

THE REFORMATION CHURCHES AND THEIR ECUMENICAL TASK TODAY

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I. FROM THEOLOGICAL CONSENSUS TO CHURCH COMMUNION

The churches marked by the 16th century Reformation are not only Lutheran and Reformed. They are also Anglican and Methodist. While they differ in their history and theology, they converge today in their ecumenical approach: they are on the way from consensus to communion. The ecumenical dialogues led by theologians were received by those churches. The dialogues have reached their goals and made possible a new stage: the declaration of church communion adopted by the synods of those churches. Such declarations of church communion are binding for the signatory churches.

International Dialogues During the past forty years all Reformation families have conducted international dialogues. Their results were then approved by world-wide assemblies. This was the case, for instance, in the 1988 Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops, in the 1990 Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation, or in the 1989 General Council of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.

Those assemblies have asked their regional or national member churches to proceed to declarations of church communion and to engage in a new phase of ecumenical relations. These regional declarations will allow for new and more global declarations of church communion. Global declarations are therefore the consequence of regional declarations. This approach corresponds to the fact that, for those churches, authority lies in the local church and the authority of their respective worldwide organisations proceeds from the authority of their local member churches.

“Local” declarations of church communion Declarations of church communion – in which the churches involved come to mutual recognition and fellowship in word and sacraments – came into existence in various countries. Such declarations include the commitment to the visibility of the communion of the church of Christ and also common service and witness in the world.

By 2009, ten declarations of church communion had been signed. The first of them is the Leuenberg Agreement of 1973¹, which established church communion between the Lutheran,

¹ For the text of the Leuenberg Agreement see www.leuenberg.net .

Reformed, United, Waldensian, and Czech Brethren churches in Europe. The Lutheran and Reformed churches in the United States signed in 1997 a “Formula of Agreement”². Reformed and Lutheran churches in the Middle East signed the Amman Declaration³ in 2006. In 1997, through the “Declaration of Vienna”, the signatory churches of the Leuenberg Agreement declared themselves in communion with the Methodist churches in Europe.

The dialogue between the Evangelical Church in Germany and the Church of England was concluded by the 1988 Meissen Agreement⁴. The Anglican churches in the British Isles and the Lutheran and Reformed churches in France signed in 2001 the Reuilly Agreement⁵. In 1992, the Scandinavian and Baltic Lutheran churches declared themselves in communion with the Anglican churches in England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales by signing the Porvoo Common Statement⁶. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America entered into communion with the Episcopal Church in the United States by the adoption of the agreement Called to Common Mission⁷, in 2001. In the same year, Anglicans and Lutherans from Canada signed the Waterloo Declaration⁸. In Australia, the Lutheran and Anglican churches established a “Common Ground” in view of a declaration of communion. The ratification of this process will soon be completed.

What these declarations hold in common These declarations are not equivalent to each other. They differ on matters of the integration of ministries, for instance. Some churches value certain declarations differently than others. In any case, the ten declarations mentioned above are based on the same understanding about the ways to communion, namely that a new phase should follow the phase of theological dialogue.

II. CHURCH COMMUNION: THE EXAMPLE OF THE LEUENBERG AGREEMENT

The Leuenberg Agreement (LA) came into existence already in 1973. We will take it as an example of the ecumenical approach of the churches marked by the 16th century Reformation.

The Church: communion in word and sacraments The Leuenberg Agreement takes up the understanding of the Church which was established at the time of the Reformation. The Church is a community of the faithful in which the Gospel is preached in its pure form and the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist are administered properly⁹.

² For the text of the Formula of Agreement see <http://www.pcusa.org/ecumenicalrelations/resources/formula.pdf>

³ For the text of the Amman Declaration see *Reformed World*, 56(2), June 2006, 204-208. See also

http://warc.jalb.de/warcajsp/side.jsp?news_id=886&navi=38&part_id=62 and

http://lkg.jalb.de/lkg/documents/lkg_doc_de_1666.pdf

⁴ For the text of the Meissen Agreement see

<http://www.cofe.anglican.org/info/ccu/europe/ecumbackground/#meissen>

⁵ For the text of the Reuilly Agreement see

http://www.cofe.anglican.org/info/ccu/europe/ecumbackground/reuilly_english.rtf

⁶ *The Porvoo Common Statement*, London, The Council for Christian Unity, 1993. See also

<http://www.porvoochurches.org/statements/index.htm>

⁷ For the text of “Called to Common Mission” see

<http://archive.elca.org/ecumenical/fullCommunion/Episcopal/ccmresources/index.html>

⁸ For the text of Called to Full Communion: the Waterloo Declaration, see <http://www.elcic.ca/What-We-Believe/Waterloo-Declaration.cfm>

⁹ Leuenberg Agreement, par. 2. See also the first chapter of the Leuenberg document *The Church of Jesus Christ*, www.leuenberg.net

The Church is not a community which “has” the true understanding of word and sacrament, but a community in which this event rightly occurs. The act of conferring grace through word and sacrament is not identical with the necessary consensus in the understanding of word and sacrament. This tension between consensus and celebration is analogous to the difference between the theological conclusions of dialogues and declarations of church communion, as well as to the difference between the doctrine of justification and the message of justification¹⁰.

The Church is part of the justifying action of God. The instruments of salvation through which God justifies each person are at the same time the instruments through which God creates and upholds his Church. By justifying human beings, God incorporates them into God’s Church. These same instruments of salvation become the necessary and sufficient criterion of the unity of the Church¹¹. The communion in word and sacrament is the hallmark of the Church. In the place where word and sacrament are truly administered, the Church, that is the *una, sancta, catholica et apostolica ecclesia*, manifests itself.

This emphasis on the true celebration of word and sacrament as the hallmark of the church is nothing else than an emphasis on the message of justification - or reconciliation, or salvation - as the measure of all aspects of church life in the understanding of the Church¹².

Ministries This understanding of unity includes the mutual recognition of ministries. In the first stage, however, this does not necessarily mean the integration of ministries in the form, for instance, of a joint exercise of the episcopè. At this point, the four traditions have different emphases. It is essential to keep in mind that for all these declarations, communion in word and sacraments does not presuppose a visible ministry jointly exercised, even if one should strive for it. This may be seen as the main difference as compared to the Roman Catholic and Orthodox approaches. On the other hand, communion in word and sacraments does presuppose that the ministries exercised differently in the various communions be mutually recognized as the ministry of the Church of Christ.

Declaration of communion and realization of communion At this point it is important to take into consideration the difference between the declaration of church communion and its full visibility or full realisation. The full visibility of the declaration of church communion is the goal to be achieved. Communion in word and sacrament either exists or does not exist, just as one cannot be “more or less” married. But such a declaration of communion calls for visibility, for realisation. The realisation of the visibility can be more or less “full” or more or less important. That is why it is more accurate to speak of “full visible unity” and to avoid the ambivalent expression “full communion”. The latter, no longer used in Europe, is still used in the United States¹³. Here, the term “full” qualifies visibility rather than communion. While visibility is our task, there are differences which need to be dealt with.

III. WHAT THE DECLARATION OF CHURCH COMMUNION REQUIRES

¹⁰ Leuenberg Agreement, par. 7 and 8.

¹¹ Leuenberg Agreement, par. 2.

¹² Leuenberg Agreement, par. 12.

¹³ The Anglican Communion in Europe no longer uses the expression “full communion”. See for instance the Porvoo and Reuilly documents. It speaks of “full visible unity”.

Declaration of church communion and mutual recognition are made possible and necessary¹⁴ when a tradition recognises and confirms the true celebration of the one Church of Jesus Christ in the celebration of word and sacrament of another tradition. This leads to table and pulpit fellowship and mutual recognition of ministries. We will use the example of the Leuenberg Agreement where the different phases of this process are clearly indicated¹⁵.

Consensus on faith The declaration of fellowship is made possible, firstly, by the consensus on the fundamental statements of faith. These are the paragraphs on salvation found in the Leuenberg Agreement, in the Formula of Agreement, and in the Amman Declaration; as well as in the ten affirmations of faith of the Niagara Report, taken up by Meissen, Porvoo, and Reuilly.

Lifting of mutual condemnations The second element is the lifting of doctrinal condemnations. The mutual condemnations are an expression of discrepancy in the understanding of faith and a break of church fellowship. Even though doctrinal consensus may not be equated with church fellowship, it still is a substantial presupposition of its restoration. The traditional doctrinal condemnations are to be examined against the background of the fundamental statements of faith. This should not involve an evaluation of these historical statements as such. Rather, the task is to decide whether these condemnations, once a reason for breaking church fellowship, do affect the partner church and its current witness.

Thus, the Leuenberg Agreement deals with the three questions that have involved condemnations: christology, the eucharist, and predestination. It goes on to conclude that the current statements of faith of the various partners, despite their variety, no longer hinder church communion. It concludes: “When such a consensus exists between churches, the condemnations pronounced by the Reformation confessions of faith are inapplicable to the (current) doctrinal position of these churches”¹⁶. This way of handling the doctrinal condemnations has been also taken up by the Lutheran-Catholic international dialogue¹⁷.

Recognition of legitimate diversity The third element is mutual recognition in diversity. What must be overcome is not the difference itself, but its dividing nature. The measure of legitimate diversity to be applied to the historical doctrinal condemnations is the message of justification and church fellowship based on it. Theological dialogue has made it possible to overcome the dividing differences in the above mentioned areas of christology, the eucharist, and predestination. This was done when these three areas ceased to be obstacles to the joint celebration of word and sacraments. The remaining diversity then appears as part of the consensus through which another tradition is recognised as true Church of Jesus Christ, and church communion is declared as a result of that.

No minimal consensus It should become clear, in this context, that communion in word and sacraments is not a minimal consensus which contents itself with a rapprochement in word and sacraments, relegating other domains of church life, doctrine and action to a sort of arbitrary diversity. Diversity touches its limit when the joint celebration of word and sacraments – that means, church communion – becomes impossible. This applies both to doctrinal statements and to ethical issues.

¹⁴ Cf. the conclusions of the Leuenberg document *The Church of Jesus Christ*, www.leuenberg.net

¹⁵ Leuenberg Agreement, par. 33.

¹⁶ Leuenberg Agreement, par. 20, 23, 26.

¹⁷ Cf. the 1999 Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification.

This can be illustrated by the way in which the apartheid issue in South Africa was dealt with by the Lutheran World Federation. Racism was declared to be a heresy because it broke communion in word and sacraments: the white Lutheran churches denied black Christians access to the eucharist. This led the Lutheran World Federation to suspend the membership of some white Lutheran churches in South Africa. Communion in word and sacraments is a hermeneutical key. In this case, the distinction between the “being” and the “well being” of the church – in which the “being” would be seen as the area of consensus and the “well being” as the area of difference – is of little help because what belongs to the “well being” could be misunderstood as arbitrary or indifferent. Communion in word and sacraments also belongs to the “being” of the church, because in them church communion itself is at stake.

Reconciled diversity is not the same as the status quo The Leuenberg Agreement declares church communion among churches “with different confessional positions”¹⁸. However this should be distinguished from the status quo. Having overcome divisions and achieved communion in word and sacraments, it is now legitimate to speak of one church with diverse accents in its teachings, piety, and everyday practices. Through joint celebration, the Holy Spirit affirms this unity, acts upon it, and grants it a future yet to be shaped.

Church communion and confessions of faith Declarations of church communion are not new confessions of faith. They rather have the character of bridges between various confessions which are now reconciled. On the other hand, they have consequences for the confessional positions involved, in the sense that not every classical interpretation of the confessions remains possible, such as those pertaining to old doctrinal condemnations. The aim is to recognise the other church as a true and complete expression of the one Church of Jesus Christ and to live this unity locally and universally.

This understanding of church communion is based on the interaction of the following three dimensions: the common understanding of faith, the overcoming of historical condemnations, and mutual recognition as true expression of the one Church of Jesus Christ. Each of these three dimensions only really makes sense in combination with the other two.

IV. THE REALIZATION OF CHURCH COMMUNION: THE CURRENT TASK

The declaration of church communion is the first step in the realization of church communion and its visible unity. This process has led to significant results. At this point it is worthwhile to look again at the Leuenberg Agreement since it is now more than thirty-five years old. Leuenberg identifies a series of tasks to be accomplished which later on were included in other declarations of church communion. They include theological doctrinal conversations¹⁹; concrete realizations at the local level, which may be very different according to the context, such as the development of common ecclesial forms and mutual exchange of ministers; common witness and service; and the sharing of this understanding of unity within the ecumenical movement.

Theologically speaking, the realization of church communion is part of the process of reception . It requires a “conversion” of the churches. It differs from classical reception at

¹⁸ Leuenberg Agreement, par. 29.

¹⁹ A significant amount of common theological texts were produced after the Leuenberg declaration of communion. See: www.leuenberg.net

some essential points. The reception of the “other” church in its difference as a true expression of the one Church of Christ is unusual. It is thus necessary to seek new expressions of being church that go beyond old habits. The danger here is that churches may content themselves simply with the signing of the declaration of communion, remaining at the “peaceful” stage in which the status quo is not overcome. That is why it is necessary to distinguish between the declaration of church communion and the realization of church communion, even if, strictly speaking, the latter is part of the former.

The realization of church communion is the current and remaining task of the churches bound together by the declarations of church communion.

V. THE BINDING CHARACTER AND THE AUTHORITY OF THE DECLARATIONS

The difficulties regarding reception, which first of all appear in practical matters, point as a matter of fact to fundamental theological questions which need urgently to be addressed. In doing so, it becomes clear that in the end the ecumenical movement raises issues that are not yet clarified either by the individual churches or by the Christian world communions. These issues are now coming to the surface. We would like to make reference to three of them.

Authority The question of authority, like a *cantus firmus*, binds different issues together. It is closely connected with the issue of the “binding character” (*Verbindlichkeit* in German), though it is different from it.

It is very often ignored that the authority of the declarations of church communion does not lie in the individual statements of these texts. It lies, as it has been shown above, in the interaction between fundamental statements of faith, the lifting of condemnations, and mutual recognition as the church of Christ. Church communion has been declared and this is the basis of the authority of these texts.

A second level is the authority of episcopé or oversight. All churches emphasize the threefold character of episcopé - personal, collegial, and communal²⁰ - and the non-identification between episcopé (oversight) and episkopos (bishop). The fact that the articulation of these three aspects is emphasized differently is one problem. However, the question of the authority of episcopé in the individual churches and in the Christian World Communions is a second problem. And it seems to me to be more important. This problem, which has not been fully solved within the individual churches, turns out to be even more serious at the international level. An example is the discussion concerning a European synod and the binding character of its decisions. This question is a challenge. The significant attempts being made to solve the problem need to continue.

Structures of unity The question of the structures of unity is also tightly connected with the issue of authority. This issue should not be mistaken for the request for an additional international organization. Many Reformation churches have an allergic reaction to the request for structures, even if local synods often continue to deal with issues of structure,

²⁰ Cf. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Geneva, World Council of Churches, 1982, section on Ministry paragraph 26.

which leads to bureaucratisation of the churches and fails to address the issue of structure itself. Theologically speaking, structures are too often regarded as a necessary “evil”.

The necessary debate on structures of unity recedes to the background in favour of new discussions, for instance on an ecumenism of oppositions or contradictions or on the search for profile. The equivalent in ecumenical committees is an ecumenism of administrators who in the end maintain the status quo. At this point also, significant steps have been taken, and further developments are needed.

Catholicity This may be summarized in the question of whether the Reformation churches are capable of catholicity. Are they able to overcome “national congregationalism”, which is not identical with – though related to – the congregationalism of local churches? One inevitably comes to the question of ecclesial self-understanding and is led to ask whether the Reformation churches do not suffer from a deficit at this point.

The question as to which extent the Reformation churches are capable of ecumenism has also to be raised. The realization of church communion is the point where this capacity has to prove itself. We need a space where this question can be dealt with at the international ecumenical level.

VI. CONCLUSION

The Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican and Methodist churches have taken and continue to the first steps in order to move from theological consensus to church communion. The different declarations of communion do not necessarily have the same status, and some worldwide communions clearly distinguish between their different declarations of communion. Thus the Anglicans give a different level of importance to the declaration of Porvoo compared than the declarations of Meissen or Reuilly.

It is nevertheless true that this is an approach that interrupts the long series of pure dialogues between theologians. It tries to give concrete expression in church life to the declarations of church communion which were approved by the respective synods.