

Lutheran-Reformed Full Communion: A Modest “No”

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ABSTRACT

“A Lutheran-Reformed full communion?” Not “no” to the proposal itself of full communion but a modest “no” to a limited, restricted kind of full communion represented by “A Formula of Agreement.” The document needs to provide for a more extended theological, church-wide dialogue. A new understanding of dialogue can commit to three kinds of understanding: (1) a familial exchange of “yes-buts” where traditional differences are seen as usable, historic strengths; (2) an understanding of dialogue as a means of grace; and, (3) spreading the fun beyond professional theologians who dialogue to full church-wide conversations. (Stephen C. Krueger)

The question before the house is: “A Lutheran-Reformed Full Communion?” The answer to that question is presumed to be either Yes or No, one or the other. Given that presumption, where yes and no are the only options, I have to argue in favor of the latter answer, No. But no to what? Not “no” to the proposal itself of Lutherans and Reformed being in full communion. That, I strongly favor. And the fuller the communion the better. What I argue against is the limited, restricted kind of “full

communion" being presented in the document before our churches, A *Formula of Agreement*. Granted, the expanding of our "communion" which *Formula* advocates is already more "full" than anything Lutherans and Reformed have enjoyed heretofore, and for that much expansion the document makes a good case. The thing is, even this newly expanded communion to which *Formula* then assigns the inflated adjective "full" is not in my judgment full enough. That is what prompts my negative.

Positively, what I would hope for is that full communion would here include at least one thing more, what we might call full conversation. Is that asking too much? It is really quite a modest request. I am not asking that Lutherans and Reformed merge their denominations or even their bureaucracies, much less their seminaries. We are not asking that Lutherans and Reformed forget their historic differences or that they necessarily apologize for those differences, least of all that they pretend those differences merely "complement" one another. No, all we are asking here is that in the interest of a more full communion we simply agree to do this one thing more than the *Formula* provides for: extend the theological dialogue so that it truly becomes churchwide.

In a way the *Formula* already provides for that full conversation, at least in principle. Its very definition of full communion includes, as one of the seven criteria, that Lutherans and Reformed "commit themselves to an ongoing process of theological dialogue." Also, as a last criterion, they are to grow together through a process of "mutual affirmation and admonition." These two provisions already go a long way toward the full conversation I have in mind.

The only questions which remain are relatively small ones. (1) Who – who all – are to engage in this ongoing theological dialogue, this mutual affirmation and correction? Only a dozen

handpicked theologians in summit meetings? Or only bishops-to-bishops? Surely not. (2) And if the ongoing conversations do include whoever in the churches are directly, locally affected by this full communion, like on-site congregations with one another, Lutheran with Reformed, with on-site presbyters and bishops, then what – what all – might these local Reformed and Lutherans discuss? Only issues of polity and practice? Only those remaining doctrinal issues which the summiteers have not yet resolved? Or also those issues which they have resolved, precisely because they have—like the episcopate, predestination, The Lord's Supper? (3) And what, finally, would hang by these local and regional – therefore truly churchwide – dialogues? The *Formula* might easily have added, though it does not, that it is precisely by means of these ongoing theological dialogues and mutual conversations, and only by means of them, that the churches can empirically fulfill the first criterion, "recognize each other as churches in which the gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered."

The *Formula* almost says as much, and with a little extra effort it still could. So the one thing more which we are requesting is not at all a negation of the document but rather a further stipulating, a clarifying, a gentle radicalizing of the document in the direction of a more full communion – may I say, a more catholic ecclesiology. What might that require parliamentarily between now and next summer when the churches assemble to vote on the proposal? My colleague, Paul Rorem, wonders whether an amendment would do.

With that ecclesiological proviso the proposal might just succeed. Without it, I deeply fear, it is likely to fail, not for lack of a majority vote (the vote seems assured) but for lack of churchwide enthusiasm and involvement in the post-assembly follow-through. As for parliamentary amendments, I have the impression that the procedure will no longer be available

once the proposal reaches the Lutherans in Philadelphia for their vote. Would I vote for the proposal even so, unamended? Very likely, but then mostly because defeating the proposal, if that is the only alternative, would be far worse. Do you detect a note of resignation? That – or worse: indifference – does threaten to be churchwide.

Sir Boyle Roche comes to mind. He was an eighteenth century M.P. from the district of Tralee, a notorious word mangler, a British Casey Stengel. He is said to have stood up in Parliament and announced, “I answer in the affirmative with an emphatic No.” That far I refuse to go. But when I read the Lutheran-Reformed *Formula of Agreement*, I do answer in the affirmative with a modest No.

Mutual Exchange of Yes-Buts

Meanwhile let me use this occasion to argue the case for a “full communion” which entails, yes, depends upon full conversation. May I begin by recounting a bit of recent ecumenical history? Back in the early eighties there were one or more theologians in the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue USA who began beating the drum for a new understanding of ecumenical dialogue. One feature of this new understanding (but not the only feature) focused on dialogue as an inner- church give-and-take or, if I may put it more colloquially, a familial exchange of yes-buts. In public we used more ecclesial expressions like “mutual affirmation and admonition.” Contrast that with traditional dialogues where, say, two teams of theologians used to face each other across a historical divide, patiently, amicably explaining their respective territories to each other like tour guides to foreigners. Eventually they achieved, at a minimum, mutual understanding and, optimally, doctrinal agreement. Their ideal, I suppose, would have been unanimity. If they did reach

consensus they could return to their homes in hope that their respective churches would then “receive” their joint agreements. This view of the dialogists’ task still endures, as it should. But if I am right, such dialogues – some of them – have come to take on another blessed function as well, an interconfessional sharing of yes-buts.

Imagine the following exchange. Yes, say the Lutherans affirming the Reformed, you do well to stress the Lord’s presence in his Supper as “spiritual,” for he does present himself there for our spirited growth in faith and love. And as our Reformed sisters and brothers you have an ecumenical calling to admonish us fleshly Lutherans when we forget that. But, the Lutherans then add as an admonition of their own, bear in mind that what the Spirit opposes is just that, the flesh, not body and blood and the bodily. The Reformed likewise affirm the Lutherans: yes, you Lutherans do us a favor when from your confessional experience you remind us that in Christ’s Supper he is quite simply, bodily given whether communicants believe that he is or not. But, comes the Reformed corrective, be careful lest communicants then misconstrue the sacrament as magic needing only their superficial ritual observance.

Notice, in traditional dialogues, as we said, the premium was on agreement, unanimity, both sides saying the same thing, maybe to the point of minimizing historic differences or even “withdrawing” them. The newer dialogues still maximize consensus, never less than consensus on core articles of the faith. But now, in addition, they deliberately identify the differences which persist, not as obstacles or embarrassments but as usable historical strengths with which both sides might strengthen each other. If nothing else, this mutual exchange of yes-buts prevents the Church’s hard-won confessional history from going to waste.

A few paragraphs earlier I recalled that this theme of give-and-take emerged in the Lutheran- Roman Catholic Dialogue USA back in the early eighties, at least on the part of a few members. That emphasis eventually surfaced into print, though subtly, in that dialogue's celebrated volume seven, *Justification by Faith* (1985.) By 1992 the mutual exchange of yes-buts had become the subject of a whole article in the magazine, *dialog*. Imagine our gratification when that same year, 1992, the Lutheran-Reformed *Common Calling* announced that there were between these two communions no "church-dividing differences." That implied, as I read it, that whatever differences there were, rather than divide us, might instead draw us together in "ongoing theological dialogue" and "mutual affirmation and admonition." The latter phrase, now prominently displayed in *A Common Calling*, was the very one we had been promoting almost as a slogan. Hope mounted.

Now comes the most recent statement, *A Formula of Agreement*, the document we have been discussing here. It advances the idea of give-and-take even farther. Not only does it speak of "mutual affirmation and mutual admonition." It extols that idea as a "breakthrough concept [which] points toward new ways of relating traditions of reformation churches that heretofore have not been able to reconcile their diverse witnesses to the saving grace of God ... in Jesus Christ." It is this emphasis in the *Formula* upon "mutual affirmation and admonition" which I believe is that document's single strongest contribution. I wish the Lutheran-Episcopal proposal, *Concordat of Agreement*, were as strong in this respect as the *Formula* is. And I know Episcopalians who wish the same.

True, there are passages in the *Formula* which seem, much too timidly, to romanticize the differences between our communions as merely "complementary" aspects of the same larger truth, hence not that different after all. For example, the *Formula*

quotes the old document, *Marburg Revisited* concerning some conflicts between Lutherans and Reformed: they “are not in themselves contradictory and in fact are complementary.” Well, in some cases that may be so. But the misimpression could be given, if Reformed and Lutheran positions ever were “contradictory” – not just “complementary” but contradictory – we would not know what to do with them, except maybe suppress them. That was a weakness in the original notion of “complementarity” put forth a century ago by the French Hegelian, Victor Cousin, and which Horace Bushnell – America’s “father of Protestant liberalism” yet! – had to correct. Might there indeed be times in our histories when, say, the Reformed are right at the very point where Lutherans are just plain wrong? Or vice versa? Isn’t it possible then not just for one right to “complement” another right but for the right to “contradict” a wrong, so the wrong can be righted?

Answer: that is possible when, as the *Formula* elsewhere stresses, the differences are no longer church-dividing. Then, under that overarching, inclusive yes, the exchange of yes-buts, even contradictory butts, do serve as constructive, in-house “correction,” as intra-church “admonition.” Yet we do well to insist, where differences are not church-dividing, what then are they? Not all that serious? Then why even mention them? But if they are serious and yet not church-dividing, they must be – how shall we say? – church-uniting. That is exactly what the yes-buts are for, churchwide. Failing that, the differences are probably still church-dividing.

Dialogue a Means of Grace

Dialogists sometimes find that in the course of sharing their confessions they are, by that very transaction, already being one church. They find themselves undeniably one in Christ, not

in spite of but because of the distinct traditions from which they come. The oneness they discover is not sentimental or impressionistic but demonstrably scriptural and confessional. When that happens, and it does, dialogue is no longer just a precondition for church union. It is itself church union happening.

That does not occur in any and every dialogue by the mere fact of theologians talking together, especially if they are still miles apart on the essential gospel. But suppose they do begin to discern – older English would say “to divine” – their common faith of the Creed, each in the other. They then have no choice but to affirm their newfound oneness, *vis-a-vis* and out loud and in so many words. They cannot settle for just knowing they are one, or just rumoring it, as if church unity were ever actually “invisible.” It must be at least audible, not to mention celebrated. True, at first the two dialogue teams may negotiate almost warily like lawyers in behalf of their client denominations or, like marriage brokers, to determine whether it is safe for their clients to marry. But what if before their clients ever read the contract or even if they reject it, the brokers stumble upon a dismaying secret about themselves, namely, that the longed-for marriage between Lutherans and Reformed is in fact already happening right in this very dialogue? Almost beyond the dialogists’ control their dialogue has become between them a means of grace. What else is that but a “mark of the Church?”

That does put the brokers in a quandary. For they had no authorization from back home to jump the gun like this. But neither is this premature marriage all their own doing. They just happened to talk it into the open. Their quandary does not lack for humor, probably a trick by the Holy Spirit. But neither does it lack for pain. I remember the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue USA. Right in the midst of the dialogists’ discovery of

their miraculous unity they had to interrupt their conversation and retire to the Eucharist – separately, Lutherans in one room, Roman Catholics in another. Of course that could all be justified under the name of “ecumenical restraint.” At the same time I think most of us found it anguishing, like what Luther called “the dear holy cross,” the sort of mutual cross-bearing which occurs only within the same one church. By that point the hapless dialogists must recognize, however uncomfortably, that the dialogue itself has become no longer just a preliminary but the very practice of being Church together.

In view of the dialogists’ quandary I can appreciate why the *Formula* sounds so ambiguous. But the fact is, it does. On the one hand it says of our Lutheran and Reformed churches that we are “entering into full communion.” On the other hand, it declares that we “are in full communion.” I interpret this ambivalence to apply to all the churches in the proposal. Still, which is it, a strict logician might ask. Now first “entering into?” Or already “are in?” Answer: Yes. For haven’t all these years of dialogue between us, here and overseas, proven not only the “not yet” but also surely the “already.” Ask the dialogists themselves.

But then comes the objection: to tout dialogue as itself an act of church union, not just a prologue to it, is like elevating it to a sacrament. I doubt that we need to worry about that. Better we should worry – especially we Lutherans – lest we forget a classic reminder from our own Confessions. Luther made a point of reminding his fellow sinners that God graces us “in more than one way”: not only through public proclamation and Baptism and The Holy Communion, but also through “the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers [and sisters].” (Smalcald Articles III.iv). If that’s what the *Formula* means by a “breakthrough concept,” it might at least have explained that the breakthrough isn’t all that recent.

Spreading the Fun

To our great debt and blessing, our Lutheran-Reformed dialogists have by their firsthand communion amongst themselves proved to their satisfaction that communion between our denominations is now at hand. The next step is up to us. How shall we respond? Merely by voting approval? And as we vote shall we, with a shrug of relief, exclaim, "What further need have we of dialogue?" Or just as bad: "What further need have we of dialogue – the professors, maybe, but surely not we in the congregations and presbyteries and synods?" Alas, if that is our response, then the very foreboding which I vented at the outset is confirmed. And if the *Formula* by its own unclarity allows for such a wimpish response from the Churches, even though that was not intended, the proposal richly deserves my "modest No," never mind how I vote. "What further need have we of dialogue," indeed! Not only is dialogue exactly what we "need" – we, churchwide. It is the most gracious, most churchly thing that could happen to us. What we ought rather reply, as we "receive" the witness of the dialogists, is: "Why should they have all the fun!"

For the new look in dialogues, as I've called it, involves also a third feature, beyond the mutual exchange of yes-buts, beyond dialogue as itself a means of grace. This third feature transforms what in older dialogues was called the process of "reception." That used to be the legal last step in the dialogical sequence. Once the churches back home voted to "receive" their dialogists' joint recommendations they would then, typically, dismiss the dialogists with thanks. In effect they were saying, What further need have we of dialogue? The only thing left, presumably, was for the joint statement of the dialogists to be denominationally "implemented," enforced churchwide. But further churchwide theological dialogue,

bilaterally, between local or regional churches? What could be more superfluous, anticlimactic! So it once seemed.

But in recent years things have changed, at least in some notable dialogues. If you are interested in examples, you may want to read the article I cited earlier, in *dialog* five years ago. What used to be the final stage, the “reception,” the point at which really decisive dialogue came to a halt, has begun to be inverted into virtually the opposite. Now, when the fruits of the national dialogists are released, that has the effect (sometimes) of triggering a whole new wave of dialogues churchwide, often in direct response to the national ones, at times even questioning their validity for a given locality, at other times advancing bravely beyond them. All the while, so I assume, the local and regional dialogists continue to share each others’ altars and ministers, but not without linking that to another *sine qua non* of full communion, their “mutual conversation and consolation of the brothers [and sisters]” precisely on matters of the faith.

My Episcopal colleague, Fr. Warren Crews, thinks of the vote by the national assembly as giving “permission” to local and regional churches to start their own dialogues. In a way, yes, though his word “permission” sounds more passive, more paternalistic than he intends. Worse, it might give the misimpression that the congregations back home, the presbyteries and synods, are just champing at the bit to get on with their dialoguing waiting only for their denominations’ “permission.” Would that they were! For my part I’d like to think of the assembly’s vote as what football teams do in their huddles, a high-spirited pact to run out the play. Yet that analogy, too, breaks down. For who is the team in the huddle? The ELCA? Then who are the opponents? The Reformed? That can’t be, for the whole point is that now we’re all on the same team. What opposition there is, I suppose, would be the forces of anti-

church. But where this athletic metaphor of the football huddle limps most is that it, too, credits more enthusiasm to the players than they (we) exhibit. On second thought, the fact that we locals are not sufficiently motivated may be reason to invoke the metaphor of the assembly as huddle after all, to up the ecclesial ante and raise our sights.

By way of whetting the appetite, picture this post-assembly, back-home scene. A rural or small town ELCA congregation, long without a pastor, met last evening for the fourth week in a row with its new interim, a Presbyterian minister who serves also her own congregation in the next village. Fresh from McCormick Seminary – before that, twelve years a businesswoman – she sits here, her ten-year-old at her side, one elbow on her Presbyterian *Book of Confessions* and the other on her Lutheran *Book of Concord*. She is leading an “ongoing theological discussion” with her Lutherans. As trust builds, one of the older men makes bold to ask, “Haven’t I heard that you Presbyterians think only some folks are scheduled for salvation?” The minister’s first impulse is to brush off the question with “Not many of us believe that anymore.” But then, perceiving that the question was seriously asking for help, she paused before replying, “I’d like to wait a week before answering that, until I can give it a little more thought and study.”

Later in the conversation she found it appropriate to direct a question to the man’s wife: whether it is essential, as she had gathered from the Augsburg Confession, for people to be baptized. The group thought so. But, to make sure, they looked to the ELCA bishop’s assistant, who nodded reassurance. “I know of grandparents these days,” the minister continued, “whose grandchildren are going unbaptized.” She was really giving permission to the man and woman, and to other seniors around the table, to do what in fact they did next: go deep inside

themselves where she had touched a deep hurt. No one had ever enabled them before, or herself either, to talk openly of that doctrinal concern. (And it is that.) In fact, seldom had they felt as Lutheran, or she as Presbyterian, as now -and yet as one in Christ. "One of these weeks," she said as she prepared to bless them, "my parishioners up the road and you folks might want to try The Lord's Supper together. But all in good time."

Does the *Formula* insist on this indispensable feature of full communion, namely, full conversation churchwide? If at all, only by the most generous inference. The document does climax with a "binding and effective commitment" and with a solemn reminder that once there has been "formal adoption at the highest levels," the churches- that is, the respective denominations – will be "binding themselves to far more than merely a formal action, [namely, to] a relationship with gifts and changes for all." That includes, the *Formula* says to its credit, "mutual affirmation and admonition." But we are still left asking about this new mutuality between our denominations: How churchwide will it be? Or better: How will it be churchwide? If the answer comes back, as I hope it does not, "Isn't that self-evident?" my modest No has now been recorded. And while that may not change my vote, it would deeply dampen it.

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