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THE AIMS AND EXPECTATIONS OF DIALOGUE

Louis N. Scholl

The subject of “dialogue” has been on every agenda of the Division of Theological Studies since the organization of Lutheran Council in Canada in 1966. Throughout these deliberations I have been continuously haunted by an echo out of the past - the insistence of one of our professors in Symbolics that the Lutheran Church is a genuinely ecumenical church. I’ve really pondered whether that’s the most apt statement by which to characterize Lutheranism, especially in view of the record that for 100 years Lutherans in our country have engaged in discussions aimed at fellowship within their own family but have not yet found the key!

So I’ve been puzzled by the good professor’s statement until I stumbled across an article in my files entitled “You Can Always Tell a Lutheran.”¹ The author almost turned me off by his lead sentence: “There has always been a rather sizeable body of opinion which contends that you can always tell a Lutheran but you can’t tell him much.” But finally he came across with the goods and I found my answer. “Lutherans”, says the author, “believe in ecumenism because they want everyone else to become just like Lutherans.” This made sense to me particularly in view of the rich heritage and tradition Lutherans have to share with others.

The development of dialogue in our world and among Christians in recent times has been an important modern phenomenon. The phenomenon no doubt has its origin in the Faith and Order Movement antedating by several decades the organization of the World Council of Churches. But dialogue really came into its own as the ecumenical movement gathered more momentum culminating in the last decade with the new impetus provided by the entry of the Roman Catholic Church into forums of inter-church relations. To most of the Protestant world this in itself seemed an important modern phenomenon that came largely as a result of the Second Vatican Council convoked by John XXIII in 1962. The years that have followed have seen an unprecedented array of inter-church discussions as church after church queued up for dialogue with Mother Rome almost as if this were the “in” thing to do.

Now that the first blush of romance has subsided, one wonders whether the enchantment for dialogue has reached its apex and even perhaps gone over the hill. There are those who maintain this is so since dialogue has been the handmaid of the ecumenical movement and, in the view of many, that movement, is already in its death-throes - at least in its original frame of reference. A column

1. *The Lutheran*, August 30, 1967, pp. 16-17.

in "The Church Newscaster" published by the Metropolitan Detroit Council of Churches asks the question "Has ecumenism had it?" and responds, "The various methods used to bring Christians together have left a great deal to be desired, and today the way of convergence seems to be the most favored way of ecumenical ACTION."²

A further indication of the growing disenchantment with the old dialogical style of ecumenism is evidenced in the current trend toward secular ecumenism i.e.; cooperation by the churches with the world in effecting the highest degree of physical well-being (social justice) for the world. At least one author has identified this as stemming from the churches' current frustration with the ecumenical movement as a whole.³ Thus one notes a new context of the ecumenical endeavour today and the question of the role and priority of dialogue in our churches' mission in these times surfaces anew.

What are or should be our aims and expectations in the exercise of dialogue? The approach taken in this paper is not to delineate specific aims or objectives to be anticipated from discussions with other churches individually. Nor does this paper claim any great degree of originality. It will become obvious that what is said here has probably been said more adequately elsewhere. My intent is simply to draw some of these threads together and offer them for your consideration in the hope that the discussion which follows will help us clarify our goals and expectations in honouring the challenges and responsibilities thrust upon us by this important phenomenon of our times.

DIALOGUE: ITS MEANING AND NATURE

Before proceeding to a consideration of our aims and expectations in the exercise of dialogue, it is important that we agree on what the term itself means. This, as I recall, was a point of some content in assessing the course of dialogue with Roman Catholicism in Canada. Particularly in our evaluation of the recommendations arising out of the first National Consultation at Port Credit, Ontario in 1969, the question was repeatedly asked: "Do not some of these recommendations exceed the legitimate boundaries of what is commonly understood as dialogue" Perhaps our understanding can best be clarified by phrasing the definition in antithesis, stating first what dialogue is not and then positing what it is. This in turn will suggest certain attitudes and aptitudes that are basic to those who have the privilege and responsibility of participating in such forums of discussion.

Probably the statement most basic to an understanding of dialogue is that it is not monologue. That may be saying the obvious, but it says a lot. It means that in dialogue one partner does not assume the role of teacher and the other learner; for dialogue is neither an academic exercise, nor is it the art of alternating discourse in which each partner is there with the avowed intent of converting the other to his own position.⁴

2. "From the Council Memo", *The Church Newscaster* (Nov. - Dec, 1971), p.2.

3. David P. Scaer, *The Lutheran World Federation Today* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House 1971), p. 27.

4. See Martin J. Heineken, "The Centre in Christ", in *The Unity We Seek*, William S. Morris, editor (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1962), p. 138.

Dialogue is neither proudly apologetic nor narrowly polemic. Nor on the other hand is it the discipline of forgoing syntheses or compromises based on the least common denominator. As the Guidelines for Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue state: "It would be no service to Truth to gloss over significant differences in doctrine or to aim at some kind of least common-denominator Christianity."⁵

A good starting point for an affirmative definition of dialogue might be what has been written of unresolved controversies between two schools of philosophical thought: "When their conclusions are opposite, adversaries must be given the necessary time to understand one another better, to understand themselves better, and so to meet at a still undetermined point which is certainly situated beyond their present positions."⁶

In similar vein, a working paper originating with the Joint Working Group of the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church states, "Etymologically dialogue means a conversation; but a conversation with an aim: to discover the truth. All dialogue involves an exchange, an interplay between speaking and suggesting on the one hand and listening and receiving on the other. . ."⁷

That kind of dialogue requires much of the participants. Both parties need to approach their task in the spirit of humility and repentance. The Decree on Ecumenism states that I John 1:10 holds true also for sins against unity and then adds: "Thus in humble prayer we beg pardon of God and of our separated brethren just as we forgive them that trespass against us." In the same spirit of humility and repentance the Evangelical Church of Germany issued the following declaration on March 19, 1964: "An insight of the Reformation, derived from Scripture, is that the Church of Jesus Christ is not in itself pure, but lives only through the justifying grace of its Lord . . . Through God's cleansing forgiveness we become free to testify to his Gospel more clearly."⁸

Also basic to dialogue is that the participants have a thorough knowledge of their own tradition as well as an accurate acquaintance of the tradition of the other church. As the statement adopted by the Church Council of the American Lutheran Church re: Guidelines for Lutheran-Roman Catholic Relationships puts it: "Dialogue requires understanding. The participant must know his own tradition. He must know the Scriptures and seek to grow in understanding of them. He must also know the history of the Christian church and of his own denomination, its understanding of the Gospel, its religious concerns, its interpretation of the Christian life. He must know it well enough to be able to interpret it to those who stand in other traditions . . . He must also know the tradition of the other church. This cannot be only the knowledge of textbooks, but

5. Published under the auspices of the General Committee for the 450th Reformation Anniversary, the Lutheran Council in the United States of America with the Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, cf. p. 4.

6. Elienne Gilson, as quoted by Yves Congar in *Ecumenism and the Future of the Church* (Chicago: The Priory Press, 1967), pp. 31-32.

7. Cf. *Information Service*, (issued by the English Secretariat of The Canadian Catholic Bishops' Commission on Ecumenism, Toronto, 1967/III), p. 33.

8. Quoted by Hermann Dietzfelbinger in "The Council and the Churches of the Reformation", *"Dialogue on the Way"*, G. Lindbeck, editor (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1965) p. 259.

a living awareness made possible through encarnations, the half-truths, the well meant but nevertheless distorted presentations give way to real understanding.”⁹

A further requirement of those participating in dialogue is openness - openness first of all to the brother. This implies respect for the other person’s integrity and a genuine willingness to listen and be informed by him. It also implies a measure of spiritual maturity on his own part that allows the kind of candor so essential for effective communication. But above all he must be open to the Spirit who leads men to the truth. That requires a willingness to subject all reasoning to the Word of God and to recognize the sovereignty of the Word over human opinions, both the other person’s and one’s own. It also requires that theological formulations be Christocentric in their orientation. For it is to Christ who is the Truth, the Word made flesh that we owe absolute fidelity.¹⁰

To summarize: Dialogue within the context of the Christian community is a conversation between representatives of two communions who come together as equals seeking the fullest expression of Christ’s will for His church. In their willingness to speak and listen, to understand and be understood, to question and be questioned, to correct and be corrected, their goal is not merely the acquiring of a more sympathetic understanding of the other by noting points of convergency and divergence. But they will, in addition, attempt to strengthen one another through whatever forms of fellowship conscience will allow. Together they will seek avenues by which they can more faithfully fulfil the mission entrusted by Christ to His church. And they will meanwhile continue their quest for that measure of unity in faith that will allow a fuller visible expression of the oneness that is theirs in Christ.

Dialogue of this sort needs no justification nor defense since it is an imperative of all who confess one holy, catholic and apostolic church.

DIALOGUE: AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

With the foregoing as background, we should be better prepared to take up the primary assignment of this paper: “The Aims and Expectations of Dialogue.” In approaching this subject I have made a distinction between aims and expectations since it seems to me when we speak of aims we are talking about goals and objectives; whereas “expectations” implies more the fruits, benefits or by-products that accrue as dividends to those engaged in the discipline of dialogue.

Turning our attention then to the aims and objectives of dialogue, here too there is an obvious distinction between the ultimate goal and the more immediate goals.

Ultimate Aim

The ultimate aim of the ecumenical movement is the unity of all men baptized in Christ. This restoration of unity among all Christians was one of the principal concerns of Vatican II. As the Decree on Ecumenism says, as churches, and communities separated from one another cooperate in works of mercy, come together for common prayer where permitted, and engage in dialogue, then “the

9. Guidelines for Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue, p. 9.

10. *Ibid.*

result will be that, little by little, as the obstacles to perfect ecclesiastical communion are overcome, all Christians will be gathered, in a common celebration of the Eucharist, into the unity of the one and only Church which Christ bestowed on His Church from the beginning."¹¹

Does this mean, then, that after all the talk subsides about fresh breezes blowing in the wake of John XXIII and Vatican II, the new ecumenism is nothing more than a renewed call, albeit in modern dress, to return to the fold of Mother Rome? There seems little room for doubt or hope when confronted by the statement of Roman Catholic bishop that the ecumenical movement holds promise for the restoration of all Christian peoples "to the ancient, unchanged and unchanging unity of Christ's Church, Catholic in its universal saving influence, Roman in its visible salutary unity."¹² Nor are our fears allayed when the same author goes on to compare John XXIII with the forgiving father who runs from his house with outstretched arms to welcome the return of the Prodigal.¹³ Another Roman Catholic spokesman however, enters a disclaimer stating that the aim of the ecumenical movement is not the conversion of Protestants to Catholicism or the return of the separated brethren to the bosom of the Mother Church, but rather the return to unity.¹⁴

Thus whether the goal of unity is any more attainable now than before Vatican II is difficult to assess. On the one hand, as one Lutheran observer at the Council states, the ultimate goal of Roman ecumenism seems to be "the unity of the separated churches, or more precisely, the reunion of the non-Roman churches with Rome." It may even be, he continues, that the theme of renewal presenting a better image of the Roman Church to the separated brethren, they would feel more inclined to return home to the Catholic household.¹⁵ But on the other hand, should the renewal turn out to be an ongoing process just begun, then, in his opinion "the call to reunion is not the result of the Roman renewal, but a call to all Christians to have a change of brethren. It is not a call to 'return' but to 'reconciliation'."¹⁶

It is this hope of reunion that makes dialogue an imperative. As the most recent guidelines to the Decree on Ecumenism state, "It is true that dialogue by itself does not suffice to bring about the fullness of unity that Christ wishes; nevertheless, that unity is the ultimate aim of the thoughts and desires of those engaged in dialogue, who are preparing themselves to receive it as the great gift that God alone will bestow, in the way and at the time that he wishes."¹⁷

Immediate Aims

In the meantime those in dialogue should work toward more immediate aims - immediate because they are more attainable; and immediate because they are essential to the ultimate goal of unity.

11. Cf. The Decree of Ecumenism, (Glen Rock, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1965), pp. 52-53.

12. Cf. John J. Wright, "The Impact of the Ecumenical Movement" in *Dialogue for Reunion*, edited by Leonard Swidler (Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1962), pp. 18-20.

13. *Ibid*, p. 30.

14. Gregory Baum, "The Necessity of Catholic-Protestant Dialogue", *The Unity We Seek*, pp. 13-14.

15. Edmund Schlink, "The Decree on Ecumenism" in *Dialogue on the Way*, p. 201.

16. *Ibid*, p. 207.

17. Cf. "Reflections and Suggestions Concerning Ecumenical Dialogue", *Information Service*, December 1970/IV, p. 6.

One of the most basic aims of dialogue should be that of a better understanding of the other party that is accurate, balanced and fair. This is the kind of discovery one can point to in the series of dialogues between the representatives of the USA National Committee of the LWF and the Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. The "Foreward" to each of the first four booklets refers to the growth in mutual understanding which, of course, is basic to the remarkable degree of agreement reached not simply in the discussions on the Nicene Creed and Baptism, but more significantly on the Eucharist as Sacrifice and the Eucharist and Ministry. And, closer to home, isn't this the same course Lutherans have had to travel in reducing the number of Synods and churches from 61 in 1900 to 12 in 1971?

A second aim of dialogue is that of renewal to the mission of the church. As the Decree on Ecumenism states, discussions between different communions should be such that "all are led to examine their own faithfulness to Christ's will for the Church wherever necessary, undertake with vigor the task of renewal and reform."¹⁸

If dialogue, therefore, is to test our faithfulness to Christ's will for the church, then we need to place the church's entire mission under scrutiny. We need to help one another in our search for the most effective proclamation of the Gospel; we need to ask one another whether our teaching is complete and faithful to the Biblical witness; expression of the unity that exists; and we need to assist and encourage one another as we respond to human needs through Christian service and concern.

Implied in the foregoing is a third objective of dialogue: identification of areas where corporate action is feasible. As the working paper of the Joint Working Group expresses it, "dialogue is not merely primarily the activity of churches meeting and confronting one another in order to advance towards unity. Dialogue is also (perhaps above all) a continuous mutual exchange and enrichment which springs from an effort to cooperate, in order to undertake everything that we are not obliged to do separately."¹⁹ Some of the areas meriting coordinated action include the defense of human dignity, promotion of peace, application of Gospel principles to social life, famine, illiteracy, poverty, inadequate housing, unequal distribution of wealth. No doubt there are numerous other concerns that could be added to this list, including the fullest possible use of the mass media - and that leads to a fourth objective of dialogue.

"So that the world may believe." In reply to the question, "Why do Catholics want to dialogue with Lutherans?" one writer responds, "Because it is the will of Jesus that all Christians be one so that the world might believe that He was sent by the Father (John 17, 21) . . . A basic Christian unity already exists through our recognition of one Body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God who is Father of all (Ephesians 4, 4f). Nevertheless, there are such serious divisions among Christians in worship and ministry, in teaching and preaching that full fellowship in communion has been broken. To this extent our Lord's prayer for unity has not been answered. To this extent our Christian proclamation believable. At least the gospel of Christ is not as believable as it

18. *The Decree on Ecumenism*, p. 53.

19. *Information Service*, 1967/III, p. 33.

would be if we were one, if our unity were the sign to the world that Jesus prayed it would be.”²⁰

EXPECTATIONS, BY-PRODUCTS AND DIVIDENDS

It is to be expected that those who engage in fraternal study and discussion will experience a number of benefits and dividends that will accrue as by-products of their dialogue.

The most important of these will be a growth in charity. This is the kind of corrective that is needed in the face of the parodies and caricatures that have paraded unchallenged in classrooms, magazines, from pulpits and in conversations among families and friends. One has to make the “ecumenical experiment”. One has to have met a Christian of another communion, have prayed with him, have seen his faith in Jesus Christ and been moved by it, have discovered, in a word, that one can receive something from him.²¹

A second dividend that may be expected from dialogue is that of mutual enrichment. No church can claim for itself sole possession of Biblical insight and truth, much less of evangelical practice that has never known any inconsistency. Dialogue involves the churches in the on-going discipline of re-examining their theology and its basis. If the participants are open to the probing and testing of others, they will be pressed to articulate their theology more clearly and may perhaps uncover certain emphases that have been neglected by their tradition and are in need of recovery in their church.

Finally, I believe that from a Lutheran perspective, one of the most fruitful benefits of dialogue with other communions is the cohesive effect this exercise has for those of a common tradition. For as we expose ourselves to the questioning of those of non-Lutheran traditions, we will be driven back to the Confessions we hold in common. We will be confronted anew with the overwhelming consensus we have for unity in our historic Lutheran Symbols. And this in turn will press us hard for an answer to the inevitable question: Why have we walked our separate ways for so long?

THE CONTRIBUTION OF LUTHERANISM

Without developing these points, let me simply refer to three contributions which the Lutheran Church owes to ecumenical dialogue:

- A. An emphasis on the sovereignty of the Word over human opinions and traditions.
- B. An emphasis on the importance of sound doctrine which flows out of the formal (*sola Scriptura*) and material (*sola gratia, sola fide*) principles.
- C. An emphasis on the centrality of Christ to all of Scripture and doctrine.

Lutherans, as one of our theologians has stated, have been “a constant flesh of the impatient ecumaniacs who see only the scandal of external disunity but are blind to the even greater scandal of an external unity based on a lowest common denominator which really ignores the truth.”²²

²⁰ Harry J. McSorley, “Why Catholics Want to Dialogue with Lutherans?” release 67-71 of LCUSA’s News Bureau, p. 7.

²¹ Congar, p. 10.

²² Cf. Heineken, pp. 139-140.

Expanding on this point, another Lutheran theologian points out, "The Lutheran Churches must not and cannot permit the ecumenical movement to turn into a kind of Protestant synthesis in which a compromise between the doctrines of the Methodists, Baptists, Calvinists and Lutherans, combined with the adoption of the episcopal polity of the Anglicans, constitutes a uniting principle which enables all to gather together without first reaching clarity and agreement on the truth of the Gospel. It does not matter whether the Lutheran Confessions of the sixteenth century remain completely unchanged in the contemporary ecumenical encounter, but it is crucial that the Gospel given in Scripture be maintained."²³

CONCLUSION

This seems like the proper note on which to end this paper, namely that everything that we do under the name of dialogue and ecumenism serve the one overriding goal: that of magnifying the Christ of the Gospel. As it has been said so well: "We dare never forget that ecumenical effort is a spiritual undertaking to be approached in a basically different way from the process by which the New York Central and the Pennsylvania railroads may some day be merged. Ultimately what is at stake is the salvation of human beings whom God created and whom He loved to the point of sending His only Son into the world to live and to die and to rise again and to intercede for them at God's right hand. What we can do is in the power of the Holy Spirit to be as open to His guiding and his leading as possible, so that He will be able to use us as effective instruments in His work of calling, gathering, enlightening, and sanctifying all of Christendom on earth and keeping it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. Since the operation is His, we cannot fail."²⁴

23. Peter Brunner, as quoted by Hermann Dietzfelbinger, "The Council and the Churches of the Reformation", in *Dialogue on the Way*, pp. 255-256.

24. Arthur C. Peipkorn, "Living with the Brothers in the Lord", *Concordia Theological Monthly*, March 1968, p. 174.