; or that the adoptionist-tending christology of Luke-Acts is clearly inconsistent with the pre-existence christology of John, Hebrews, and parts of Paul; or that after all the Gospels say, we really know very little about Jesus of Nazareth—when Scripture scholars talk like this, evangelical theologians will have to demur, question the working principles that produce such conclusions, and then undertake fresh biblical work of their own.

Future evangelical theology will also need to be much more aggressive and persistent in gathering fruit from the history of doctrine. Again, wherever Thomas Oden fits in the galaxy of types of Christians, his work is a fine example of meeting at least this requirement. His systematic theology seeks to be centrist Christian—irenic, massively traditional, ecumenically attractive, spiritually vital. By writing theology that displays the patristic consensus on the big questions of theology—letting us see not only its intellectual sophistication but also its religious beauty—Oden confirms in many of us the heretical suspicion that it is service that divides and doctrine that unites. What most deeply unites us in the grand tradition of mere Christianity is our common rootage in patristic exegesis and its flowering in the theology of Augustine and the Cappadocians. Here is a garden that evangelicals have to cultivate.

(2) Rejuvenated evangelical and grand tradition theologies will now have to take more than one form. We need Thomas Oden's sort of theology, though it will often be used more as a resource for seminarians and professors than as a weapon to invade contemporary culture. We need Millard Erickson's sort of theology—plainly written, readable, consensual, fair. Surely we need theology that has fresh and [p. 186](#) tough-minded biblical scholarship behind it and that fairly and critically engages—really engages—contemporary intellectual culture.

All fair enough. But who is going to *read* this theology? Of course we hope other theologians read it and then use it to teach seminarians and, in certain settings, college students. But how do we get lay people to read theology again—lay people like some of our grandparents? How do we get theology into the hands of the devout and literate—or even into the hands of the non-devout and literate?

We may need at least some theology to be written by the theological equivalents of Garry Wills and William Manchester. Some of the theology that traditionalists bring to the contemporary culture wars must be written with the verve, deceptive simplicity, and sheer sparkle that make non-politicians read Wills on politics and non-militarists read Manchester on Douglas MacArthur. These are writers who have an almost unerring sense of what is both objectively important and also truly interesting to other human beings—even to human beings who ordinarily possess no interest in the topic at hand. We need theologians who, as audaciously as Wills does it, use Augustine to criticize Robert Mapplethorpe (of the notorious Mapplethorpe art exhibit) and who make Augustine not only the more plausible but also the more interesting!

We need theology, in other words, that can skilfully work the border between religious and general interests. This will be theology that is solidly rooted in Bible and tradition, that knows contemporary habits of mind (the sundering of public and private spheres of life, the tendency to take refuge in the self, the sheer impermanence of so many attachments, the relentless democratizing of not only persons but also of thought and opinion). We need theology that can skilfully work the border between the grand tradition on the one hand and the contemporary mind on the other and do it in a style that literate nontheologians find appealing.

(3) In seminaries and denominational colleges we need to assign less and less by way of general, bland, acceptable secondary sources and more and more by way of intensive study of classic confessions and creeds—which are in any case congealed theology, theology in distillate. We also need to assign more short theological classics so that students read not forty pages about Augustine by some secondary source trying to balance its trade deficit with other secondary sources, but Augustine's *Enchiridion* itself; not forty pages on Calvin by a devout Calvinist, but judiciously selected sections of the *Institutes*. We need to do this because wellchosen original sources have character and angularities that stay with students long after hundreds of pages of secondary sources have dissolved in the mind. We need to do it also because students who reject the classical tradition should never be allowed to do it in innocence.

(4) We need to keep pressing forward in the quest for doctrinal and theological unity among Christians of all kinds who claim the apostolic [p. 187](#) heritage and the patristic consensus. As Thomas Ryan observed a few years ago in an acute essay, the slow going in ecumenical relations often stems in part from an empathy power shortage.<sup>3</sup> We dwell on differences. Religiously, we have been in the habit of defining, distinguishing, and defending ourselves as different from other Christians. The ordination of women, the baptism of children, the celibacy of clergy, the presence of the Lord in the Lord's Supper, and, amazingly to most lay people, the question whether the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father only, or from the Father and the Son, or from the Father through the Son, or from the Father of the Son—these things, especially the last, divide millions and millions of Christians from each other.

We keep forgetting, as Ryan says, that these differences, though familiar, are not normal and not acceptable. We have become either rivals or strangers, and neither is acceptable.

That is because, as Ryan puts it, 'the Gospel of Jesus Christ asserts that our real identity is not at the edges of our Christian existence where we can brag about our specialties, but

---

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Ryan, 'Ecumenism and Compassion', *Mid-stream* 25 (1986): 184–89.

at the center where we are rooted in Christ and where the bond of the Spirit gives us our essential Christian sameness'.<sup>4</sup>

(5) We need to pray for theology. Every serious Christian prays. Usually we praise and thank God in our prayers, intercede for others, and offer petitions. Some of these intercessions and petitions are going to have to start focusing on theology. When we mention the needy of the world, we are going to have to include poorly educated ministers and their congregations who are, theologically, sheep without a shepherd. When we confess our sins, we must include our theological sins—our inattentiveness, our boredom with the deep things of faith, our readiness to make intellectual concessions for trivial or merely fashionable reasons.

And when we pray 'thy kingdom come' and look to the future, we must do it with faith and hope that, in God's good time, there shall be not only the bowing of the head and the bending of the knee to Jesus Christ, not only the feeding of the hungry and the sharpening of the hunger for justice, but also the sharpening of intellects and the clatter of keyboards as young William Manchesters try to write theology as crisp and flavourful as an apple. The challenge, as Charles Malik said to evangelicals at the Billy Graham Center in Wheaton, is not only to save souls but also to win minds. If you save the whole world, but lose the *mind* of the world, you will soon discover that you have never won the world at all.

---

Mark Noll is Professor of Christian Thought at Wheaton College and author of *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (1994). Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. is Professor of Theology at Calvin Theological Seminary and has edited (with Ronald Jay Feenstra) *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement: Philosophical and Theological Essays* (1989). David Wells is Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary and the author most recently of *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (1994). p. 188

## Book Reviews

### BOOK REVIEW LIST

Reviewed by David Parker  
Rick Warren  
[\*The Purpose Driven Church\*](#)

Lynne & Bill Hybels  
[\*Rediscovering Church: the Story and Vision of Willow Creek Community Church\*](#)

### THE PURPOSE DRIVEN CHURCH

by Rick Warren

(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995 ISBN 0 310 20106 3 Hb 399pp)

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 184.

# **REDISCOVERING CHURCH: THE STORY AND VISION OF WILLOW CREEK COMMUNITY CHURCH**

by Lynne and Bill Hybels

(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995 ISBN 0 310 59320 4 Hb 213pp)

(Reviewed by David Parker)

Zondervan Publishing House has made an important contribution to the Christian community worldwide by making available the inside stories of two of the most famous mega-churches, Rick Warren's Saddleback church and Bill Hybels' Willow Creek Community Church. Both of these churches have been established to reach American 'babyboomers' in fast growing suburban settings. But in response to the interest taken in their success by other churches and pastors, both churches have extended their influence globally through seminars, videos and publications, and also in the case of Saddleback, the Internet. Today they are both known worldwide and are used as powerful models of contemporary church style.

However, the two churches and the books about them are very different. The Willow Creek book is mostly an informal narrative by the wife of the Senior Pastor, recounting how the founders of the church began working together in a youth ministry and then moved to establishing a church. She tells in highly personal (and often emotionally charged) terms of the organizational growth, but places much more emphasis on the difficulties faced by the leaders and how they handled them. Only the last quarter of the book is by Bill Hybels, but even though it is intended to explain the philosophy which guides the church, it too is presented in a personal, preaching manner.

On the other hand, Rick Warren's book, almost twice the length, devotes only the first chapter to the [p. 189](#) story of the church before launching into a detailed, systematic exposition of the principles he used to establish and manage his Californian church. Although there are many personal touches to his account, the overwhelming emphasis is, as the title suggests, on the objectives, methods and procedures that he advocates. Warren's book could be used as an effective manual for church planters and leaders, but apart from the personal story, material of this kind in the Hybels' volume is largely limited to their seven-step strategy, ten core values and the 5-Gs of personal growth, which are outlined only briefly in about thirty pages in the closing chapters.

The contrast in the presentation reflects the differences between the two churches and their founders. Bill Hybels came from a family that owned a wholesale farm produce company; he was expected to take his place in this business and was taught the value of hard work and an entrepreneurial approach to life and business. In the early 1970s, he mixed this with a zealous Christian activism in partnership with a friend as they worked together in an innovative youth ministry attached to a suburban Chicago church. Bill first used his musical talents to some advantage, but soon took to Bible teaching (although without any formal training), especially in a successful evangelistic ministry called Son City, that used drama, contemporary styles of Christian music and simple preaching to reach unchurched youth.

But through one of his college professors, he encountered the idea of the NT church as the dynamic people of God which has the divinely ordained role of being the medium of redemption and hope in the world. This made him decide to switch his efforts from youth to adults, and led in 1975 to the formation of a new church in an outer suburb, using the same principles which had proved successful in Son City. Essentially it comprised an evangelistic ministry designed especially for the unchurched, using contemporary styles of music, drama and preaching and based in a neutral facility—at first a cinema. It was only much later, in 1981, that it moved to its present very large purpose-built campus, but



not before many difficulties and traumas had been encountered which, as the book graphically recounts, took their toll on the founders and other leaders as well as many in the congregation. The Hybels were determined to maintain their focus on the fundamental purpose of their new 'church for the unchurched' in the light of common perceptions that traditional churches were irrelevant to daily life, boring, legalistic and apparently always asking for money. The now well-known concept of the weekend 'seeker services' was the result, but to nurture new believers and to care for pastoral situations, various extra ministries needed to be added, focusing especially on the mid-week 'New Community' service and a growing team of full-time and volunteer workers.

Although Willow Creek has become world-famous, the story told by Lynne Hybels reveals that it passed through more than one serious crisis. In fact, far from having 'all the answers to ministry', the leaders conceded that they were 'making things up' as they went along. It is only in the mid-1990s that they feel as if Willow Creek 'has reached a point of relative maturity' in its goal p.190 to be a church community which could 'turn irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Christ'. They believe that the clarification of its 'ten core values' and the 'Five G' membership process along with the restructuring of its care ministry have made important contributions to their ability to 'adequately address both ends of our mission' (evangelistic and pastoral) for the first time in twenty years. As Lynne Hybels puts it, 'There is a sense for the last twenty years we have been students in God's divinity school, learning slowly and methodically—and sometimes painfully—what it means to be the church. Now, on the verge of graduation, we look forward to finally beginning the ministry for which God has been preparing us.'

The contrast with Rick Warren's approach to church planting at Saddleback could hardly be more complete. Although Warren notes that he too 'made things up as he went along' and that many attempts at ministry have been unsuccessful, his own story is rather like his ideal for the church—it is 'Purpose driven'. Acknowledging the inspiration of W. A. Criswell, the legendary pastor of First Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas, for his call to pastoral ministry, Warren explains that it was church growth pioneer, Donald McGavran who steered him into church planting. Even more so, it was McGavran's writings that led him to devote himself to 'discovering the principles—biblical, cultural, and leadership principles—that produce healthy growing churches'. In 1979, this resulted in Warren, then a final year seminary student, undertaking a comprehensive study of growing churches in the United States. Following this, he carried out intensive demographic research into four fast growing areas in the most unchurched parts of the country, which ultimately led him to Saddleback in Orange County, California. This same pattern of careful analysis of relevant data characterised every step that led to the establishment of his church and the opening 'seeker' services which were held at Easter, 1980. Since then, Saddleback has become the fastest growing Baptist church in American history with over 10,000 in attendance at worship services while at the same time planting many other churches.

Warren attributes his success in part at least to discerning when to 'catch a wave' of interest and the movement of the Spirit in people's lives. But his book clearly indicates that other factors were involved as well. The most important of these is his concept of the 'purpose-driven church', which is his term for indicating that a church should be guided by the theological purposes which Scripture shows a church should fulfil, rather than allowing it to be controlled by tradition, personalities, orthodox teaching, seekers, programmes, money or the like.

Warren discerned in the NT five purposes which Christ ordained for the church—worship, ministry, evangelism, fellowship and nurture. He strongly advocates that churches take the time to discover these for themselves and that they should then be

extremely clear in their understanding of them. They should ensure that these purposes determine the entire programme and activities of the church. His book sets out the ways he has personalized these at Saddleback, how each activity or ministry relates to one or other of these purposes and how the various [p. 191](#) elements in the programme such as preaching, music, worship and membership training must be oriented around them. Most important of all, Warren strongly advocates a balanced approach so that no one function overshadows another and the necessity of communicating and explaining these purposes to everyone involved in the ministry of the church so that they understand how their particular activity relates to the whole.

As a corollary, Saddleback has set up a member training scheme that takes people through all the stages of development from initial discipleship to training for ministry within the church, thus ensuring that they are not only fully aware of the purposes and ministries of the church but also brought to levels of commitment that will enable them to participate fully in those purposes and ministries. Furthermore, he urges each church to identify its own particular goal so that it can fully concentrate on its distinctive role rather than trying to be all things to all people, although without destroying the balance between the functions; this is a principle that also applies to pastors and church workers.

By clearly identifying and presenting the theological purposes of the church and giving practical explanations of ways to organize a church around them, Warren makes it much easier than the Hybels for readers to transfer the principles to other situations. Furthermore, Warren's comprehensive understanding of the nature and functions of the NT church are highly consistent with his practice. On the other hand, there is a certain inconsistency between the Hybels' strongly evangelistic church model and their vision of a church as 'a true community of God' with a deep sense of fellowship, worship and the presence of God, or as Bill Hybels puts it in a personal story in the introduction—the church is 'about people coming together to be Christ to each other in community'. If the changes that have occurred at Willow Creek in very recent times are taken into account, then perhaps it has finally come to the point where it is 'rediscovering church' (as the title has it), but it would have been more prudent to settle on these principles before setting out to plant a church rather than discovering them through a traumatic 'hit or miss' process over a period of twenty years. After all, isn't one of the purposes of the Scriptures to give us guidance on such matters? [p. 192](#)

## Journal Information

### **Hayama Missionary Seminar**

(Annual)

Distributor, Tokyo Mission Research Institute

1-30-1 Megurita Cho, Higashi Murayama Shi, Tokyo 189, Japan US \$ 10.00 Issues 1972-89 \$5.00

### **International Bulletin of Missionary Research**

Published quarterly by Overseas Ministries Study Centre, 490 Prospect Street, New Haven, Connecticut 065111, USA

Subscription \$18.00 (payable in US funds only) to: PO Box 3000, Denville, NJ 077834, USA

**Theology Today**

Published quarterly, All Communication to: PO Box 29 Princeton NJ 08542 USA

Subscription USA \$21.00. All other countries \$27.00