WHICH COMES FIRST, BELIEFS OR THE MESSAGE?

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Notice, please, the precise formulation of my question: which comes first, beliefs or the message? I could, of course, have formulated a question: which comes first, the Gospel or faith? Only then the answer would have been too simple. As good Protestants, we know that it is the Gospel which invites and creates faith. But in fact the matter is a little more complex. For the *fides qua creditur*, the “faith by which one believes,” inevitably finds expression in the *fides quae creditur*, “the faith which is believed”; the attitude and act of faith calls for statement of its content, which are “beliefs.” And then “beliefs” affect the “message,” which is the concrete form taken by “the Gospel” on any particular occasion of its proclamation. The question can then be put in ecclesiological terms, as it has been in controversial and ecumenical theology: Does the Gospel carry the Church, or does the Church carry the Gospel? Protestants tend to take the first option, Catholics the second.

Peter Brunner, the great Lutheran dogmatician of the mid twentieth century, wrote thus in a review of Karl Rahner’s *Kirche und Sakramente* (1960):

The chief difference between the Protestant doctrine and Rahner’s conception may perhaps be indicated by the following question: Is the church the subject which bears the word of God and the sacraments, or is the church rather borne by them? Of course, Protestant doctrine knows the church also as the bearer of word and sacrament. But the church is such, only because and insofar as she herself has her existence through the word of God and the sacraments instituted by Christ. Significant in many respects is the way in which Rahner can pass directly from the Christ-event to the church that Christ founded, the church clearly being thought of as existing immediately--and only then, from the standpoint of this existing church, does he catch sight of the sacraments.... By contrast, Protestant theology will pinpoint the fact that the church which Christ willed to be the people of God of the last days becomes a historically tangible reality only when the chosen witnesses of the Risen One comply with the charge of preaching given them by Christ, and when the sacraments instituted by Christ are administered to those who come to faith in the gospel. Must not therefore the relation between church and gospel, and accordingly the relation between church and sacraments, basically be seen as the exact reverse of Rahner’s view of the matter?

To Brunner the question might be put: Were not the apostles already “church” when they began to preach? But he might reply that, at least for all subsequent generations, the apostolic preaching of the gospel -- deposited in the New Testament writings -- precedes the current church as creating its faith and governing its message.

In any case, my immediate purpose -- in the situation of a divided Christendom -- is to argue for the indispensability of doctrinal dialogue among the churches for the sake of the mission of the Church. I will take my examples from three international dialogues; [1] the continuing dialogue between the World Methodist Council (WMC) and the Roman Catholic Church (RCC); [2] the dialogue of the 1980s between the WMC and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC); [3] the 1998-99 Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ) produced and signed by the RCC and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), with which both the WMC and WARC may in some way become associated. The ecclesiological question is
intrinsic to the questions of “Gospel” and “faith,” or “beliefs” and “message,” and vice versa — because the question of ecclesial unity is intrinsic to them all.

I. METHODISTS AND ROMAN CATHOLICS

Repeatedly, the Joint Commission between the WMC and the RCC has declared the ecclesial goal of the dialogue to be “full communion in faith, mission and sacramental life.” Let me unpack that.

For full communion, agreement in faith (fides qua creditur) and in the faith (fides quae creditur) is necessary: “Can two walk together except they be agreed?” (Amos 3:3). That means agreeing on (or about) the Gospel, in (or by virtue of) which they find themselves agreed. That internal agreement between the two partners is necessary to their outward-facing mission, and for two reasons: first, because it must be recognizably a single Gospel that they preach (in such a way that any variety in the formulation of the message neither compromises “the whole Gospel” nor presents “another gospel”); and second, because unity or reconciliation belongs to the very substance of the Gospel which those who receive it are charged to carry further in mission to the world (John 17:20-23; 2 Cor. 5:17-6:1). Moreover, unity in faith makes possible communion in sacramental life, and the practice of a common mission requires such sacramental communion; while, in the other direction, communion in sacramental life strengthens both agreement in faith and cooperation in mission. Confident in a common baptism and a common eucharist, the evangelizers can invite converts into a visibly united fellowship with no “separate tables.”

If that is the goal, how are we to get there? As between Methodists and Roman Catholics, I consider that there are still lessons and encouragement to be drawn from John Wesley’s “Letter to a Roman Catholic” and his sermon on “Catholic Spirit.” Even if the immediate occasion of those two writings was to avoid a repetition of the Cork riots of 1749 (itself no bad thing), they retain a much larger potential in happier circumstances. Albert Outler deserves credit for the propagation not only of the Sermon but also of the Letter as “an olive branch to the Romans” through his widely used anthology, John Wesley (1964). Some 215 years after Wesley’s original Letter, Cardinal Bea was able to respond to it favorably, and the Irish Jesuit Michael Hurley included Bea’s text in his monographic edition of John Wesley’s Letter to a Roman Catholic. The Letter and the Sermon have inspired and guided the WMC/RCC dialogue since its inception in 1967.

Wesley could not in his day envisage “an entire external union” but his components for a “union in affection” retain their validity as a stage on the way to a more comprehensive goal. In setting out “the faith of a true Protestant” Wesley offered an expanded version of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, drawing out its implications christologically (the Chalcedonian “one person” in “two natures”), soteriologically (the munus triplex of Christ as prophet, priest, and king), and pneumatologically (the Holy Spirit as “not only perfectly holy in himself, but the immediate cause of all holiness in us”). The WMC/RCC dialogue has affirmed the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed as our common faith (Singapore Report [1991], The Apostolic Tradition, 38) as well as the other implications and has placed its entire work firmly under the sign of the Trinity. In his creedal statement Wesley also affirmed Mary’s perpetual virginity; the WMC/RCC dialogue has not yet tackled this and other topics of Marian doctrine, which of course raise questions concerning the teaching office in the RCC. The ecclesiological clauses in Wesley’s Letter run thus: “I believe that Christ and his Apostles gathered unto himself a church to which he has continually added such as shall be saved; that this catholic (that is, universal) Church, extending to all nations and all ages, is holy in all its members, who have fellowship with
God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost; that they have fellowship with the holy angels who constantly minister to these heirs of salvation, and with all the living members of Christ on earth, as well as all who are departed [this life] in his faith and fear." It is "the Church" -- perhaps not so much its nature as its concrete location -- which has emerged, and remains, as the principal matter requiring exploration in the dialogue. Is there anything symptomatic in the fact that Wesley, in his paraphrase of the creed, does not use the word baptism when declaring that "God forgives all the sins of them that truly repent and unfeignedly believe his holy gospel"? (Nor does Wesley mention the eucharist in his reference to "fellowship" with the Trinity and with the living and departed; but neither does the Creed itself.)

In the Letter, Wesley concludes his creedal statement thus: "Now, is there anything wrong in this? Is there any one point which you do not believe as well as we? But you think that we ought to believe more? We will not enter into the dispute. Only let me ask: If a man believe thus much and practices accordingly, can any one possibly persuade you to think that such a man shall perish everlastingly?" With the "more," Wesley hints at those extra matters in which he elsewhere considers Roman Catholics to be "volunteers in faith, believing more than God has revealed." In that same place (Sermon 106, "On Faith"), Wesley goes on to say: "It cannot be denied that they [Roman Catholics] believe all which God has revealed. In this we rejoice on their behalf: we are glad that none of those new articles which were added at the Council of Trent to 'the faith once delivered to the saints' does so materially contradict any of the ancient articles as to render them of no effect." That raises the question of whether a "surplus" or a "deficit" of items can so disfigure the general pattern (Gestalt) of "the faith" as to render it unrecognizable as a response to "the Gospel" and thus lead to a distortion of "the message" as preached to others. Vatican II's decree on ecumenism famously instructed Catholic theologians engaged in ecumenical dialogue with "separated brethren" to "remember that in Catholic doctrine there exists an order or 'hierarchy' of truths, since they vary in their relation to the foundation of the Christian faith. Thus the way will be opened whereby this kind of 'fraternal rivalry' will incite all to a deeper realization and a clearer expression of the unfathomable riches of Christ" (11). As dialogue partners continue "searching together into the divine mysteries" (ibid.), attention must be given to keeping step between the progress in doctrinal agreement (cf. "Faith" in Rio de Janeiro Report [1996], The Word of Life, 27-72, 112-116) and the possibilities of common witness (cf. "Mission," ibid., 73-93, 123-125) and liturgical fellowship (cf. "Sacramental Life," ibid., 94-107, 117-122).

METHODISTS AND REFORMED

After only two sessions in 1985 and 1987, the dialogue between WMC and the WARC was able to produce an agreed statement, Together in God's Grace. This was a strange dialogue, insofar as Methodists and Reformed had already entered together into church unions (Canada 1925; South India 1947 and North India 1971, where Anglicans were included, too; Zambia 1965; Australia 1977; Belgium 1969, 1978). Were they wrong to have done so at the time, or had the unions later proved unsuccessful? If neither of those, why did churches of the two families remain apart elsewhere? Or had different "models of unity" taken over the ecumenical scene?

Our concern here is solely the doctrinal. It will be recalled that in his ferocious sermon of 1739-40 on "Free Grace" (which was never included among his "standard sermons"), Wesley berated predestinationism as "a direct and manifest tendency to overthrow the whole Christian Revelation." Yet at the Annual Conference of 1745 Wesley declared that Methodists might properly "come to the very edge of Calvinism, (1) in ascribing all good to the free grace of God,
(2) in denying all natural free-will and all power antecedent to grace, and (3) in excluding all merit from man, even for what he has or does by the grace of God.” Writing to John Newton in 1765, Wesley admitted that, at the time of his breaking off evangelistic collaboration with George Whitefield in 1741, he had regarded Calvinist teaching on predestination “not as an opinion, but as a dangerous mistake”; but he now expressed his readiness to reclassify “particular election and final perseverance” as simply “an opinion” because his acquaintance with some who held it had shown the holding of it to be “compatible with a love to Christ and a work of grace”; and with fine even-handedness Wesley was prepared to qualify as an “opinion” his own teaching on perfection, which he told Newton was “the main point between you and me.” As part of his (unsuccessful) efforts towards a “union” of evangelical preachers in the 1760s, Wesley made clear that he did not envisage “an union in opinions; they might agree or disagree touching absolute decrees on the one hand and perfection on the other”; only they would “speak respectfully, honorably, kindly of each other” and “each help the other on in his work and enlarge his influence by all the honest means he can.”

In the 1987 Report, the participants from the WMC and the WARC declared: “Grace has been a principal emphasis in both our traditions. From first to last our salvation depends on the comprehensiveness of God’s grace, as prevenient, as justifying, as sanctifying, as sustaining, as glorifying. Nevertheless, in seeking to preserve this primary truth, our traditions have tended to give different accounts of the appropriation of saving grace, emphasizing on the one hand God’s sovereignty in election, and on the other, the freedom of response.” The Report concluded that “both traditions have gone wrong when they have claimed to know too much about this mystery of God’s electing grace and of human response.”

Can the “message” of (Wesleyan) Methodists and (Calvinist) Reformed be seen as paradoxically complementary versions of the one mysterious Gospel? What are they intending—what “nature”, what “works”—when they join in singing the hymn of Isaac Watts?

Praise ye the Lord! ’Tis good to raise
Your hearts and voices in His praise;
His nature and His works invite
To make this duty our delight.

THE JOINT DECLARATION ON THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION

In his late Sermon 107, “On God’s Vineyard,” Wesley fairly or unfairly criticized the lopsided soteriologies of Lutherans and Roman Catholics respectively, and then argued that Methodists had the matter just right:

Many who have spoken and written admirably well concerning justification had no clear conception, nay, were totally ignorant, of the doctrine of sanctification. Who has wrote more ably than Martin Luther on justification by faith alone? And who was more ignorant of the doctrine of sanctification, or more confused in his conceptions of it? ... On the other hand, how many writers of the Romish Church ... have wrote strongly and scripturally on sanctification, who nevertheless were entirely unacquainted with the nature of justification? ... But it has pleased God to give the Methodists a full and clear knowledge of each, and the wide difference between them....

They take care to keep each in its own place, laying equal stress on the one and the other. They know God has joined these together, and it is not for man to put them asunder. Therefore they maintain with equal zeal and diligence the doctrine of free, full,
present justification on the one hand, and of entire sanctification both of heart and life on the other....

Now in 1998-99, the Lutherans and the Catholics came pretty close to converging on a Methodist understanding, if we may take the testimony of their Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, the nub of which reads:

15. In faith we together hold the conviction that justification is the work of the triune God. The Father sent his Son into the world to save sinners. The foundation and presupposition of justification is the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ. Justification thus means that Christ himself is our righteousness, in which we share through the Holy Spirit in accord with the will of the Father. Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ’s saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works.

16. All people are called by God to salvation in Christ. Through Christ alone are we justified, when we receive this salvation in faith. Faith is itself God’s gift through the Holy Spirit who works through word and sacrament in the community of believers and who, at the same time, leads believers into that renewal of life which God will bring to completion in eternal life.

If we can further agree with present-day Lutherans and Catholics that “the message of justification directs us in a special way towards the heart of the New Testament witness to God’s saving action in Christ” by telling us that “as sinners our new life is solely due to the forgiving and renewing mercy that God imparts as a gift and we receive in faith” (17), then it appears we have a tripartite agreement among Lutherans, Catholics and Methodists on the “message” of justification as a crucial expression of the one “Gospel.” That would surely allow Methodists to join with Lutherans and Catholics in a giant step towards the healing of the divisions in Western Christendom. The progress in doctrinal unity -- unity in “the faith”-- would itself constitute a (still imperfect) witness to the truth of the Gospel, and, besides bringing closer the possibility of a more complete communion in “sacramental life,” it would allow, and indeed require, greater cooperation in the “mission” to proclaim “the Gospel.”

Listen first to Cardinals Dulles and Ratzinger, and then to Bishop Klaiber, on the opportunity and the need.

Avery Dulles: “In face of a world that is so alien to the gospel, our churches are called to unite their forces in restoring missionary and evangelistic power to the gospel message of God’s powerful mercy.... [The signing of the Declaration] says clearly to a world that hovers on the brink of unbelief that the two churches that split Western Christendom on the issue of justification nearly five centuries ago are still united on truths of the highest import. They can confess together that we are sinful members of a sinful race, that God offers us the gift of justification, that this offer comes through Christ, our only Savior, that it is received in faith, that the Holy Spirit is conferred upon those who believe, and that, having been inwardly renewed, they are called and equipped to excel in deeds of love.”

Joseph Ratzinger, in an article on the “reach” of “the consensus on justification,” recognizes the absence of the theme of justification from the contemporary consciousness, even among Christians, where there is little or no sense of sin and judgment, judgment and grace, the honor and anger of God, the cross of Christ and faith; where psychotherapy replaces redemption;
and where “God,” if he has any interest in human beings at all, may be expected, in any afterlife there might be, to “forgive us, it’s his job.” This is the cultural situation in which theologians have less a duty to refine the details of old controversies than to re-think the purpose and problems of life on the basis of the Bible and the Church’s heritage. Ratzinger then sets out three sets of limits within which any renewals of the doctrine of justification must fall. First, the depth of sin must be recognized in face of any merely voluntaristic notion, while our capacity for conversion must be affirmed in face of any temptation to despair of God’s mercy. Second, as creatures whom God made for relationship with himself, we are called to a cooperation in our salvation with God that is both responsible and modest; for all the poverty of our God-enabled doing, we are not “God’s marionettes.” Third, faith is indeed what places me personally before God, but this personal faith must be integrated with the “rule of faith,” the confession of the trinitarian God, christologically centered and rooted in the living Church and its sacramental life. What is redemption, who is God, who is Christ, who are we: “the more honestly, humbly, and passionately we take up these questions as they press on all of us today,” Cardinal Ratzinger concludes, “the more evident it will become that the struggle for faith brings us closer to one another.”

Walter Klaiber, in responding to the JDDJ, has argued that the “overcoming of the past” requires also “perspectives on the future.” Old problems need to be settled, or they will reemerge. Here discussion with other ecumenical partners can help a breakout from disputed formularies; and this itself may become the start of the new reflection that is needed if the message of justification is to become, as at previous times in Christian history, a liberating and enlivening word. Most important will be attention to Scripture as the norma normans, and here Klaiber finds evidence among serious contemporary exegetes for readings that challenge the secondary confessional norms of both Catholics and Protestants. Thus the human part in salvation can be seen in properly Pauline terms as “the activation of the believer through being taken up into the activity of God.” That will entail also “the social side” of justification: “as adult sons and daughters of God, the justified are placed in responsibility for themselves and for others.” Regarding the task of preaching in today’s world, the Bishop puts the matter playfully: if faith is like the laughter released in people by a joke, then we must learn to tell our Gospel story better. In pastoral care, we shall need to find ways of allowing the doctrine of justification to meet the fears, doubts, and concerns of contemporary people.

Clearly, the gift and the task remain to be received and performed -- ecumenically.