

WILL “FULL COMMUNION” INCLUDE FULL CONVERSATION?

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ELCA's two proposals for “full communion,” one with the Episcopalians and another with the Reformed, will surely be adopted by the assembly, if only for the sake of appearances. Flawed as the proposals may be, to vote them down now would be unimaginable to today's churches except as an act of schism. There will be delegates at Philadelphia who because of confessional conscience still have to vote Nay. They have my respect. But for my part, for what it is worth, defeating the proposals would be worse by far than adopting them, though I quickly admit that adopting them will likewise give a very misleading appearance. It will suggest, falsely, that what we will have voted for really is “full communion.” In fact it is far from that. The proposed “communion” is not even “full” enough to provide for full conversation. Still, that weakness might still be remedied. If it is, it might even be parlayed into the sort of opportunity ELCA so sorely needs: confessional awakening.

Let me explain. My objection is not to Lutherans finally realizing their communion with Episcopalians and Reformed. That, I ardently favor. And the fuller the communion the better. Granted also, the expanding of our communion which the two proposals advocate is already more “full” than anything we have enjoyed heretofore. And for that much expansion the documents make a reasonably good case. The thing is, even this newly expanded communion to which the documents then assign the inflated adjective “full” is not nearly full enough. Such a

pretentious title requires, at a minimum, one thing more: what I have just called “full conversation,” “full” meaning “churchwide.” Is that asking too much? Really it is quite a modest request. In a way, one of the documents, the Lutheran-Reformed A Formula of Agreement, already provides for such 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, “churchwide” 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, Lutherans with Reformed, Episcopalians with Lutherans, along with on-site presbyters and bishops, then what – what all – might these local Lutherans and non-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 documents might easily have added, though they do not, that it is precisely by means of these ongoing theological dialogues in parishes and presbyteries, 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.”

Can the churches in fact do that now, namely, recognize each other as rightly communicating gospel and sacraments? Will they even be ready to do that in August in Philadelphia? At one level, yes. At another, very decisive level, no. For instance, picture the Episcopal convention. A priest goes to the floor microphone and complains that back in the Midwest the Lutherans he lives with hold a very disturbing view of the episcopate, namely, that there is only one apostolic office of oversight (episkope), the one into which bishops were already ordained when they were first called as pastors. In fact, the priest protests, these Lutherans quote their own Confessions as saying, “What does a bishop do that a pastor doesn’t do, except ordain?” So how in all honesty can he, the priest, now vote for this Concordat? To which his convention should reply, “Vote for it here and then go home and work it out, fact to face.” Or at ELCA’s assembly a Lutheran objects that in his New England ministerium UCC really does mean “Unitarians Considering Christ.” So isn’t it deceitful for him now to approve this Formula of Agreement as if those UCC churches were indeed preaching the gospel, let alone “rightly?” Answer: “Once you approve this Formula, as the UCC already has, you and they have a whole new incentive to enter into ‘mutual affirmation and admonition’ right in Massachusetts – about the Trinity yet. The only question is, Who of you two will profit more?” In traditional lingo, to “recognize each other as churches in which the gospel is rightly . . . ,” etc., is to be interpreted in Philadelphia as quatenus (insofar as) that is true, in hopes that subsequent dialogues in Peoria will justify a quia, a “because” it is true.

Trouble is, neither of our two proposals – Concordat much less so – makes explicit provision for this extending of the dialogue “churchwide.” To the extent that they suffer from that weakness

they reflect an outmoded understanding of ecumenical dialogue. Five years ago this magazine carried an article which contrasted “new” dialogues with “old,” specifically on three points. 1) In earlier bilateral dialogues doctrinal differences between the two churches, even two churches which agreed on important basics, were seen as necessarily divisive and so either had to be resolved or soft-pedaled before the two churches could begin being church together. More recent bilaterals openly acknowledge those differences and, what’s more, pool them as an ongoing “mutual exchange of yes-buts.” (A Formula for Agreement, to its credit, recognizes this as a “breakthrough concept.”) 2) Traditional bilaterals assumed that dialogue was prior to church union and so was typically conducted by dispassionate theologians who, like marriage brokers, sized up each other’s traditions to determine whether it was safe for their respective clients to marry. Newer dialogues, at least the more successful ones, reveal that the dialogists themselves start succumbing to each other’s common Christian witness and thus experience a de facto church union ahead of schedule. To their dismay they find themselves suitors as much as brokers. Then dialogue has already begun to function as a “means of grace,” not unlike The Smalcald Articles’ “mutual conversation and consolation of the brothers [and sisters.]” We should not be surprised, or disappointed, if that has happened to our own ELCA dialogists after decades of working with their Reformed and Episcopalian counterparts.

But then why should they have all the fun? 3) That recalls the third feature of the “new” dialogues, namely, the transforming of what used to be called the “reception” process. Formerly, once the summiteers had agreed on some joint doctrinal statement, they were dismissed with thanks and it was then up to their respective churches to “receive” their statement, up or down, typically by a convention vote. The assumption was that dialogue had done all it could. What remained was to “implement”

it. (Read: enforce.) No longer. Now, by contrast, the “reception” process has become a whole new stage of bilateral dialogues, wave upon wave, local and regional, sometimes challenging the summit findings, sometimes advancing beyond them. Talk about “churchwide.” It begins to sound like the Vincentian Canon for catholicity: “What has been believed everywhere, always, and by all.” ELCA could do worse, especially if it misinterprets “full communion” to mean something less than full conversation.

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