

Group 6: Contemporary Methodist Theology and Doctrinal Consensus

Consensus and Integrity

Attempts in the past to reach agreement on creedal statements have usually begun with considerations about their meaning. The original, literal texts, the cultural and historical framework in which they arose and their transmission in tradition have all been considered serious points at issue in arriving at consensus. It is not surprising that progress has been slow for, central as such considerations may be (and they are), the problem about whether we can reach consensus with integrity has expanded beyond these alone.

It is rarely if ever possible to return to earlier intellectual and conceptual positions and the problem today is whether any study of the original and literal meaning of the Nicene Constantinopolitan Creed can provide for twentieth century Christians sufficient ground on which to come to consensus not only with one another but to consensus with our perception of everything that is. Is it possible for us to take with full seriousness both the conceptual framework of the fourth century and the staggering explosion in human knowledge we have experienced in our own era, the rich plurality in thought and belief now fully acknowledged and the attendant danger of regarding any proposition as final and inerrant? Can consensus, not only doctrinal but intellectual - our total awareness of the way things are and our growing acknowledgement of the limitations of certainty - be achieved without losing integrity? Some Methodist themes may help us to proceed, albeit cautiously.

The World Council of Churches study APOSTOLIC FAITH TODAY urges the significance of the Creed, 'implying as it does temporal as well as geographical universality.' (APT #4 p220) The first issue then is what we understand by universality or, in Methodist usage, universalism. Against the Calvinists Wesley vigorously rejected the notion of predestination and proclaimed the universal love of God that excluded no one.<sup>2</sup> (XIV 352) All true believers are termed elect. This election is not according to human judgement but within the eternity of God, who calls 'the things that are not yet as though they were now subsisting.....(so God calleth true believers elect from the foundation of the world although they were not actually elect, or believers, till many ages after in their several generations.....when they were made sons of God by faith.' (XIV 323) In other words Wesley too proclaimed a temporal universality. This has few problems for us in respect to the past but in attempting to reach doctrinal consensus about present or future boundaries of faith how universal is universal?

Another aspect of universalism may illustrate the issue. For many years the Roman Catholic dictum EXTRA ECCLESIAM NULLA SALUS in effect excluded from the saving grace of God in their view, all who were not Roman Catholics. Some evangelical groups still maintain similarly rigid limits.<sup>3</sup> But the second Vatican Council recognised other ecclesial bodies as true, though separated parts of the Church of Christ<sup>4</sup> and later Roman Catholic theology can even speak of devout members of another faith as partial or unconscious Christians, members of the latent if not the manifest church.<sup>5</sup> The World Council of Churches project on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths goes further in acknowledging in non-Christian religions, too, the unmistakable evidence of the presence of God. The point here is that we can now see how mistaken were opinions in the past that tried to confine the operation of God's grace within the limits of human understanding. If the future as well as the past dimension of universalism is to be taken seriously how are we to reach doctrinal consensus while still remaining open to developments that at the moment we see only dimly if at all? Where will the 'extensifying (broadening)' process take us?

Methodists must also remember the consistent warning of Wesley against attaching too much importance to 'right opinion.' 'Opinion is not religion ..... Persons may be quite right in their opinion, and yet have no religion at all; and, on the other hand, persons may be truly religious who hold many wrong opinions.' True religion, to Wesley, was the 'restoration not only to the favour but also to the image of God', and the evidence of this in holy living (IX 123). This restored state is brought about not by assenting to any opinion or proposition but by the operation of prevenient, saving and sanctifying grace in the human heart and the individual's response of faith.

Recognition of the continuing central place of the Nicene Creed must be sought not in any literal interpretation that binds us irrevocably to past (or even present) understanding, but in ascribing to it the value of a symbol, an Ecumenical Symbol (APT #a p228). 'They (symbols) speak to an existentially and find an echo in the inarticulate depths of his psyche..... symbols transform the horizons of man's life, integrate his perception of reality, alter his scale of values, reorient his loyalties, attachments and aspirations in a manner far exceeding the powers of abstract conceptual thought.' 'In other words symbols speak to us aesthetically, non-conceptually, through the imagination, the emotions, the whole being, as so much religious language must speak.

If viewed in this way as symbol, the creed may readily be recognised as limited and inadequate; it fails to express the whole of faith, we want to add clauses to it; it is one sided and selective in respect of the Biblical revelation, saying nothing for example about the earthly ministry of Jesus; it has shifted from God known to us through His works to emphasis on the Divine Nature, from the Economic to the Immanent Trinity. But as symbol rather than description this is acceptable for symbols cannot be definitive. If the creed is viewed as Symbol we may also be content that the one faith may be lived and expressed in a great diversity of ways. Doctrinal consensus becomes much more possible but also less pressing. May we go even further and begin to assert a complete universalism, one God as God of all people in the one world, an absolute and thorough going monotheism that conceives of religious as well as doctrinal pluralism being within the will of God? Doctrines of revelation, natural theology and, in Wesleyan thought, Prevenient Grace may fruitfully be explored along these lines. Those in the Methodist tradition will also be encouraged by Wesley's rejection of bigotry.

What if I were to see a Papist, an Arian, a Socinian casting out devils? If I did I could not forbid even him without convicting myself of bigotry.....but do not stop here. In every instance of this kind acknowledge the finger of God.....rejoice in His work and praise His name with thanksgiving. And he warned, "Think not the bigotry of another is any excuse for your own." So he was willing and able to see, even in a "Jew, a Deist or a Turk" the possibility of the work of God. (VIII 196ff)

Such developments lie in the future and go far beyond our present brief but they are not irrelevant. Wesley was a pragmatist. As Outler puts it he was not an original but "a creative theologian practically involved in the application of his doctrine to the renewal of the Church." In this application he was prepared to be innovative and to take risks; but only so long as he believed that it was indeed toward the renewal of the church. So we return to the question above about what is meant by the church and the conclusion that considerations of meaning are inescapable.

Meaning matters even when we are thinking symbolically for a symbol retains its value only so long as it bears enough of the same meaning for all. The letters ph are symbols for a certain sound in English but Greek requires a different symbol, φ. A national anthem or flag will be symbolic of the homeland only to nationals of that country and will not evoke the same response in other people. The creed viewed as ecumenical symbol provides a way to consensus that is not limited to verbal definitions, but if openness is not to become the emptiness of sheer relativity explication must also still be attempted. In this process of explication the crucial question for Christians is the Christological one in the second article of the Creed. Who is Jesus Christ for us today? What is the irreducible minimum when we claim that Jesus is Lord or Christ is unique? the traditional definitive of Nicea and Chalcedon raise conceptual as well as linguistic problems and the hermeneutical endeavours of the church have been only partially successful.

In the light of Darwin and the genetic code, in the light of developmental psychology and Freud, in the light of modern understanding of person and self as the physical and psychological product of long and complex processes which include evolution, heredity, the personal and social environment and free will, how are we to 'place' human and divine in the Christ of the Creeds? Metaphysical speculations which attempt to say what it would mean for God to become man have this century largely given way to a number of attempts that begin from 'below', from the human situation.<sup>5</sup> And so the question becomes - how can we discuss God's revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ? The uniqueness of Jesus in degree or kind has been a difficulty for all these attempts (some say a fatal flaw) and new issues keep arising. From Lima, for example, has come the anxiety of some Christian feminists that the Incarnation may be seen as 'enmalemment' and not enfleshment and this is held to affect their understanding of their redemption. (APT #3 p229)

In all this discussion theological and intellectual integrity is important. God is God of truth as well as love and if our talk about God matters at all it matters supremely. What then of consensus? Here we are driven back to the nature of religious language and all our attempts to express the inexpressible. Because we are finite our understanding of God and His revelation is necessarily partial and imperfect. We will always need to recognise the mystery present in any talk of God - what we must not do is to retreat into mystery as a way out of painful or difficult questions. A certain amount of doctrinal diversity is an acceptable (and perhaps essential) part of our theological quest and we should not fear it. Ian Ramsey put it succinctly, "Doctrines are not photographs of God

delivered unambiguously through the conciliar post-bag; they are essays in language, man's (sic) endeavours to grapple as consistently and reliably as possible with a mystery about which he cannot be silent. They are rules for significant stuttering.<sup>9</sup>

The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed has stood since the fourth century as a symbol of our faith in a transcendent reality which cannot be defined in propositions. The rich diversity of apprehensions and perceptions evoked by this Symbol reflects the inexhaustible riches of God. As we share our experiences in dialogue we are called to openness, to lack of bigotry, to Wesley's catholic Spirit. But integrity demands that our perceptions remain true to what the creed symbolises. The church's task is the reformation and restoration of the image of God in the world; it is mission to individuals and structures. But the mission of the church is also to herself, constantly to re-form and restore in her own life and worship the image of God she seeks to present to the world.

Faithfulness is a pre-requisite of mission. So our attempts at explication, our significant stutterings must continue aiming not only at doctrinal consensus but faithfulness, faithfulness to the revelation still transmitted through the creed as ecumenical symbol and faithfulness to the complex realities of the late twentieth century world to which we mission. Only consensus with this kind of integrity will enable the creed to continue to speak in the future as powerfully as it has in the past.

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- 1 REFERENCES are from HANS-GEORG LINK (Ed) APOSTOLIC FAITH TODAY (APT), World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1985
  - 2 REFERENCES are from WORKS OF JOHN WESLEY, Conference Office, City Road, London, 1812 Edition
  - 3 STATEMENTS from the COUNCIL OF FLORENCE 1438-45 and the PROTESTANT CONGRESS ON WORLD MISSION meeting in Chicago, 1960 in John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite (Eds) CHRISTIANITY AND OTHER RELIGIONS, Fount, p178
  - 4 Second Vatican Council THE CONSTITUTION ON THE CHURCH, DLT, 1965, p90
  - 5 eg. Hans Kung in JOSEPH MEUNER (Ed) Christian Revelation and World Religions Burns and Oats, 1967, p52
  - 6 Avery Dulles SJ, MODELS OF THE CHURCH, Gill and Macmillan, 1974, p18
  - 7 Albert Outler (Ed) JOHN WESLEY, OUP, 1964, p119
  - 8 eg. see D.M. Baillie, GOD WAS IN CHRIST, Faber and Faber; John Robinson THE HUMAN FACE OF GOD; G.W.H. Lampe, GOD AS SPIRIT, OUP
  - 9 Ian Ramsey, WORDS ABOUT GOD, SCM, 1971, p219.
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