

Chicago Theologians on BEM

Robert W. Bertram

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Seeing that the NCC's BEM conference in Chicago last October was co-hosted by an ecumenical cooperative of Chicago-area theological schools, it was natural that these schools would contribute to the conference a public review of BEM's theology. This they did in two successive panel discussions, each panel involving three Chicago faculty members: Lauree Hersch Meyer of Bethany Theological Seminary, on "Baptism"; O. C. Edwards of Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, on "Eucharist"; Lewis Mudge of McCormick Theological Seminary, on "Ministry"; and Bernard McGinn of the University of Chicago's Divinity School, on "Baptism"; Carolyn Osiek of Catholic Theological Union, on "Ministry"; Robert Bertram of Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, on "Eucharist".

Although the panelists were to address the substantive issues of Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, not the conference theme of "reception" as such, what they said about BEM's theological substance had implications for its reception process as well. Two implications in particular deserve notice. The two I have in mind are not the obvious twosome, which every panelist also reflected: yes, BEM is already basically receivable; no, it is not to be received uncritically or even without further rewrite. That much yes-and-no was reflected even by the two panelists from the Faith and Order Commission, Mudge and Bertram, who at Lima had already gone on record in BEM's favor and so now leaned over backward to add what Moderator Carl Braaten requested, a "critical response."

But beyond such general endorsement cum "critical evaluation," which BEM's own preface invites, all six panelists surfaced two other, more nuanced, more telling features of BEM's theology which in turn might foreshadow how the document will be received in the churches: BEM's theological ambivalences or, better, its inconclusiveness, and second, its intimations of something better still to come.

Inconclusive

First, in noting BEM's inconclusiveness I would not minimize that the document did evince definite conclusions from our panelists. The conclusions they drew, however, all of them apparently warranted by BEM itself, occasionally were not only different. They were at times markedly contrary, leaving the audience in a quandary and the discussion as a whole undecided. That sort of irresolution may be a shadow of things to come. All the moreso if, as this conference recommended, a document like BEM which has been ecumenically produced ought also, as in these Chicago panels, be ecumenically

discussed and received. The fallout from any reception process as multi-vocal as that may be a whole new range of interesting theological impasses.

For instance, contrast the two presentations by Hersch Meyer and Edwards, she from Church of the Brethren, he an Episcopalian. Both of them affirmed BEM for reasons of their own, but reasons not evidently compatible with each other. Hersch Meyer explained that, for Brethren, "baptism was never understood as a means of saving one's soul." Rather it functions as a rite of passage into the religious group, thus fulfilling an important sociological need both of the person and of the community. It is only of secondary importance that the "socio-ecclesial formation terrain" of the Brethren had traditionally limited this rite to adults. For recently there has been a growing recognition that adolescents, too, need a rite of passage. At that, "a meaningful adolescent rite need not be confirmation or baptism any more than a meaningful infant rite needs to be baptism or infant dedication." What matters is "enrolling each new generation meaningfully in the corporate identity."

Such a "free church" view of Baptism would seem to justify the misgivings voiced by Edwards. Not that he had serious doubts about BEM. On the contrary, he could comfortably acknowledge that "the Lima statement does presuppose a sacramental orientation that is reflexive to Anglicanism and the thought world of the statement feels like our native land." No, he explained,

my questions about this as an adequate basis for reunion lie outside the document. My question is whether many of the member churches of the World Council who have not been so sacramental in their orientation throughout history as Anglicans have, are really this converted to a sacramental point of view.

As Edwards went on, his real question lay deeper. "The sacramentalism of the Lima statement implies a christology on a par with the classic Christological statements of the early church." Must not those creeds, therefore, be "an essential part of any discussion of reunion?" What he wondered, not optimistically, was whether "all of the member churches are willing to ascribe such an ultimacy to Christ."

Hersch Meyer, on the other hand, whose Brethren obviously have "not been so sacramental in their orientation throughout history as Anglicans have," and maybe not so inclined "to ascribe such ultimacy to Christ," nevertheless argued from an explicitly christological orientation of her own. The Christian community into which Baptism provides a rite of passage is, after all, "the body of Christ" and membership in it means "participation in Christ's very life." "What social scientists would call a sociological" event is what "Brethren would understand as an incarnational" one. Indeed, Hersch Meyer's single most theological reason for approving BEM is its "christological mode" of "Christian conversation." But by that she meant, "Christians today are learning to see in others who practice radically different forms of baptism...members of Christ's living body, incarnated in a social matrix sometimes painfully and astonishingly different from our own."

If that is what strikes Hersch Meyer as christologically significant about BEM, namely, its "openness to expressions of God's Spirit visibly different from our own," then she was being consistent in challenging the way the BEM question is frequently posed, "the question to what degree the document adequately represents the apostolic faith." "That very wording," she objected, "suggests to Brethren ... a view of 'correspondence' more than 'relational' truth." And Edwards' plea, by contrast, for "a Christology on a par with the classic christological statements of the early church" must then sound like the very thing Hersch Meyer criticized as a "search for a particular deposit ... to rightly represent the faith."

Still, BEM evidently seems inclusive enough to embrace Brethren as well. Both their "faith and practice," says Hersch Meyer, "is found within those descriptions the BEM document affirms." Edwards, on the other hand, questions whether churches like Hersch Meyer's truly can find themselves there. She, in turn, questions whether his sort of criterion is worthy of BEM, also christologically. "It's the old question of the Council of Florence," Mudge observed. "How do you know that when you use different words you are speaking with the same intention?" (Or even, we might ask, when you use the same words?) Edwards: "And the Catch-22 of all this is that in order to deal with the questions we're faced with we must first reach some sort of methodological agreement so that we will know that we are talking about the same thing" The discussion then digressed farther and farther from the theological issues at hand (Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry) toward some elusive "hermeneutical" solution -- toward a solution, in other words, outside BEM itself, though necessitated by BEM's own theological indeterminateness.

BEM's inconclusiveness did not need interdenominational give-and-take to reveal it, though that helped. It surfaced right within panelists' solo presentations, for instance, in McGinn's and Osiek's, both of them Roman Catholic lay theologians. McGinn was "puzzled . . . about the nature and content of [BEM's] new ethical orientation granted in Baptism." Why "puzzled"? "Because the text says so little about what used to be called original sin," upon which any such conclusions about baptismal renewal would presumably need to be premised. Other points of puzzlement for McGinn were the relation of Baptism to faith, also Baptism's sacramental causality: "If there are still differences of theological interpretation under the fairly calm surface of the document that imply real differences of belief, I do not think that the document itself tells us how to deal with them."

Or Osiek, on BEM's treatment of Ministry: "The traditional tension remains between the theology of charism and the act of ordination; the tension is not resolved by simply assuming as I Tim. 4:14 seems to that ordained ministry is a charism." As for the apostolicity of ordained ministries, she observed, "There is no more obvious sign of compromise in the document than the conclusion of #10: 'There is therefore a difference between the apostles and the ordained ministers whose ministries are founded on theirs.' That there is a difference no one would dispute. Apparently every attempt to articulate what kind of difference was unsuccessful."

Mudge, similarly, called attention to BEM's unresolved tensions, including one which the document itself acknowledges: "... the degree of the presbyter's participation in the episcopal ministry is still for many an unresolved question of far-reaching ecumenical importance" -- far-reaching enough, I might insert, to exercise Lutherans. Recalling Lima, Mudge was inclined to trace some of BEM's lingering tensions back to its pre-publication "drafting process." He remembered how free-church and Reformed theologians "felt we were always tugging at cassocks to get heard." "I do wonder sometimes whether our Orthodox friends, particularly those who are resident in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and Greece, have any real understanding of what Protestantism is ... and what we mean in the West by the critical method."

The critical method came up also in Bertram's challenge to BEM, specifically with respect to its chapter on "the institution of the Eucharist." Here again was a case where the document is "halting between two opinions," needlessly so. For one example, (and there were several) BEM at first gives the appearance of affirming the apostolic tradition that the sacrament was instituted by the historical Jesus. But then, "needlessly cautious," BEM retreats from that doctrinally crucial claim, apparently fearing that a dominical institution may no longer be tenable, which to say the least is a premature conclusion. As a result, rather than grapple with "historical-critical evidence" which in this case might just have supported the apostolic tradition, BEM "shifts the dominical origins of the Eucharist instead to Jesus' general practice throughout his ministry of table fellowship." But at what a price, "thus obscuring precisely in his new Supper Jesus does not eat and drink with his disciples, and obscuring why he does not."

Anticipatory

If BEM gives off mixed signals, especially when these are tricked out in mixed theological company, it seems to do so in a way that does not at all stultify further effort. On the contrary, if our panelists' reactions were typical, BEM awakens expectations which point beyond the document in its present form, perhaps beyond anything that so far is conceivable. In that sense BEM is proleptic, self-eclipsing, anticipatory of better things to come, as the following excerpts illustrate.

McGinn. "The Lima Statement obviously is looking for something more than mutual toleration. It does say that it intends to be an expression of the common faith of the Church and it asks for the explicit mutual recognition of each other's baptism on the part of the churches. But each of these express intentions contains hidden ambiguities that make the process of reception (or non-reception) at least as important as the document...."

"The Lima document appears to have done as much as it could have within a particular set of circumstances, but perhaps its real hope is that the discussion and debate over the meaning and the reception of this document will create a new set of circumstances, a new reality which will eventually make things that now seem difficult if not impossible to resolve far less problematic. I do not want to say that the conversation we are engaged in is the reality we seek, but it is perhaps the best way open to us to move forward so that we may be able to catch some glimpse of what that reality actually may be."

Osiek. "On the subject of the relationship of the ordained ministry to the apostles and of the ordained priesthood to the priesthood of all believers, we still have some distance to go, both ecumenically and in the theologizing of the more highly structured churches..... The greatest challenge for Roman Catholics, I believe, will be to take this document seriously, not just as an ecumenical statement to tell us what others are thinking, but as a document in which we see ourselves reflected and to which we look to guide our reflections: "a statement to be not only informative but formative as well."

"A monumental step has been taken with the Lima document. Let us welcome it with appropriate joy as a child born into the world who has thereby begun the long process toward maturity. There is a commonly expressed opinion that the documents of Vatican II represented the state of the question at the time they were written, but began to be obsolete as soon as the Council ended. Perhaps that would not be a bad way to view the Lima document as well, so that we can receive it not as an achievement but rather as a call into the future."

Hersch Meyer. "I think I would want to speak not so much trying to represent the document ... as trying to find my way as a member of a free church tradition into the document, meaningfully. That is precisely the reason why I ... was pressed to use incarnational and christological language. I found no other way to make coherent both my participation and also the limits where I felt participation simply couldn't occur"

"I would go past that, though That is to say, we have in our traditions, I think, an orthodoxy which trusts formulations. . . . Some of us are organized more around orthopraxis than around orthodoxy. We trust that as well. ... In ecumenical dialogue neither of these, when we actually are able to change, is the center of our life. . . . Neither is orthodoxy nor orthopraxis a change of any transformation in our communion. Rather that happens in the moment when we experience ourselves as made one ... by the Spirit in ways that allow us to question very specific previous forms. To think only in terms of what we say and how we shall there achieve unity or what we do and how we shall there achieve unity is not enough. Christological analysis is not enough. Really a trinitarian mode of reflecting on our life in communion together strikes me as utterly basic. ..."

Edwards. "I don't think that any Anglican could for a moment believe that the seamless robe of Christ has been restored with the Quakers not in it. The Friends' spirituality is one that has borne an effective witness to us, and in some ways we probably feel more commonality with you [Friends] than with many of the people to whom we're closer in matters of polity. So I could never rest content until our conversations had proceeded much farther along the road."

"But finally, it may be that this ability to reach across differences of tradition can only be done in stages. So conceivably only those who are able to live with the kind of point of view of the [Lima] statement so far could participate in this first stage of discovering what we have in common. But then when we are able to clarify that with one another, maybe then a new stage of conversation could reach out to those who are in your

[Friends'] tradition and others, to find out what all of us have in common -- with the certainty that the things that unite us are far more important than the things that separate us."

Mudge. "I believe that what BEM says about the historic threefold ministry will be very helpful in the negotiations between your [Edwards' Episcopal] church and mine. . . . Presbyterians are beginning to realize that they have at the level of the local congregation what might be called a miniaturization of the historic threefold ministry, in which a bishop or pastor is surrounded by presbyters, whom we call elders, and assisted by deacons. That is, I believe, essentially the Ignatian form of the episcopacy, in which the bishop was the pastor of a congregation. It is a fact that in the nineteenth century, when you look at Presbyterian presbytery rolls, when the attendance was taken, it said, 'The following bishops were present.' The reference was to pastors of congregations. . . . That is an historical memory of our intention in constituting a diocese in each local congregation. If we can see that the differences between our two churches have to do with scale -- larger diocese, smaller diocese -- rather than with principle, and if we can see that the essential of the historic threefold ministry can be expressed in varying constitutional or canonical forms, then we have the basis for understanding each other.

Bertram. "While it is essential in The Holy Communion to stress its intercessory and its thanksgiving (that is, its "eucharistic") action, in short its action as one great prayer to the Father made possible by the joining of our lowly prayers with the efficacious intercessions of our great High Priest, isn't it likewise a mark of catholicity, indeed the very height of gratitude, when we the guests at The Lord's Supper finally accede to what he has so generously invited us to do in the first place, namely, sup? Isn't that in fact the essence of the anamnesis, that as he bids us to we eat and drink, believing, and thus in the most earthy and gustatory way (as befits earthlings) we share in his selfsame cruciform and Eastered flesh? And isn't it true that we do that supping explicitly "for the forgiveness of sin" and "for proclaiming the Lord's death till he comes," two powerfully anamnestic themes from The Great Tradition about which BEM says virtually nothing? But it certainly could, and it could do so consistently with its own great starting point, in the Eucharist as anamnesis."

"This weakness, which appears [in BEM] appears only because at that very point the document is being particularly strong and bold, raising the churches' highest expectations, but then, alas, slacks off and shrinks from its full apostolic promise. So our 'critical evaluation' is really only a part of receiving BEM, a way of cheering it on and saying, 'Yes, yes, go on, don't stop now!'"

Robert W. Bertram
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