

Service for Visible Unity in the Truth of the Gospel

“Doctrine divides, service unites!” That was the slogan in the early years of one important stream in the modern ecumenical movement: Life and Work, or *Praktisches Christentum*. We may ask whether the negative pole in that contrast still applies, eighty years later: Does doctrine still divide? A plausible answer might be: “Not as much as it used to.” But that answer can itself be taken in two ways. On the one hand, it may be taken as an acknowledgment of the positive achievements in the realm of Faith and Order (the silent counterpart in the original slogan), whereby some older doctrinal divisions have been overcome, or at least mitigated, through responsible agreements among the churches. On the other hand, such a response as “Not as much as it used to” may be taken, less happily, as an indication of the diminished importance of doctrine in public, and even ecclesiastical, awareness.

Among the successes at the doctrinal level must be reckoned the “convergence text” of Faith and Order, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1982), which both registered and further encouraged *rapprochements* in sacramental teaching and liturgical practice among a wide range of churches. Given the strikingly positive “reception” of this so-called Lima document, however, one must then wonder why the next text, *Confessing the One Faith* (1991), which aimed at a “re-reception” of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, became stalled in Geneva and attracted little attention from the churches.

The other most striking doctrinal achievement was the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, signed on behalf of the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church in 1999. What has aptly been characterized as a “differentiated consensus” is officially regarded as having put to rest the disputed question that was perhaps the most neuralgic point in the controversies and resultant divisions of the sixteenth century. The irony here is that some of those Lutheran theologians in the German heartlands who were most vociferous concerning the alleged inadequacy of the JDDJ are calling for immediate intercommunion (or perhaps mutual eucharistic hospitality) in the absence of what they would consider a satisfactory agreement in the matter that Lutherans have traditionally regarded as the *articulus stantis vel cadentis ecclesiae*. And they seem thereby to join a popular sentiment among Christians in a society where Christian practice is in steep decline.

Pope John Paul II considered it necessary, in his encyclical of 2004, to forbid Catholic participation in eucharistic sharing, short of doctrinal agreement concerning the sacrament, including its sacrificial character and its priestly administration. The ground of this prohibition – and prohibitions are, of course, only issued against acts that are in fact taking place – was precisely the “vital” role of the eucharist in the identification and nourishment of the Church: *Ecclesia de eucharistia VIVIT*. The pope’s perspective was profoundly ecumenical: to promote further work towards the agreement that all parties may consider as necessary and sufficient in the intrinsically connected themes of eucharist and ecclesiology and so hasten the day when the Church can be recognized as one around the table of the Lord. As, on the basis of the agreement on justification, Lutherans and Catholics proceed towards the attainment of the “visible unity which is

Christ's will" (JDDJ, 44), the topics listed for "further clarification" comprise "the relationship between the word of God and church doctrine, as well as ecclesiology, ecclesial authority, church unity, ministry, the sacraments, and the relation between justification and social ethics" (JDDJ, 43). As a Methodist, I am pleased at the prospect of joining in this process, since the World Methodist Council and its member churches are expected to become associated with the JDDJ by a tripartite action at their meeting in Seoul in July 2006.

The final prayer of Jesus – and its implied imperative – that his followers "be one" retains its force. The scriptural context makes clear that such unity involves "sanctification in the truth" (John 17:17-23). Witness to the world – "*ut mundus credat*" – is made through the Church's visible and tangible embodiment of the truth of the gospel. It may even be that such is the most needed "service" to be rendered to our contemporaries, especially in the face of the "dictatorship of relativism" that Pope Benedict discerns as characterizing the culture of today.

As an institution and through its associated personnel, the Strasbourg Institute has for forty years played a very significant part both in the progress made towards overcoming doctrinal divisions as well as in keeping the essential importance of doctrinal matters before the churches. The tasks are unfinished, and my prayer is that the Institute will continue to accomplish its good works in the service of visible unity in the truth of the gospel.

Geoffrey Wainwright