

## **SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE**

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The recent World Methodist Conference received the seventh report of the international Roman Catholic-Methodist dialogue. It is entitled, 'Speaking the Truth in Love – Teaching Authority Among Catholics and Methodists.'<sup>1</sup> It is prefaced by the text of Ephesians 4.1 - 16 on which it is, in certain respects, an extended meditation. It is to be hoped it receives substantially more attention than its six predecessors.<sup>2</sup> So far this fruitful dialogue has been shamefully neglected within Methodism, in contrast to the seriousness with which Anglicans and Lutherans take their dialogues with Rome.

A key feature of all the dialogue reports, this one included, has been their honesty. A surprising degree of convergence has been registered from the first. The dialogue has always kept 'the blessed end in view' of unity. At the same time, it has been honest about remaining difficulties and these are clearly spelt out at various points of the Report.<sup>3</sup> The particular subject essayed in this last quinquennium is of missionary and apologetic as well as ecumenical relevance. How does the Church teach authoritatively? In a world where all authority is questioned this is a poser. The term 'post-modernist' does not appear in the Report, an underlying assumption of which is the absolute reality of the transcendent self-gift and self-communication of God. Likewise, the real teaching and sanctifying activity of the Holy Spirit is affirmed. The dialogue team accept that language about God is never perfect.<sup>4</sup> They do not, however, endorse any view that all opinions are of equal value and that there is nothing of which we may be supremely sure.

The report considers the understanding of the 'means of grace' within the two traditions as well as the question of teaching authority. On the former question, there seems to be a degree of confusion in its thinking that could profitably have been taken further. On the latter, it is generally acute and lucid. It records convergence on the following points. Both churches accept that there is a teaching ministry in the Church in order to ensure the faithful transmission of the Apostolic Tradition. It is to ensure 'faithfulness not only in believing but in what is believed.'<sup>5</sup> Such ministry is empowered by the Holy Spirit. It is subordinate to the Word of God which 'has primacy over all later formulations of divine revelation.'<sup>6</sup> It is exercised within the Church, in the context of the Church as 'prophetic community' in which all, as a body, are anointed with the Spirit of truth. 'All the faithful share in the understanding and handing on of revealed truth.'<sup>7</sup> In the communion of love, which is the Church, the Holy Spirit maintains the community and guides its growth in faith and understanding. Teaching authority is emphasised as a gift to the Church, a point made particularly forcefully in recent Anglican-Catholic dialogue.<sup>8</sup> It takes place in and for the community. 'The

ministry of authority should always seek the growth of those over whom it is exercised.<sup>9</sup>

The emphasis upon teaching authority within the context of the total communion of the Church has important lessons for both communions. For some Roman Catholics, it will be a timely reminder that both the *sensus fidelium*, the common sense of all the faithful as to what is appropriate, 'the God-given sense or instinct aroused and sustained in each believer by the Spirit of Truth,<sup>10</sup> and the prophetic charisms of particular individuals (lay as well as ordained) play a key role alongside the *magisterium* (the teaching office of the Pope and the bishops) in the life of the Church. For many individualistically minded Methodists, it will equally be a reminder that doctrine is not to be approached in a cavalier DIY manner, in which each person has an absolute right to make up their own mind independently of the witness of the whole Body. There is an essentially corporate memory of God's saving acts, to be handed on.

Great emphasis is laid upon the spirit of harmony and partnership that should prevail between the laity and the ordained ministers, both sides respecting the particular vocation of the other. This partnership is always an active one.

'Led by the Holy Spirit, the whole Church, lay people and ordained ministers together, shares Christ's ministry of witnessing to the truth of God's good news... Preaching and teaching in this broad sense belong to the mission of all Christians as members of the Church called by Christ to make disciples of all nations (cf Matthew 28.19). Christ's Church is a community of interpreters and proclaimers. Both lay people and ordained ministers have complementary gifts of discerning the truth of the Gospel and of interpreting how it should best be expressed in a cultural setting.'

In the light of this emphasis upon partnership, both sides issue a challenge to each other in matters of church government. Methodists challenge Catholics as to why lay people (and also priests) have no formal role in the government of the Church at the highest levels. Catholics ask why, granted that Methodists recognise a special teaching role for the ministry, the formal role of ministers in Conference, especially in regard to teaching and doctrine, is not made clearer.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps both churches need to reconsider their position in the light of the ecclesiology of communion, so clearly affirmed in the Report.<sup>12</sup> Such a theology clearly implies a degree of mutual reception on all sides. Perhaps, in view of the evolving theology of the episcopate in American Methodism, the formula adopted by the Church of England, that it is 'episcopally led and synodically governed' might be pondered, with the corporate presbyterate playing, to an extent, the role in British Methodism that the episcopate does in the Catholic and episcopal

Methodist churches.<sup>13</sup> More attention might have been paid to the balance between personal and synodical leadership as explored in the works of such Catholic theologians as Jean-Marie Tillard. Tillard emphasises the role of the bishop as guardian of the traditions of his particular 'local church' and his responsibility both for keeping that church in communion with the other churches, while relaying to the wider Church the insights and concerns of his local church.<sup>14</sup> Ministers in both traditions are ministers of enablement, serving through their leadership.<sup>15</sup>

The Report describes the ways in which authoritative teaching is carried out within the two churches. In the Catholic Church, it is through the work of the Pope and the bishops. In Methodism, it is by the Conferences, which include lay people.<sup>16</sup> A key difference is recorded. Catholics believe that the bishops, collegially, can teach without error. In certain very special circumstances, the Pope can even do so on his own authority. Methodists do not ascribe such infallible authority to the Conferences, albeit that they believe they are guided by the Spirit and that their teaching, where clearly derived from and consistent with Scripture, should be respectfully received.<sup>17</sup> Methodists continue to be sceptical as to whether any body of Christians, being weak, fallible and sinful, can teach infallibly. Perhaps it depends on our understanding of the nature of the Spirit's gift of infallibility. Roman Catholics believe that it can, in the circumstances described above, apply to doctrinal definition. We should note that the term 'infallible' can be found in Charles Wesley's hymnody, for example in this verse:

That heavenly Teacher of mankind,  
The Guide infallible impart,  
To bring Thy sayings to our mind,  
And write them on our heart.<sup>18</sup>

This verse surely implies that the faithful are led infallibly in the way of sanctification, though not necessarily in theological precision of definition.

This remains a major question for future work which will involve both pneumatology and the understanding of the purpose of doctrinal definition. The rich pneumatology of the report is its overall outstanding theological characteristic. Section II presents the Church as 'God's Prophetic Community, anointed with the Spirit of Truth.' It begins with the assertion that 'Methodists and Roman Catholics are united in the hope that the Holy Spirit will lead all believers into the truth.'<sup>19</sup> The Spirit is 'the invisible thread running through the work of the Church in the world, enabling our minds to hear and receive the Word, enlightening them to understand the Word, and giving us tongues to speak the Word.'<sup>20</sup> The Report stresses that a common belief in the sanctifying power of the Spirit undergirds the conviction

in both churches that visible unity is achievable within time and not simply at the *eschaton*.<sup>21</sup>

The Report alludes to Christ's promise that the Holy Spirit would lead into 'all truth.'<sup>22</sup> It might, with advantage, have taken its exegesis of it further. Does the promise imply certainty in a propositional form, analogous to that once used in geometrical proofs, and hence applicable to the doctrinal formulae of the Church, or does it imply leading in the nature and forms of Christian discipleship, the 'Scripture way of salvation' as Wesley called it? A fuller exegesis of Ephesians 4.13 - 16, part of the key text for the Report, would have been helpful. This might have led the Commission to emphasise, as did James Rigg in 1878, that the better translation of *aletheuontes* is as 'doing the truth in love' rather than just 'speaking' (though speaking can certainly be included within it).<sup>23</sup> They might also have emphasised more the pilgrim nature of the Church's search for both truth and sanctification. The Church is constantly being built up in truth. Its perfection, as both Benjamin Gregory and Vatican II emphasised, is yet to come.<sup>24</sup> Within the 'convergence' in understanding and love between Methodism and the Roman Catholic Church, there is surely room for a joint understanding of how the Spirit has been authentically, albeit differently, at work in both communities. The Report gladly acknowledges that unity and diversity belong alike and inseparably to the divine plan.<sup>25</sup> Maybe the next task for the Commission is to explore the way in which the Spirit can be at work both through the continuity in episcopacy cherished by the Roman Church and in the 'extraordinary' mission and ministries of the Methodist Revival. Upon an eventually wholehearted mutual recognition of the authentic work of the Spirit in each other's life depends the oft expressed hope for the goal of full communion in life. At root, the question is pneumatological, relating especially to the way in which we recognise the work of the Spirit. Does the Spirit, as Benjamin Gregory alleged in his studies of the early chapters of Acts, have the sovereignty to work through varying structures of Church and ministry? Was it not part of the work of the apostles and their successors to recognise the work of the Spirit and to bring the varying, but Spirit filled communities 'into connexion'?<sup>26</sup> A use of the riches of the nineteenth century Wesleyan tradition in ecclesiology would have allowed the Methodist team to pose a challenge to the Roman Catholics on this.

The question of the purpose of teaching, and especially of solemn doctrinal definition, needs to be addressed. The Christological and trinitarian definitions of the early Councils were concerned with the exclusion of error that definitely seemed to threaten the appropriation of salvation. Thus, the definition of the two natures was asserted because 'what is not assumed is not saved.' Trinitarian theology undergirds and safeguards the whole basis of the distinctively Christian understanding of God and his action in the

world, upon individuals and upon his Church. Wesley, as Geoffrey Wainwright has shown elsewhere, took these doctrinal achievements as axiomatic and concentrated on teaching concerning the way to entire sanctification.<sup>27</sup>

In its conclusion, the Report notes that 'there is not complete agreement on what constitute the essential components of the Gospel.'<sup>28</sup> Methodists can perhaps query, both on grounds of lack of clear Scriptural authority and necessity in the scheme of salvation, some of the later, more precise teaching of the Catholic Church in relation to aspects of the eucharist and the person of the Virgin Mary. Is it essential for a Christian to believe all the Tridentine teaching about the mass provided he or she faithfully and regularly attends at the table of the Lord? Is it essential to believe in the Marian dogmas of 1854 and 1950 provided the Christian interiorises and practises the submission to the divine will of which Mary is such an exemplar?<sup>29</sup> Does the Catholic Church need to contextualise its Marian definitions, recognising that they were defined at times when the Church was responding to immense devotional pressures in a pre-ecumenical age and failing to take full account, at least in the case of the 'Immaculate Conception,' of dependence upon purely Latin western concepts, in this case of 'original sin'? The question of the 'exact circumstances' under which doctrinal definition becomes necessary needs more attention than it has yet been given in this dialogue.<sup>30</sup>

The Report states that 'the heart of the Gospel and the core of faith is the love of God revealed in redemption.' Thus, 'all our credal statements must derive from faith in Christ who is our salvation and the foundation of our faith.' It accepts that, for both Catholics and Methodists, 'there is an order among the doctrines of the faith based upon their relationship to the core of faith'. It then mentions the teaching of Wesley on an 'analogy of faith' or 'a grand scheme of doctrine' and of Vatican II on the 'hierarchy of truths.'<sup>31</sup> It could with advantage have taken this exploration further. Wesley's distinction was more narrowly related to the truths absolutely necessary for salvation, truths not being strictly so necessary being relegated to the status of 'opinions,' albeit that Wesley regarded some 'opinions' as better founded than others! Catholics, by contrast, regard all truths within the hierarchy of truths, however secondary, as requiring to be believed. The question naturally arises as to whether Catholics create burdens by requiring more than is strictly necessary (Acts 15). Perhaps there is a mediating position to be explored in which both churches might accept that certain teachings of both churches, while not absolutely essential to all, ought to be received with respect for the value that they have had within the partner church in promoting holiness and devotion. Something of the sort was implied by the Pope in his homily commending the recent 'Joint



Declaration' of Catholics and Lutherans on justification which he said ought now to be received.<sup>32</sup> The implication is that both churches should assimilate the spiritually fruitful parts of each others' emphases.

The Report deals with an important, and ecumenically somewhat neglected theme when it deals with the 'means of grace.'<sup>33</sup> It is clear the different Christian communities live with very divergent understandings of the priority and importance of the various means of grace. For all, the eucharist is seen as important because it is mandated by the Lord himself. In the 'catholic traditions,' (including here the Orthodox and 'high' Anglicans) it is seen not merely as the most important but the most frequently to be used 'means of grace.' For many Protestant Christians, reception of the eucharist, though often seen as a spiritual 'high point,' is less frequent and the ordinary diet of the means of grace concentrates more on non-eucharistic public worship, bible reading and personal prayer.<sup>34</sup>

An interesting matter for further consideration is the relationship between the eucharist and the Church. A previous report referred to the eucharist as the 'place where the pattern of life appropriate to Christians is shown forth.'<sup>35</sup> The present report adduces two further *theologoumena*. Firstly, it is said that 'Set at the heart of the Christian liturgy and piety, the Eucharist as communion with Christ substantiates the doctrine of the Church as communion.' Secondly, that 'the Lord's Supper is a privileged occasion for the Church to be realised as the Body of Christ.'<sup>36</sup>

There is, I believe, an ecclesiological paradox to be held in tension. Certainly, the Church is constantly renewed by the sacramental *anamnesis* of the paschal event upon which it is founded. However, the activity of the Spirit in the Church goes beyond the 'realisation of the sign' (to use Charles Wesley's expression).<sup>37</sup> The Spirit also maintains the Church through his presence in the other means of grace and by his constant abiding within the fellowship, local and universal. This last point is particularly substantiated by the Wesleyan experience of fellowship, which underlay Rigg's claim that the Wesleyan revival was as much a revival of primitive church life as of primitive doctrine.<sup>38</sup>

The Report explains clearly Roman Catholic teaching on the special position of the seven sacraments of the new Covenant, contrasting it with the teaching on 'sacramentals.'<sup>39</sup> The sacraments are seen as guaranteed means of grace, always honoured by God.<sup>40</sup> The Wesleyan distinction between the 'instituted means of grace' and the 'prudential means' is also explained: the Wesleyan distinction being between the former as clearly commended in Scripture and the latter as means developed late in the Church, and found fruitful as such, but lacking the clear authority of Scripture *per se*.<sup>41</sup>

Slightly surprising are the questions asked by both partners of each other. First, Catholics ask Methodists 'how and by what means they verify that a particular means is a trustworthy channel of God's grace?' The answer surely lies in the faithfulness of God to his promises, a faithfulness that can be held to be directly implied in the case of the 'instituted means of grace' with their directly scriptural warrant and which can be held to be implied in the case of such 'prudential' means as are tried and tested in the experience of the Church, and are seen to issue in an increase of holiness. Further, in many cases, they may be held to be logical adaptations of means prescribed in Scripture. The nineteenth century Wesleyan ecclesiologists held that, though the class meeting could not be held to be literally prescribed in Scripture, it nevertheless fulfilled a need recurrently felt (and indeed recurrently occurring) throughout the history of the Church. It was naturally consistent with forms of fellowship and mutual support described in the New Testament.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, the Methodist question is curious, 'whether the idea of the guaranteed quality of a sacrament takes full account of the weakness, limitations and sinfulness of the human beings called to be agents of God's grace?'<sup>43</sup> Presumably again, the answer lies in the abiding faithfulness of God, who always honours the means of grace given by himself, however deficient a presiding minister or celebrant might be. The Christian who receives the sacraments or the other 'instituted means of grace' in faith knows that they always contain the promise and self-gift of Christ. This, surely is biblical and Wesleyan teaching. Concerning prayer, we read 'ask and you will receive, knock and the door will be opened to you.'<sup>44</sup> Of Scripture, we read in one of Wesley's greatest hymns,

All who read or hear are blessed,  
If Thy plain commands we do'<sup>45</sup>

which clearly states that faithful and fruitful reception of those things that we are commanded to 'do,' whether sacramental or in practical service, necessarily receive God's blessing. It is precisely on account of such faithfulness that Wesley can sing,

I set to my seal that Jesus is true.<sup>46</sup>

Further study of the faithfulness of God to his call and promise might help Catholics and Methodists further forward. The statement that 'all the means of grace ... are channels of God's faithfulness to his promise' makes the succeeding quibbling, on both sides, rather curious.

Despite the above criticisms, one must affirm that there is much in this report that will repay prayerful consideration and reflection. In general, it is richly and tightly argued. It constantly refers back to the points of convergence already established in the earlier stages of the dialogue and builds

on them. This is particularly effectively done in the section on ordained ministry. The report stresses the 'connectional nature' of the ministry in both churches, the role of presbyters and bishops as ministers of *koinonia*.<sup>47</sup> It could, with advantage, have used Gregory's striking phrase 'keystones in the arch of unity'.<sup>48</sup> It stresses the corporate, covenantal nature of the ordained ministries. Through ordination, ministers enter into a 'covenantal' relationship with the Church and with each other.<sup>49</sup> The 'representative' nature of ministry is stressed as a point of convergence. 'Increasingly, both Catholics and Methodists understand the ordained minister to represent both Christ and the Christian community.'<sup>50</sup> The question of the sacramental nature of ordination remains, however, contentious. One wonders whether this need remain so. The references to ordination as an 'apostolic practice' and to the doubly representative role of ministry offer grounds for hope.<sup>51</sup> Further points for consideration could emerge from recent research into the variety of practices of ordination and ministerial recognition in the early Church and from an examination of the possible convergence value of a nineteenth century Wesleyan emphasis upon the presbyterate as sharing in the pastoral ministry of the Great Shepherd.<sup>52</sup> Continued examination of this question would be a service to the entire Ecumenical Movement and not just to the specific cause of Catholic-Methodist reconciliation.<sup>53</sup>

In conclusion, the Report represents a further step along the path to greater mutual understanding. It is to be hoped the eighth dialogue will come up with some creative theology that may assist with the solution of the remaining problems that it identifies.

#### References

- 1 Published by the World Methodist Council and obtainable from WMC at P0 Box 518, Lake Junaluska, NC 28745, USA.
- 2 The six previous reports are now conveniently collected together in Meyer H and Vischer L, (eds) *Growth in Agreement*, Geneva, 1984, pp 307 - 388 and Gros J, Meyer H and Rusch W, *Growth in Agreement II*, New York, 2000, pp 583 - 646.
- 3 Part II of the report, paras 85ff, is specifically devoted to an account of the differing practices and the way they are understood. It contains 'challenges' from each side to the other.
- 4 Report, op cit, para 79.
- 5 *ibid*, p 1 (preface)
- 6 *ibid*, para 17.
- 7 *ibid*, para 36.

- 8 para 83. See also the citations from *The Gift of Authority*, referred to in para 33. For a full text of *The Gift of Authority*, see *One in Christ*, 1999, pp 243 - 266.
- 9 Report, para 83.
- 10 *ibid*, para 37.
- 11 *ibid*, paras 79, 80.
- 12 *ibid*, paras 13 - 15.
- 13 cited in Reardon M (ed), *Called to be One*, London, 1996, p 55.
- 14 Tillard J-M, *L'Église Locale*, Paris, 1995, pp 222, 314ff.
- 15 Gregory B, *Holy Catholic Church*, 1873, p 103.
- 16 Report, paras 74 - 80.
- 17 *ibid*, para 78, para 21.
- 18 *Methodist Hymn Book*, 1933, no 275, v 3.
- 19 Report, para 29.
- 20 *ibid*, para 32.
- 21 para 28. For a fuller treatment of this theme in the Methodist tradition, see Kissack R, *Church or No Church*, London, 1963, p 145. He argues that belief in the possibility of the visible unity of the Church is an ecclesiological consequence of the Methodist understanding of the doctrine of sanctification.
- 22 John 16.13. Report, para 29.
- 23 *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*, 1878, p 798.
- 24 Gregory, op cit, pp 195 - 212. Decree *Dei Verbum* of Vatican II, para 8, cited in Abbott W M (ed) *Documents of Vatican II*, 1966, p 116.
- 25 Report, para 14.
- 26 Gregory, op cit, pp 40 - 41, 49 - 50.
- 27 Wainwright G, *Methodists in Dialog*, Nashville, 1995, pp 231 - 236 and 261 - 276.
- 28 Report, para 118.
- 29 Some of the issues, with regard to Mary are discussed in Evans M, *Mary, Sign of Grace, Faith and Holiness*, London 1995, a document that came out of discussions in the British Catholic-Methodist Committee.
- 30 See eg. the essay by Kallistos Ware in Stacpoole A (ed), *Mary's Place in Christian Dialogue*, Slough, 1982, pp 169 - 181.
- 31 Report, para 23.
- 32 Bulletin of the Pontifical Commission for Christian Unity Information Service, 103, p 35
- 33 Report, paras 52 - 61.
- 34 See eg the points made in the British Methodist response to the *Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry* process of the World Council of Churches, in Thurian M (ed), *Churches Respond to BEM*, vol 2, Geneva, 1986, pp 222 - 224.

- 35 Gros et al, op cit, p 606.  
36 Report, para 26.  
37 cf *Hymns and Psalms*, 1983, no 602.  
38 Rigg J, *A Comparative View of Church Organisations*, London, 1897, p 207.  
39 Report, para 57.  
40 ibid, para 56.  
41 ibid, paras 57 - 61.  
42 Gregory, op cit, pp 217, for an extended historical justification that the class meeting fulfilled the need for fellowship commended in the New Testament.  
43 Report, para 61.  
44 Matthew 7.7.  
45 *Hymns and Psalms*, no 468.  
46 ibid, no 805.  
47 Report, paras 64, 67, 76.  
48 Gregory, op cit, p 103.  
49 Report, para 67.  
50 ibid, para 64.  
51 ibid, paras 60, 64.  
52 Paul Bradshaw's essay in Franklin R W (ed), *Anglican Orders - Essays on the Centenary of Apostolicae Curae, 1896 - 1996*, London, 1996, pp 75-86. Jackson T, *Christian Presbyters, their Offices, Duties and Rewards*, London, 1850.  
53 The Pope has identified this as one of the five crucial issues in dialogue between the 'reformation' churches and the Roman Catholic Church. *Ut Unum Sint*, para 79.

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