

FAITH AND ORDER ON UNITY OF DOCTRINE

We all know that doctrinal unity means that all the members of the one Church are visibly united by the public profession of the same doctrines proposed by the Church as divinely revealed. Faith and Order today is the department of the World Council of Churches concerned with the doctrinal issues of church unity. The World Council itself is the organizational fruit of that larger movement toward unity known as the Ecumenical Movement.

Our question is: do the members of Faith and Order think that visible unity of doctrine is willed by God for his Church? We will seek our answer mainly from the four major Faith and Order meetings held at Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1927, Edinburgh in 1937, Lund, Sweden in 1952 and Montreal in 1963. Since, however, Faith and Order members are influential in all ecumenical activities, we shall also consider some of the other assemblies of the World Council.

The Faith and Order Movement was organized in 1920, but its roots go back much earlier. Since Faith and Order has not always given the same answer to our question and since all the members of Faith and Order today do not give the same answer, we cannot correctly evaluate the present position of Faith and Order regarding doctrinal unity without some history of the trend or evolution of the attitude toward doctrine in the Ecumenical Movement.

Granting that many exceptions could be cited, I think we can distinguish three stages in this trend. Stage 1: from around mid-nineteenth century to 1910, when unity was sought without any regard for doctrinal issues. Stage 2: from 1910 to 1954, when doctrinal unity was discussed but the opinions hostile to it prevailed. Stage 3: from 1954 to 1964, when Faith and Order attention was primarily directed to the doctrinal issues of unity and, from a Catholic viewpoint, many correct conclusions were reached. We are mainly interested in this final stage, but, as I said, it cannot be understood without its historical background.

Stage 1. We all know how rampant dogmatic indifferentism was in the last century. As a result of the religious scepticism spawned by the Enlightenment, of the religious voluntarism begun by Kant's *Critique*, of the religious emotionalism introduced by Schliermacher and the Romanticists, and of the industrial and political liberalism of the era, many men felt that one could not be intellectually certain of religious truth, so that what a man believed was not as important as how he felt and individual freedom was the first principle and the ultimate norm. These prevailing ideas influenced many of the early efforts for church unity and they did not die with the turn of the century.¹

The Faith and Order Movement grew directly out of a 1910 meeting in Edinburgh of the World Missionary Conference. This meeting, in turn, was the result of three converging nineteenth century forces, each of which bore the marks of nineteenth century indifferentism. There were the youth movements, such as the YM and YWCA, both of which were founded as semi-religious organizations to promote unity among Christians irrespective of doctrinal differences. There were the missionaries, who sought closer cooperation among the differing churches in foreign lands. And there were the descendants of the Revivalist Movement in America, whose preachers had paid little heed to the doctrinal differences of those attending their tent meetings.²

The fact that in Stage 1 unity was sought without any consideration of doctrine was epitomized in this 1910 meeting, which was convoked only after an agreement that doctrine would not be discussed, since the Church of England feared that, if it were discussed, it would be treated indifferently.³ But the 1910 meeting also marked the opening of Stage 2. Many participants saw that unity could not be promoted without a discussion of the doctrinal issues; thus was born the Faith and Order Movement.⁴

¹ G. Tavad, *Two Centuries of Ecumenism*, Mentor Omega Book, New American Library, N.Y., 1962, 19-24.

² *Ibid.* 20, 54, 76-77. Cf. G. Weigel, S.J., *A Catholic Primer on the Ecumenical Movement*, Newman Paperback, Westminster, Md., 1961, 18.

³ Tavad, *op. cit.* 76. Cf. R. Rouse, and S. C. Neill, ed., *A History of the Ecumenical Movement*, Westminster Press, Phila., 1954, 359.

⁴ Tavad, *op. cit.* 76-78. Rouse & Neill, *op. cit.* 360.

The first two meetings of Faith and Order, held at Lausanne in 1927 and at Edinburgh in 1937, discussed precisely the question: what must be the role of the creeds in the reunited church?⁵ Aside from Anglican, Orthodox and Lutheran objections,⁶ the general tenor of the answer to that question—and hence the prevailing attitude toward doctrinal unity—was reflected in such statements by the delegates as: “As to the creeds, I think we should throw out all that old lumber”;⁷ “Christian unity should not require the imposition of this or that creed”;⁸ “After all, the Apostles got on very well without the Apostles’ Creed”;⁹ “In our diversity of dogmas is revealed the infinite diversity of God”;¹⁰ “Are our differences such as need hinder the union of those who hold the various views in one visible church?”¹¹ Hand in hand with this opposition to the creeds went eloquent testimonies to the invisible unity of all Christians in the Spirit as the really important factor in reunion.¹² At the close of the 1937 meeting, Professor Georges Florovski characterized the opinions expressed at Edinburgh as “a kind of treachery to the truth.”¹³

When the Faith and Order Movement joined with the Life and Work Movement to form the World Council of Churches at Amsterdam in 1948, most of that meeting was taken up with organizational details, but at the time an unofficial Catholic observer wrote of the newly-formed World Council: “It is to be feared that the a-dogmatic tendencies may carry the day.”¹⁴ We can see the lineage of the World Council from the fact that its Basis of Membership—acknowledgment of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour—is almost verbally

⁵ Rouse & Neill, *op. cit.* 419.

⁶ H. N. Bate, ed., *Faith and Order, Proceedings of the World Conference, Lausanne*, Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y., 1928, 163, 173, 190.

⁷ Rouse & Neill, *op. cit.* 422.

⁸ Bate, *op. cit.* 206.

⁹ L. Hodgson, ed., *The Second World Conference on Faith and Order, Edinburgh*, Macmillan, N.Y., 1938, 111.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 81.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 63.

¹² Bate, *op. cit.* 466. Hodgson, *op. cit.* 111.

¹³ Hodgson, *op. cit.* 74.

¹⁴ R. Rouquette, “Some Roman Catholic Voices about the First Assembly,” *The Ecumenical Review*, I, 2 (Winter 1949), 207.

identical with the basis of membership in the first YMCA exactly one hundred years earlier.¹⁵

The function of this Basis in the World Council gives us some idea of the practical attitude toward doctrinal diversity which must of necessity be maintained in Council meetings. At Amsterdam, again at Lund in 1952 and above all at Evanston in 1954, it was clearly stated that this Basis is not a confession of faith or a test of orthodoxy, that different interpretations of the Basis are permitted and that the Council has no power to judge if a member church takes the Basis seriously.¹⁶ Although I think this does show the extent of the aversion to doctrinal conformity among World Council members during the years of Stage 2, still from this we cannot label the World Council as officially dogmatically indifferent.¹⁷ This was clearly declared at an important World Council meeting in Toronto in 1950.¹⁸

Two other points were made in this Toronto Statement which are pertinent to our topic and will have a bearing on later developments. First, it was stated that the World Council is not based on any particular concept of the church or of the unity to be sought as the goal of the movement.¹⁹ Thus, for our purposes here, it stated that doctrinal unity is not necessarily the goal of Council action; but neither was this ruled out as an element of the ultimate unity.

Secondly, the Toronto Statement vigorously repudiated what it termed a widespread desire and practice of regarding the World Council itself as the *Una Sancta*, despite the divergent doctrinal

¹⁵ W. Visser 't Hooft, ed., *The First Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Amsterdam*, Harper Bros., N.Y., 1949, 197. P.B., "The Changing 'Y'", *The Ecumenist, A Journal for Promoting Christian Unity*, Paulist Press, N.Y., I, 5 (June-July 1963), 78.

¹⁶ Cf. *The World Council of Churches, Its Process of Formation*, Geneva, 1946, 182, quoted in E. Hanahoe, S.A., "The Ecumenical Movement," *Proceedings CTSA* (9) 1954, 185. Cf. also O. Tomkins, ed., *The Third World Conference on Faith and Order, Lund*, SCM Press, London, 1953, 255. Cf. also Visser 't Hooft, ed., *The Evanston Report*, Harper Bros., N.Y., 1955, 306-307.

¹⁷ Weigel, *op. cit.* 26, 52.

¹⁸ Cf. "Ecumenical Chronicle—The Church, The Churches and The World Council of Churches—The Ecclesiological Significance of the World Council of Churches," *The Ecumenical Review*, III, 1 (October 1950), 49. Cf. also *The Ecumenical Review*, XI, 3, (April 1959), 327.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* III, 1, 47-49.

positions of its members.²⁰ At Lund, Dr. Visser 't Hooft himself recognized this desire as a manifestation of the anti-dogmatic tendencies in the Ecumenical Movement; for he said, "To talk of the World Council as a world church is to minimize the seriousness of our theological division."²¹

We can close our analysis of Stage 2 by a quick look at the Third Faith and Order Meeting at Lund in 1952 and the Second Assembly of the World Council at Evanston in 1954, pointing out here only the factors which, in my opinion, revealed a definite increase in the opposition to doctrinal unity. At Lund, the practice of intercommunion, despite doctrinal differences about the eucharist, was strongly encouraged as "the best preparation for fuller unity," although the Lutherans objected that this "implied that the varying conceptions of the Lord's Supper were insignificant."²²

Intercommunion was again urged at Evanston where the greatest stress was also placed on the invisible unity already enjoyed by all the churches and where it was stated that perfect visible unity is an eschatological reality to be attained only at the *parousia*.²³ Moreover, the Evanston Assembly held up the Church of South India as an inspiring model of church unity.²⁴ There are authors who feel that this union was begun in a spirit of indifference to doctrine. Many other authors dispute this, especially in its development. In 1947 four denominations joined to form what they definitely claim is one church. Yet, for a thirty year interim period, members are permitted to retain their former doctrinal positions. The Apostles' and Nicene Creeds are accepted, but liberty of interpretation is granted concerning the articles. Finally, in this union, equal recognition is given to ordained and non-ordained ministers, as well as to ministers upon whom hands have been imposed, even though they do not believe in a hierarchical church or the sacrament of orders.²⁵

In passing, I might note that we can see a trend in ecumenical

²⁰ *Ibid.* 48. Cf. II, 3 (Spring 1950), 298.

²¹ Tomkins, *op. cit.* [*Faith & Order, Lund*], 130, 135.

²² *Ibid.* 55, 281.

²³ Visser 't Hooft, *op. cit.* [*The Evanston Report*], 83 ff., 90.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 88.

²⁵ Cf. D. Webster, *What is this Church of South India?*, Highway Press, London, 1954.

thought from the reaction of the Church of England to this union in South India. In 1940, when the union was first proposed, Canterbury would not allow Anglicans in India to join, because, as was stated, "under this scheme essentials of faith are jettisoned."²⁶ In 1950, with no change in the scheme, Anglicans were permitted to join and Canterbury declared itself "fully satisfied as to the credal orthodoxy of the Church of S. India."²⁷ In 1948, Canterbury would not recognize all Church of S. India ministers as validly ordained.²⁸ But in 1955, the Convocations of Canterbury and York "acknowledged all those ordained in the Church of S. India as true bishops, priests and deacons in the church of God."²⁹

All of these things indicate, I believe, that in Stage 2, from Edinburgh in 1910 to Evanston in 1954, the influences in the ecumenical movement opposed to doctrinal unity were growing stronger. This seems to have been the judgment of the Orthodox delegates at Evanston who declared: "The whole approach to the problem of reunion is entirely unacceptable to the Orthodox Church. Reunion of Christendom can be achieved solely on the basis of the total, dogmatic faith of the undivided church without either subtraction or alteration. We cannot accept a distinction between essential and non-essential doctrines and there is no room for comprehensiveness in the faith."³⁰

We come now to Stage 3—1954 to 1964—in which we will see a reversal of this opposition to doctrinal unity in Faith and Order circles. This change began in the years of Stage 2. Although the reports of the large assemblies during that second period evidence an a-dogmatic trend, still behind the scenes interest in doctrine was growing. Earlier Faith and Order meetings had consisted mainly of

²⁶ Rouse & Neill, *op. cit.* 475.

²⁷ M. Bruce, "The Church of England and South India—The Convocations' Decisions," *The Ecumenical Review*, VIII, 1 (October 1955), 54.

²⁸ *The International Convention of the Church Union*, 1948, quoted in *The Tablet*, London, 206, 6023, 421.

²⁹ "Ecumenical Chronicle," *The Ecumenical Review*, VIII, 1 (October 1955), 88. Cf. also *The Official Year-book of The Church of England, 1961*, The Church Information Office, London, 1961, 169.

³⁰ Visser 't Hooft, *op. cit.* [*The Evanston Report*], 93.

a comparison of the varying doctrinal positions. Yet, to prepare themselves to give a report on their own position, the theologians of each church were led to turn ever greater attention to matters of doctrine. At Lund in 1952 it was decided that the time for comparison was over. Faith and Order then undertook to formulate a statement of the convictions all the churches held in common; not to seek a compromise or the lowest common denominator in doctrine, but to find how much they were in agreement on matters of doctrine. To work out this statement Faith and Order began various research projects during the decade prior to the Third Assembly of the World Council in New Delhi in 1961 and the Fourth Faith and Order Meeting in Montreal last summer. The reversal in the trend regarding doctrinal unity has been the result of this research.

For example, as a result of a study on the sacraments, New Delhi insisted that intercommunion must be practiced in a "responsible fashion" and recommended further study into the doctrinal issues involved.³¹ While at Montreal agreement was reached that the Lord's Supper is a "sacrament of the presence of Christ, a means whereby the sacrifice of the Cross is operative, an act of praise, thanksgiving and intercession, a self-offering of the worshipper and the source of unity in the Body of Christ."³²

From research on the question of religious freedom have come the convictions that scepticism and relativism are neither valid foundations for toleration nor compatible with the New Testament teaching.³³ From this study also came the statement that "the harsh words of Pius IX against freedom of religion were justified because freedom of conscience as understood by the liberals of the time meant the complete denial of all objective truth."³⁴ Such conclusions have

³¹ Visser 't Hooft, ed., *New Delhi Speaks*, Association Press, N.Y., 1962, 100, 108.

³² "Christian Fraternal Encounter at Montreal," *Herder Correspondence*, 0, 0, (October 1963), 16. Cf. P. Minear, ed., *World Council of Churches, Commission on Faith and Order, Fourth World Conference, Montreal*, Augsburg Publ. House, 1963.

³³ N. H. Soe, "The Theological Basis of Religious Liberty," *The Ecumenical Review*, XI, 1 (October 1958), 36-39.

³⁴ A. F. Carrillo de Albornoz, "Roman Catholicism and Religious Liberty," *The Ecumenical Review*, XII, 1 (October 1959), 34.

led to a desire in Faith and Order circles for deeper investigation into what Eric Mascall called "the philosophical presuppositions behind the theological deadlock between Protestantism and Catholicism."³⁵ I think we can expect that such a reexamination of the philosophical bases of Protestantism should do much to dispel the a-dogmatic tendencies in the ecumenical movement.

But the greatest single cause of the new awareness of the necessity of doctrinal unity in the church has been the research into the role of tradition and into the nature of the church. At a meeting in Kifissia, Greece, in 1959, it was stated that "the New Testament came into being as a result of apostolic tradition."³⁶ The New Delhi Report said: "Biblical revelation was given to and through the apostolic church."³⁷ Last summer at Montreal the theologians agreed that not only is Scripture itself the proclamation of the faith of the early church, but also our understanding of it today is determined by later tradition and by the present life of the church. Moreover, much thought is being given to the guidance of the Spirit in understanding the Scriptures, which is granted not to the individual reader but to the whole community.³⁸

Such insights led the Montreal meeting to ask itself: "Where do we find the genuine tradition?" The answer given was: "Written tradition, as Holy Scripture, has to be interpreted by the Church. Such interpretation is found in the creeds, in the liturgy, in the preaching and in theological expositions of the Church's doctrine."³⁹ That brought the Montreal meeting to the crucial question, which was raised but not answered: "Who is authorized to give the right interpretation?"⁴⁰ The question of authority—so vital to the subject

³⁵ E. L. Mascall, *The Recovery of Unity: A Theological Approach*, Longmans Green, London, 1958, as reviewed by Bridston in *The Ecumenical Review*, XI, 3 (April 1959), 332.

³⁶ T. Ariga, "Christian Tradition in a Non-Christian Land," *The Ecumenical Review*, XII, 2 (January 1960), 201.

³⁷ Visser 't Hooft, *op. cit.* [*New Delhi Speaks*], 111.

³⁸ G. Baum, O.S.A., "Montreal: Faith and Order," *The Commonweal*, LXXVIII, 19 (August 23, 1963), 510.

³⁹ *Herder Correspondence*, October 1963, 17.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

of doctrinal unity and of church unity in general—has been studied by a Faith and Order research group on institutionalism or on the nature of the Church.

The experience of twenty years together in the World Council has led their theologians to ask: what authority should the World Council have? What is the place of authority in the church? To solve these questions Faith and Order made a study of what New Delhi, when recommending its continuance, called "the conciliar process in the church of the early centuries."⁴¹ In 1962, Dr. Lukas Vischer, research secretary, reported: "One of the functions of a church council is to take decisions. A council which took no decisions would have to be regarded as fruitless. It is not necessarily a sign of strength if the World Council brings together opposing views without taking any decision between them. [This] confronts the World Council with the question whether it sufficiently realizes the importance of the question of truth."⁴²

This recognition of the authoritative nature of any meeting of churchmen led to doubts concerning the neutrality adopted in the 1950 Toronto Statement about the kind of unity to be sought as the goal of the movement. At a meeting in Nyborg-Strand in 1958, Faith and Order issued a formal Interim Report (i.e., between Lund and Montreal) which stated:

In the Toronto Statement, the positions are taken that the Council exists to break the deadlock between the churches but membership does not imply the acceptance of a specific doctrine concerning the nature of church unity and so no church is obliged to change its ecclesiology. This paradox will become pure contradiction; for participation in a council to break the deadlock at least opens the possibility of changes in ecclesiologies, for without such changes the deadlock cannot be broken. We challenge the World Council to find the right form of Church unity—the unity God demands of His Church—and we recommend a re-structuring of the Council

⁴¹ Visser 't Hooft, *op. cit.* [*New Delhi Speaks*], 120.

⁴² L. Vischer, "The World Council of Churches and The Vatican Council," *The Ecumenical Review*, XIV, 3 (April 1962), 283, 292.

more on a theological than a functional basis as is the case now.⁴³

This led to the 1961 New Delhi definition of the unity which the World Council must seek as its goal—a definition which one Faith and Order official termed “a break-through in the ecclesiological sound barrier.”⁴⁴ This definition says that the church must be one visible body of men here on earth. This is a drastic change from the Evanston assembly’s stress on the invisible and eschatological nature of church unity. According to the definition, unity is visible because it is manifest in unity of doctrine, unity of ministry, unity of liturgy and unity of apostolic action.⁴⁵ This is a far cry from the emphasis laid in 1937 on the value of a variety of traditions in one church as a reflection of the infinite wisdom of God.

Thus, I believe we can say that through the influence of the theologians on the Faith and Order Commission, the World Council of Churches, and the ecumenical movement are closer to the Catholic idea of doctrinal unity than ever before. Fr. Bernard Leeming, S.J., has said: “For long years in Christianity, liberalism and individualism were accepted as almosts axiomatic. Definite progress has been made.”⁴⁶ And Fr. Gregory Baum, O.S.A., has written: “Ecumenical literature reads as if dogmatic liberalism was really a thing of the past. It is in the direction of orthodoxy that the ecumenical movement influences Protestant Christianity.”⁴⁷

However, we cannot close without noting that there are still strong forces opposed to these conclusions favoring doctrinal unity which have been reached by Faith and Order research. These forces so definitely made themselves felt at Montreal that Fr. Baum reported: “Montreal was no step ahead from Lund in the direction of

⁴³ K. R. Bridston, “The Future of Faith and Order,” *The Ecumenical Review*, XI, 3 (April 1959), 251-256.

⁴⁴ Quoted by B. Leeming, S.J., “The Meeting at St. Andrews,” *America*, September 24, 1960, 712.

⁴⁵ Visser 't Hooft, *op. cit.* [*New Delhi Speaks*], 92.

⁴⁶ Leeming, *op. cit.* 712.

⁴⁷ G. Baum, O.S.A., “The World Council of Churches: A Catholic View,” *The Commonweal*, June 24, 1960, 320.

greater orthodoxy."⁴⁸ This was due to two groups which sent delegates to a Faith and Order meeting for the first time at Montreal. First, the representatives of many of the evangelical churches, which are strongest in their hostility to church authority and in their allegiance to *sola scriptura*; secondly, a group of European theologians of the school of Rudolf Bultmann.

At Montreal these two groups, especially the latter, checked the momentum of the trend of the past ten years. They spoke of a unity reconcilable with a diversity of doctrines and of an invisible unity which is Christ himself. They repeated the Evanston idea that full unity is an eschatological gift, for, they asserted, to speak of visible church unity here on earth is to distort the scriptural picture of the church as the community which is marked by the weaknesses of the cross and not yet by the triumphs of her risen Lord. They stated that the criteria by which the true Christian community is distinguished are not simply adherence to a creed or submission to an authority, but the faith, witness and devotion of the community. Such statements as these prompted *Herder Correspondence* to comment: "Whereas the pre-conference study paper faced the necessity of real institutions of the church, the Montreal paper's emphasis was more upon spiritual unity."⁴⁹

The recommendation of the Faith and Order 1958 Interim Report for a restructuring of the Council along theological lines was ignored at Montreal and acceptance of the New Delhi definition of unity was not made a condition for membership in the Council, in order to keep the dialogue open to all positions.⁵⁰

At Montreal there was impatience with the theological research and the attempts to formulate doctrinal agreements on the true nature of church unity. All this was called irrelevant. Instead of seeking the objective meaning of Scripture, it was said that Faith and Order should find the message of Scripture for the modern post-Christian world.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Baum, *The Commonweal* (78), 19, 511.

⁴⁹ *Herder Correspondence*, October 1963, 15-16; cf. also Baum, *The Commonweal* (78), 19, 506.

⁵⁰ Baum, *ibid.* 511.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 506.

Lastly, and most importantly, at Montreal there was a strong resurgence of the desire to recognize the World Council itself as the true church. Was not the Holy Spirit working through the Council? Did not the Council assemblies achieve a true spiritual unity in the common worship? Did not the Council enable the churches to act and to witness with a catholicity and a solidarity never known before? Was it not, therefore, a churchly institution? Such were the sentiments expressed last summer and it was only through the stiff opposition of the Orthodox delegates that this ecclesial concept of the World Council of Churches was kept from enactment as a formal statement of the Montreal meeting.⁵²

So I can only conclude by saying that today a fairly large and growing number of Faith and Order theologians have a clearer idea and a firmer conviction of the place of doctrinal unity in the church than ever before; however there are still many other members who are just as strongly opposed to the idea as they ever were.

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⁵² *Ibid.*