

Chapter 7

TOWARD THE COMMON EXPRESSION OF THE APOSTOLIC FAITH TODAY: INTRODUCTION TO A FAITH AND ORDER PROJECT

Günther Gassmann

Introduction

It is highly appropriate that this Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies integrate into its discussions on the identity and calling of the theological and spiritual heritage of Methodism the wider ecumenical search for rediscovering and expressing the common Christian identity and mission in this time of history. Indeed, no particular Christian tradition is any longer able to reflect, live, and act in isolation from the other ones. They are all called to transcend their own embodiment of the Christian faith by stretching out towards the universal dimension and significance of the Christian gospel encompassing all times, situations, and traditions. This universal dimension, in turn, becomes real and relevant in its concrete manifestations in specific cultural, socio-political and, I believe, also confessional/denominational contexts. There is thus a necessary interrelation between the particular and the universal, and this in more than a geographical sense.

This interrelation carries with it a great ecumenical potential. On the one hand, it can help to open up, enrich, and renew confessional traditions for the sake of their own identity and vitality, and it will at the same time contribute to their growing closer together on the way toward visible and effective forms of Christian unity. On the other hand, this interrelation can help to avoid a colorless "universal" or general Christianity which will be totally uninteresting to our contemporaries and which will have no chance of being taken seriously both in the intellectual debates and in the struggles and hopes of our time.

I am, therefore, grateful for the opportunity to introduce, together with my colleague Geoffrey Wainwright, a study project which offers ample

room for testing and implementing the interrelation just indicated. The study project certainly needs the contribution of insights and experiences merging from the Methodist tradition. And the broad, universal scope of the project offers a framework which may assist Methodists in rediscovering and redefining their particular calling and mission as part of the wider ecumenical community.

The Study Project

At its meeting in January 1982 in Lima, Peru, the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches (WCC) decided to launch a new study project under the title "Towards the Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith Today."¹ This title is not very precise. But even so it clearly indicates a new stage in the program of Faith and Order. After a period of thematic concentration on controversial issues, culminating in the adoption of the convergence document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* at that same meeting at Lima, Faith and Order was now going to deal with the broader, comprehensive dimensions of the Christian faith. This decision was very much welcomed by the 1983 Vancouver Assembly of the WCC,² the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the WCC,³ and many ecumenically concerned people and groups in the churches. Faith and Order is finally looking at the whole and not only at the parts—this seemed to be the impression undergirding these positive reactions.

By moving from the parts to the whole, however, one faces much more complex methodological problems than in dealing with narrower and limited issues. How can an international, interconfessional, intercultural theological community, which in itself carries all the potentials of mutual enrichment as well as conflict, cope with such a comprehensive theme which has been and still is interpreted in many different ways within Christianity? How can such a study process go beyond the limited circle of the Faith and Order Commission? And, most importantly, how can this process be shaped and oriented in such a way that there is realistic hope that the process itself and its results will contribute to the calling of the churches to common witness and confession in a divided world?

At the meeting of the Faith and Order Commission in Lima, such methodological and conceptual questions were already clarified to such a degree that the future course of the study on the apostolic faith seemed to be fairly obvious. The key element in this clarification was the decision to make the Creed of Nicea-Constantinople of 381 the starting point, focus, and goal of the study. On this basis three major elements and goals of the study were identified:

- (a) A common *recognition* of the apostolic faith “as expressed in the Ecumenical Symbol of that faith: the Nicene Creed”;
- (b) A common *explication* of the apostolic faith “in the contemporary situations of the churches” by way of explicating the Nicene Creed for today;
- (c) A common *confession* of the apostolic faith today on the basis of the Nicene Creed and its contemporary interpretation.⁴

The focus on the Nicene Creed was justified with the argument that it is the most widely accepted symbol of faith in both Western and Eastern Christianity, that it was in early church history an expression of the unity of the church, and that it has been received by many churches as an expression and summary of the fundamental articles of faith. These facts support the claim for the basic significance of this Creed for the ecumenical task of manifesting the unity of Christ's church.

However, the methodological and conceptual clarifications at Lima soon proved to be too optimistic and the ensuing study of the apostolic faith from 1984 until today has been constantly accompanied by a struggle with methodological questions. First of all, the strong focus on the Nicene Creed met with considerable reluctance and opposition from different sides. Because of their historical experience and theological conviction—the so-called “non-creedal churches”—or because of their historical, cultural, and social context—churches in the so-called third world—many churches have difficulties with fixed and authoritative formulas of faith in general and especially with those conceived in a distant period in the Mediterranean historical and cultural context. There was also the reminder that in many of the churches of the Christian West, the Apostles' Creed occupies a much more prominent role than the Nicene one. This led to serious doubts as to whether these experiences and convictions could be overcome simply by asking for a recognition of the Nicene Creed as a common ecumenical symbol and bond of unity. It was, therefore, soon decided to postpone work on this first element and goal—common recognition—of the Lima outline for the study.

Also the third element of the Lima outline, common confession of the apostolic faith today, soon proved anything but clear. It was obvious, and this was already affirmed at Lima, that the intention was not to formulate a new ecumenical creed. This was beyond the authority of the WCC and belonged properly only to a truly ecumenical council. Was the alternative the preparation of a document which could serve as a basis for common confession today? But how could such a document, given the unpredictable history in which we live, anticipate situations of challenge, crisis, and conflict which this common Christian witness and confession would call for? These and other questions are still with us.

The Standing Commission on Faith and Order responded in 1984 to this dilemma concerning the first and third element of the Lima outline by deciding to begin the study for focusing work on the second aspect of the outline, the common explication or interpretation of the apostolic faith for today.⁵ Here we seemed to be on firmer ground. In 1984 and 1985 three international consultations—in India, France, and Zaire—produced first draft interpretations of the three articles of the Nicene Creed.⁶ The steering group for this study revised the drafts and integrated them into one consistent document. The Plenary Commission on Faith and Order, at its meeting in 1985 at Stavanger, Norway, thoroughly discussed this document. Its criticism, comments and suggestions provided the basis for further revision. In 1986 and 1987 the steering group continued to work on the document by revising the existing text and adding new aspects. The study document “Confessing One Faith” is the sixth version of the text.⁷ It has become the longest Faith and Order text so far (one hundred pages). In August 1987 it was presented to the Standing Commission on Faith and Order for final comments. Since then, it has been made available as a study document to churches, commissions and groups, seminars and individuals. This should encourage and enable broader participation in the task of explicating the apostolic faith for today. There seems to be a wide interest in this work—“Confessing One Faith” had to be reprinted twice—and several churches and ecumenical bodies have already begun to participate.

In the course of developing “Confessing One Faith” over the last three years, certain methodological and conceptual modifications became necessary. The explications of the three articles of faith start from the formulations of the Nicene Creed—without prejudging the issue of the recognition of this Creed. The Creed is used as an important summary which can help us focus our attention on fundamental convictions of the Christian faith. Each formula of the Creed, however, is directly related in the text to respective sections of the biblical witness which are foundational to these later formulations. This is to indicate that only by linking the Creed to the biblical witness and by interrelating the biblical witness and the early creeds does the term “apostolic faith” take on clearer contours.

But “apostolic faith” is not a historical concept in the sense of just looking back to the roots; that would be rather un-apostolic. Accordingly, the interpretation of the affirmations of the Nicene Creed in the context of their biblical basis is related to specific theological, religious, and social problems and challenges of our time and world. How can the belief in a Trinitarian God be interpreted in relation to the challenges coming from other monotheistic religions? The Creed as well as Christian faith and spirituality have followed Jesus in addressing God as “Father,” but how can this be reinterpreted in a non-sexist way? What are the ethical consequen-

ces of the confession of God being the creator of all things, seen and unseen? How can we articulate the suffering and death of Jesus for us as a message of hope in a world full of suffering? What are the ecumenical convergences in relation to traditional controversial issues such as "filio-que" or Mariology? In what way is eschatological hope becoming relevant for the struggles of humanity in present world history?

These are only some of the issues which are part of the contemporary horizon within which the fundamentals of faith are interpreted. This attempt is made in order to indicate in what way the affirmations of an ancient Creed can be actualized in new times and situations. It is also, and primarily so, in order to suggest common theological perspectives for a joint Christian witness in our world when and where such a witness is called for. Thus, the affirmations of the Creed are interpreted within the comprehensive framework of God's saving purpose and action in history from its beginning to its fulfillment. It is understandable that an effort with such a wide scope cannot be summarized in a relatively short document like the *BEM* text.

The Ecumenical Significance of the Study Project

The work on the explication of the apostolic faith on the basis of the Nicene Creed has been highly interesting and stimulating for those who have been involved in the process so far. Diverse concerns and priorities of people could come together because the biblical and historical material is combined in an attempt to interpret fundamental affirmations of the faith in the horizon of contemporary problems and challenges. We can expect similar experiences when the text is discussed in the churches, even though we have to underline that it is still a study document which will be further revised. We hope that by then we will have received quite a number of reactions from groups and individuals which can be fed into the discussions of the Commission. Only after several years will a more mature text be published and officially sent to the churches for their study and reaction. But interesting and stimulating as it may be, what is the ecumenical purpose of this enterprise of explicating the apostolic faith?

The oscillating term "apostolic faith" refers in the first instance to the content of the faith and not only to the obedient and confident act of faith in continuity with the apostles. Both aspects of the faith are, of course, deeply and inseparably interrelated. But if the term "apostolic faith" puts the emphasis on the content of faith, then the point of reference for faith so qualified is the apostolic witness which is normative for all times and places. It has this authority because it is the witness of the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ. We receive this witness from witnesses empowered by the Holy Spirit: the disciples of Jesus; those whom the risen Christ sent

out into all the world; the members of the first congregations who were enabled by the Holy Spirit to put all their trust and hope into the risen Lord.

The apostolic witness of all these people, going far beyond the inner circle of the twelve, is transmitted to us in the New Testament which, in its way, received the witness of the people of God in the Old Testament. This comprehensive apostolic witness was further clarified beyond the first generation with the help of structures of thinking and terminologies of that time. Such clarification was necessary because of conflicts with sectarian and heretical movements and because of the need to develop short formularies of faith for worship services, especially for baptismal confessions of faith. Such clarification in the form of credal formulations was also required because of the necessity to arrive at some mutual understanding on the fundamental articles of faith as an expression of identity, and as a bond of unity for the Christian communities in view of the rapid expansion and diversification of Christianity. Thus, the credal formulations of this early period are still to a certain extent part of that foundational apostolic witness, even though we have to make a distinction between them and the normative biblical witness. Apostolic faith then is the personal, corporate, and missionary witness and confession of faith in commitment to and continuity with the basic apostolic witness in holy scripture and in the early creeds.⁸

Such a rough, preliminary description of "apostolic faith" includes *per definitionem* an ecumenical and catholic dimension. When we say "apostolic faith" we are looking beyond our confessions and Christian traditions, despite our conviction that this apostolic faith receives historical expression, continuity, and lived faith in these same confessions and traditions. But we have also to realize that the fullness of this faith cannot be wholly comprehended and expressed by any one of our confessions and traditions. Could then the apostolic faith which is both in and beyond our churches, be or become the deepest bond which unites us despite our differences and divisions?

This ecumenical dimension is also present in the fact that all major Christian traditions emphatically affirm their commitment to the apostolic faith, notwithstanding their differences concerning the authority and role of the early creeds. Thus, if the apostolic faith is regarded as the authoritative witness of the saving action of the Triune God in creation, redemption, and fulfillment, then the communion, unity, and mission of those who live this faith must also be expressed in the common confession of this same faith. It is obvious, therefore, that the common confession of the apostolic faith should be the basis and starting point as well as the goal of ecumenical endeavors. It has to be the goal, because despite our commitment to our

common roots, the Christian churches in their history have interpreted this apostolic faith in such diverse ways that they have become divided from each other.

This ecumenical dimension of the apostolic faith has been discovered rather late in ecumenical debate. In the early history of Faith and Order an attempt was made to introduce the early creeds as a bond of unity. This attempt was made under the influence of the Anglican Lambeth Quadrilateral, which made in its second point the acceptance of both the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds as a condition for reunion. This effort was, however, given up after the First World Conference on Faith and Order at Lausanne 1927 because of the different attitudes of the churches to creeds and confessions. Of course, basic elements of the apostolic faith have always been part of ecumenical discussion and statements, from the reflection on "Christ and the Church" at Lund 1952 (Third World Conference on Faith and Order) to "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry." But they were always, as I said in the beginning, the parts—and usually the traditionally controversial parts—and never the whole of the apostolic faith.

This wholeness of the faith came more directly into view when the WCC began to formulate the goal of the unity we seek to manifest. When the famous "formula of unity" of the 1961 WCC Assembly at New Delhi enumerated the basic conditions and expressions of unity, it mentioned in the first place communion in "holding the one apostolic faith." Since then all descriptions of unity include the confession of, or the agreement in, the one apostolic faith as one of the basic requirements of unity. In 1975 the WCC Assembly at Nairobi asked the churches "to undertake a common effort to receive, reappropriate, and confess together, as contemporary occasion requires, the Christian truth and faith, delivered through the Apostles and handed down through the centuries."⁹ This new emphasis on agreement in faith was taken up by the Faith and Order study on "Giving Account of the Hope that is in Us" (1971–1978)¹⁰ and by the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the WCC in its reflections on "Towards a Confession of the Common Faith" (1978–1980).¹¹ Two Faith and Order consultations in 1978 and 1979 struggled with the "filioque" controversy,¹² and two further consultations in 1981 on the occasion of the 1500th anniversary of the Creed of Nicea-Constantinople highlighted the ecumenical significance of this Creed.¹³ These and other developments reclaimed the ecumenical dimension of the apostolic faith and prepared the way for the decision at Lima 1982 to initiate the study process "Towards the Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith."

We have started this process, and we hope to broaden it beyond the limits of Faith and Order. There already seems to be a remarkable readiness and interest in many places to participate in this study. Just one example:

the Christian Council in Burma informed us that they have constituted a study group for this project. Also quite apart from this Faith and Order initiative we observe a number of projects in churches and worldwide Christian communions which point into similar directions. One possible explanation for this general tendency is the desire to reaffirm the foundations of Christian identity and communion in a world of increasing pluralism and religious choice. And with this goes the felt need to provide a deeper theological and spiritual basis for the faith and life of individual Christians and their churches. This is felt because they are more than ever before challenged to render their witness in words, deeds, and suffering by facing the complexities of our world, a world which has all the potentials of God's good creation which at the same time are being distorted in a way which threatens even the survival of humanity.

With this more general perspective we have not lost sight of the ecumenical dimension of the apostolic faith. On the contrary, it is exactly by turning again to our common apostolic roots in the perspective of our common mission that we are able to rediscover what we have in common, what unites us as Christians at the deepest level. It seems to be a favorable time for an ecumenical study on the apostolic faith even though we are also encountering here confessional differences and, perhaps even more, differences of theological positions and methodologies. This study has the potential of stimulating in churches and ecumenical bodies a reflection on the apostolic faith as an orientation for Christian life and witness today and at the same time the study can profit from the reflections that are already going on. It will then be the special responsibility and task of Faith and Order to bring together and formulate the insights of this shared process. At the end of this process there might hopefully come the moment when we will be able to say to and in the name of ecumenical Christianity: This is our common faith, founded on the witness of the apostles, reaffirmed, and reinterpreted for the church and the world at the end of the second millenium. This communion in the fundamentals of the faith is the deepest expression of the unity which already binds us together and which undergirds and inspires our unity in prayer, solidarity, and action. This communion provides us with the basis and the content for a common confession today wherever Christians are challenged to testify against the principalities and powers of this world and to incarnate God's love for those who cry out for life.

42. More, *Responsio*, p. 191.
 43. *Ibid.*, p. 193.
 44. Nowell, *Catechism*, ed. G. E. Corrie (Cambridge: Parker Society, 1853), p. 11.
 45. More, *Dialogue* (Campbell), p. 111.
 46. In R. H. Greenfield, "Such a Friend to the Pope," in *Pusey Rediscovered*, ed. P. Butler (London: SPCK, 1983), p. 174.
 47. ARCIC A I (16), in *Growth in Agreement*.
 48. Wyclif, *Opera Minora*, ed. J. Loserth (London: C.K. Paul, 1913), pp. 327:30ff.
 49. More, *Dialogue* (Campbell), pp. 157-8.
 50. *Ibid.*, pp. 132-3.
 51. More, *Responsio*, p. 626.
 52. *Ibid.*, p. 608.
 53. Lechmere, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
 54. Sebastian Castellio, *De Arte Dubitandi*, ed. E. F. Hirsch (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981), p. 3.
 55. Luther became progressively more disillusioned about the authority of Councils.
 56. Canon Law, 207.1.
 57. See the Introduction to the *Final Report of ARCIC I*.
 58. ARCIC A I (6).
 59. Canon Law, 207.1.
 60. Wyclif, *De Ecclesia*, ed. J. Loserth (London: Trübner, 1886), p. 112.
 61. Nowell, *Catechism*, p. 115, and see p.v on its status.
 62. Article 34, and cf. an important discussion of Melancthon, CR 4362.
 63. ARCIC A I, E1.3.
 64. Anselm, *De Casu Diaboli*, in *Opera Omnia*, ed. F.S. Schmitt (Rome/Edinburgh: Seccovii, 1938), I. 235 ff., Chapters II-III.
 65. More, *Dialogue* (Campbell), p. 111; Rogers, *Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles*, p. 198.
 66. Rogers, *Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles*, p. 210-11.
 67. *Ibid.*, p. 201.
 68. Nowell, *Catechism*, p. 117.
 69. *Corpus Reformatorum* 24, col. 401, cf. 406 and 409.
 70. Wyclif, *Opera Minora*, p. 314.12-3.
 71. More, *Responsio*, p. 206.17-9.
 72. Luther, "Assembly," *Luther's Works*, 39:308.
 73. *Ibid.*, pp. 306-7.
 74. Rogers, *Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles*, p. 191.
 75. *Ibid.*, p. 192.
 76. *Ibid.*, p. 190.
 77. H. Chadwick, General Synod of the Church of England, *Report of Proceedings* (February, 1985), 16:I, p. 75.
 78. *Ibid.*
 79. ARCIC A I, E1.3.
 80. Chadwick, *loc. cit.*
 81. ARCIC A I, E1.3.
 82. Chadwick, *loc. cit.*

Chapter 7: Toward the Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith Today

1. *Towards Visible Unity II*, ed. by Michael Kinnamon, Faith and Order Paper No. 113, (Geneva: WCC, 1982), p. 28ff.
2. *Gathered for Life*, Vancouver 1983, ed. by David Gill (Geneva: WCC, 1983), p. 48f. and 253.

3. *The Ecumenical Review* 35/2 (1983), p. 211.
4. *Towards Visible Unity II*, pp. 32–44.
5. *Minutes of the Meeting of the Standing Commission 1984*, Faith and Order Paper No. 121 (Geneva: WCC, 1984), p. 11–21.
6. *One God, One Lord, One Spirit*, ed. by H.-G. Link, Faith and Order Paper No. 139 (Geneva: WCC, 1988).
7. Faith and Order Paper No. 140 (Geneva: WCC, 1987).
8. Cf. *Confessing One Faith*, p. 3.
9. *Breaking Barriers*, ed. by David M. Paton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), p. 66.
10. *Sharing In One Hope*. Bangalore 1978, Faith and Order Paper No. 92 (Geneva: WCC, 1978), pp. 1–11.
11. Faith and Order Paper No. 100 (Geneva: WCC, 1980).
12. *Spirit of God—Spirit of Christ*, Faith and Order Paper No. 103 (Geneva: WCC, 1981), pp. 3–18.
13. “*The Ecumenical Importance of the Nicene Creed*”, in: *Apostolic Faith Today*. A Handbook for Study, ed. by H.-G. Link, Faith and Order Paper No. 124, (Geneva: WCC, 1984), p. 245ff.

Chapter 8: Methodism and the Apostolic Faith

1. Albert C. Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 492–99. *Works*, X:80–86.
2. *Works*, X:86–128. See also “Popery Calmly Considered,” *ibid.*, 140–58.
3. *Works*, V:492–504; *Sermons*, 2:81–95.
4. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1987.
5. *Ibid.*, Introduction paragraph 11.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, paragraph 8.
8. *Ibid.*, paragraphs 11–12.
9. *Ibid.*, paragraph 11.
10. *Ibid.*, paragraph 4.
11. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982).
12. “Confessing One Faith,” I/18.
13. For example, *ibid.*, I/52; II/93.
14. *Ibid.*, III/180 and 188.
15. See the letter of July 3, 1756, to James Clark, *Letters* (Telford), III:182.
16. Since the writing of this chapter, the 1988 *Discipline* of the United Methodist Church now makes the welcome—and needed—stipulation that ordinations take place in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (paragraph 432), and the same is implied for baptism by the reference in paragraph 1214.3 to “The General Services of the Church.”
17. “Confessing One Faith,” Introduction, 11.
18. “Confessing One Faith,” Introduction, 4; cf. 6.
19. *Ibid.*, III/191.
20. *Ibid.*, III/213.
21. *Ibid.*, Introduction, 13.
22. From “A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists,” in *Works*, VIII:249; cf. the postscript to the letter of July 3, 1756, cited above in note 15 (p. 183).
23. From “The Character of a Methodist,” in *Works*, VIII:340.
24. *Works*, X:80–6.
25. *Ibid.*, paragraph 6.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*, paragraph 7.