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An Evangelical Response to Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry

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PREAMBLE

Faith and Order Paper No. 111, the Lima document on *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM), has been widely acclaimed as a most significant statement in the recent history of the church. It represents a momentous endeavour to reach doctrinal agreement on key issues that for centuries have troubled the churches. The World Evangelical Fellowship welcomes the opportunity to join those many churches and organizations that are responding to the document and sharing the common search for the bearing of the apostolic faith on baptism, eucharist and ministry.

This statement has been written by the Theological Commission of WEF with the purpose of speaking both to the ecumenical community and to those of our own constituency who may belong to churches involved in the ecumenical process, or who more generally seek guidance on how evangelicals should respond to the document.

The WEF is not an organized church nor an organization of churches. It is a fellowship of national and regional evangelical bodies formed with the purpose of encouraging, motivating and enabling the local church to fulfil its scriptural mandate. It represents approximately 100 million Christians around the world. Structurally WEF is polymorphous: it represents about sixty national or regional fellowships, and a variety of denominations, parachurch organizations and individual Christians. The WEF constituency ranges from those who do not observe the sacraments (e.g. Friends) to those for whom sacraments are centrally important to their faith and thought (e.g. some Anglicans and Lutherans). Membership in WEF requires adherence to the Statement of Faith (see Appendix I). Many of the persons who belong to one or other regional national fellowships are members (and leaders) of churches that are also intimately involved in the ecumenical movement. There is, therefore, some overlap of membership.

The WEF is a fellowship of evangelicals. Three characteristics of evangelicals are historically linked to developments in the churches during the last century and a half. The first is a response in the English-speaking world to what was seen as an overemphasis on the sacraments, and to a concomitant devaluation of the need for personal faith in the recipients of the sacraments. This means that evangelicals [p. 292](#) tend to be 'low church' rather than 'high church' (to use terms current in the Anglican world).

A second characteristic of evangelicals is their stress upon the authority of Scripture and its essential doctrines, such as those enunciated in the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. We give priority to such matters as the deity of Jesus Christ (in the strict sense of the Councils), the historicity of his virginal conception and bodily resurrection, the substitutionary nature of his atonement, the primacy of justification as the entry-point into a right relationship with God, the necessity of a personal response of faith to the gospel, the exclusive sufficiency of grace as the ground of our salvation and of faith as the means for appropriating it, the prospect of Christ's personal return, and the truthfulness of the divine revelation embodied in Scripture.

Out of this engagement with sacramentalism and theological liberalism, with their resulting de-emphasis on personal faith and on the need for conversion, a third distinctiveness has arisen: evangelicals sense the urgent need to share the good news in worldwide evangelism with those who have not believed in Jesus Christ. Hence our objection to any reduction of the Christian message to a merely social or political gospel and to the idea that there is saving truth in all religions.

In short, emphasis on personal faith rather than the efficacy of the sacraments, acknowledgement of the supreme authority of Scripture above autonomous reason or the traditions of the churches, and the continuing mandate to evangelize the lost, characterize evangelicals today.

From these characteristics it follows that conversion, seen as the turning from sin to God, is for evangelicals the *sine qua non* for fellowship in the body of Christ.

This does not mean that evangelicals have no interest in the sacraments, nor that they hold that Scripture gives ready-made answers to all of life's complex problems, nor that the traditions of the church may be ignored, nor that we may be insensitive to social injustice. It does mean that in responding to BEM we will analyze the issues raised primarily in the light of our perception of God's normative self-disclosure in Scripture.

Amongst evangelicals there is a growing concern about ecclesiological issues and the need to manifest as clearly as possible the visible unity of the body of Christ. We agree, for instance, that:

- The one holy catholic and apostolic church comprises all who call upon the name of the Lord in truth ([1 Cor. 1:2](#)) and acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord ([1 Cor. 12:3](#)). p. 293
- Membership in this church, the body of Christ, not membership in any denominational affiliation, constitutes our fundamental identity as people of God.
- The prayerful yearning of our Lord, namely that we experience and display, in truth, that oneness that exists between him and the Father, should be a driving force in our lives ([Jn. 17](#)). Visibly to maintain the unity of the Spirit ([Eph. 4:3](#)) and to grow into a unity-in-maturity as we strive to attain to the fulness of the stature of Jesus Christ ([Eph. 4:16](#)) are constituents in our continuing assignment.
- The visible unity of the church should build upon the truth of the whole gospel.
- In anticipation of the consummation, the Holy Spirit is present in the church, empowering it to live a life worthy of the gospel and to proclaim by word and action the mighty deeds of God who called us out of darkness and into his marvellous light ([1 Pet. 2:10](#)).

The WEF Statement of Faith does not contain an article on the church. One reason for this omission is that evangelicals have not generally considered church government, the nature of sacraments and the nature and form of authority in the church to be the most important issues to be faced. Moreover, opinions differ rather widely across the constituency of WEF on the sacraments (or 'ordinances': cf. Appendix II) and church polity. Questions relating to baptism, eucharist and ministry are nevertheless of great interest to evangelicals, though in accordance with our own ecclesiological diversity our evaluations of the BEM proposals vary somewhat.

In this response we will bear in mind the four questions raised by the WCC Commission on Faith and Order (BEM, p. x):

- the extent to which [WEF] can recognize in this text the faith of the Church through the ages;
- the consequences [WEF] can draw from this text for its relations and dialogues with other churches, particularly with those churches which also recognize the text as an expression of the apostolic faith;
- the guidance [WEF] can take from this text for its worship, educational, ethical, and spiritual life and witness;
- the suggestions [WEF] can make for the ongoing work of Faith and Order as it relates the material of this text on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry to its long-range research project 'Towards the Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith Today'. p. 294

We will summarize our response to these questions in the Conclusion.

It is important to note the particular context and origin of the BEM document, made clear in the background and introductory material (see BEM, pp. vii–x; *Churches Respond to BEM 1* [1986], pp. 1–27; *Ecumenical Perspectives on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* [1986], *passim*). The most important point to be considered is that the document is designed to facilitate the process of the union of churches, and therefore it deals with matters which have traditionally hindered this process. Accordingly, it does not set out a fully comprehensive theology of church, ministry and sacraments but deals with areas of difficulty. In many cases these are of a practical and institutional nature, as well as theological and pastoral. Similarly, it seeks to resolve these areas of difficulty by searching for consensus and agreement with a View to establishing grounds for unity where perhaps it had not been anticipated beforehand.

Because of the nature of the WEF and of the origin and history of the BEM document, we cannot respond to the document and the four questions asked of respondents in the same way as denominations and Christian World Communions can, especially those involved directly in the ecumenical process. Nevertheless as members of the body of Christ we express our concern for unity on these issues and therefore submit our observations.

Before dealing with specific points in BEM, there is one major area in which we would offer comment on the document. It concerns the first question about the extent to which we can recognize in this text the faith of the church through the ages. It is one that comes close to the heart of the reason for the existence of the evangelical movement. To facilitate our response, the issue may be formulated as follows: Does the wording of BEM's first question not focus the attention on what is secondary, namely the faith of the church through the ages, rather than on what is primary, that is, the normative witness given in Scripture?

By God's grace, we will approach the BEM document in a spirit of openness and biblical discernment. In dealing with these matters we shall indicate what distinguishes evangelicals from other Christians regarding the issues covered by BEM, and the extent to which our central concerns are reflected in and adopted by BEM.

BAPTISM

A. Introduction

The framers of the Lima document are to be thanked for their valiant p. 295 efforts to achieve some measure of unanimity on so disputed a subject as baptism. On this subject our evaluation is so integrally connected with our unity and diversity as evangelicals that a brief explanation seems prudent.

Because the convictions and values that unite WEF constituents (cf. Preamble) do not include a uniform understanding of baptism, the degree of divergence amongst us on this subject is large. Some of us use the term ‘regeneration’ in connection with baptism (evangelical Lutherans, some Anglicans), Others advocate baptism months or years removed from conversion (some Baptists and others), and still others practice no baptism at all (Salvationists, evangelical Friends).

These differences of opinion turn on such issues as the following: the mode of baptism; how baptism is related to faith—whether or not conscious, personal faith must precede baptism (indeed, the precise function of baptism in Christian experience); how those who are baptized are related to the people of God in the Old Testament; and the degree to which baptism should be interpreted as an individual act and the degree to which it should be interpreted corporately. Because of the place of Scripture in evangelical theology, disputes in these areas resolve into disagreements over the meaning of Scripture. We frankly admit that we have not done all we could to bring these disputes to fair debate around the Scriptures, in an effort both to isolate the precise points of our interpretative disagreements and to resolve them.

Nevertheless, most evangelicals would happily subscribe to such points as these: that Christians should be baptized in obedience to God; that baptism is related to the incorporation of people into the church; that baptism implies unity with Christ, and therefore also with Christ’s death and resurrection; that it is a symbol or a sign (some would add a ‘seal’) of that identification; that it is a means of grace, in the sense that by means of baptism God blesses us and gives us assurance; above all, that sacramentalism (cf. Appendix II) must be rejected as unbiblical.

B. Aspects of the baptism section most evangelicals will appreciate

Among the many features of the Lima document for which most evangelicals will be grateful are the following:

1. The text recognizes the need for conversion and faith (cf. especially B4).
2. The Lima document rightly calls for genuine unity (B2), and p. 296 insists that the evil divisions based on race, sex and status be transcended. At the same time, it guards against language that might be taken to call for the abolition of all distinctive *roles* through baptism.
3. The Lima document rightly relegates the mode of baptism to a position of secondary importance. It properly challenges credobaptists, who insist that conscious faith precede baptism, not to be too stringent about the mode; and paedobaptists to recognize that immersion expresses in the best way the Christian’s participation in the death and resurrection of Christ.
4. On several fronts, the Baptism section of BEM openly admits the differences of opinion found amongst WCC constituents, even while trying to find points of continuity and agreement. We applaud such frankness, convinced that genuine unity can never be achieved by masking differences.
5. We acknowledge the effort of BEM to grapple with the complex historical and liturgical problems associated with the practice of baptism in relation to the gift of the Spirit, personal faith and the corporate life of the church (B14-23). Its proposals challenge evangelicals to develop their own thinking and practice in this area.

C. Aspects of the baptism section with which evangelicals have difficulty

1. *Sacramental language*: we find we cannot approve the sacramentalist language of the entire section (baptism unites, initiates, gives participation, effects). To be sure, many in the WEF constituency would not feel that the problem lies in the language itself since

Reformed theologians have often used similar language. The early Reformers followed the linguistic rule that the sign may stand for the thing signified (i.e. metonymy). Many in the WEF would argue that baptism is not a mere symbol of the grace preceding it, but also an instrument of the grace that it symbolizes (as 'visible word'). The problem, they would argue, is that the sacramental language is not accompanied by an equally firm emphasis on the need for faith, repentance, and conversion, as presuppositions of baptism.

Many WEF constituents would go farther and insist that the clearly sacramentalist language of the Lima document depends far too heavily on church tradition that cannot be traced back to the New Testament itself. Even when conversion and faith properly receive some stress (B4), the clause in question is weakened by being subsumed under an introductory sentence which claims that baptism makes us partakers of [p.297](#) the mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ. The same paragraph (B4) goes so far as to say, 'Thus those baptized are pardoned, cleansed and sanctified by Christ, and are given as part of their baptismal experience a new ethical orientation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.' Again, 'signifies and effects' (B14), implies a sacramentalist causation that few evangelicals could support (though evangelical confessional Lutherans amongst us greatly stress the efficacy of the Word in baptism).

It appears to us that the tensions within the Baptism section of the Lima document are largely confined to sacramentalist controversies (remembering especially the debate on the seal of the Spirit: cf. B14). It is highly significant that the conclusion should be: 'All agree that Christian baptism is in water and the Holy Spirit'. In its context, this statement apparently writes off all non-sacramentalist Christians, who do not tie together water baptism and Holy Spirit baptism as efficacious cause and effect, to say nothing of those who do not practice any baptism (e.g. Salvationists, Friends). In short, most evangelicals will regret the persistently sacramentalist thrust of the entire document.

2. *Use of Scripture*: Many of WEF's constituents would question the baptismal exegesis of BEM (e.g. B2, B3, B4, B5, B6, B8, B9, B10, B19). Amongst the passages quoted are many that do not refer to water-baptism ([1 Cor. 12:13](#) of paramount importance). Most would find considerable difficulty with the appeal BEM makes to [In. 3:5](#); [1 Cor. 6:11](#); [Tit. 3:5](#); [Heb. 10:22](#), to cite but a few examples.

3. *Mere appearance of agreement*: It appears to us that the framers of BEM too frequently use language that is patient of mutually exclusive interpretations. If we are not mistaken in this impression, we must ask whether genuine unity is achieved when each party reads BEM in such a way that the presence of mutually unacceptable opinions is actually hidden.

To take but two examples, all will happily accept the words 'the Lord who bestows his grace upon his people' (B1), but some will worry that the context implies that these words mean God bestows his grace 'at baptism', 'in baptism', or 'in consequence of baptism'. The theological problem at issue is not mere automaticity, for sacramentalist theology strongly maintains the need of faith for *fruitful* reception of the sacraments; it is the problem of a grace-conveying role distinct from that of signification ('visible word'). Again, 'means' in the statement 'Baptism *means* participating in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ' (B3) is ambiguous, for it may refer to the thing signified or to the operation of the rite itself. [p.298](#)

Further, silence on some issues may (doubtless unwittingly) convey a greater impression of agreement than is in fact the case. For instance, although the Lima document makes it clear that faith is the required condition for fruitful reception of baptism (B8), and although the Commentary gently takes to task those churches that practice infant baptism 'in an apparently indiscriminate way' (BCom 21), neither makes clear what faith is required. BEM does not rule out the Roman Catholic view that the

absence of conscious objection (*obex*) is a sufficient condition for infant regeneration. Most evangelicals, regardless of their views of paedobaptism, would judge such an uncertainty to be a serious liability.

4. *Grounding unity in baptism*: To base unity on the rite of baptism is entirely foreign to Scripture, since [1 Cor. 12:13](#) does not refer to water-baptism. Biblical unity is based on union with Christ through the Spirit's indwelling ([Rom. 8](#)). The full measure of such unity requires agreement in faith; nevertheless our human limitations require that present church unity be based on agreement on the *essentials* of the faith. The rite of baptism is an important issue to the question of union and unity, to the extent that it is related to fellowship with Christ.

BEM's appeal for 'mutual recognition of baptism' (B15, B16) is probably both easier and more difficult within an evangelical framework than within some other traditions. Evangelical distinctives, such as concern for doctrinal truth and the unmasking of merely nominal Christian profession, make the mutual recognition of baptism a difficult matter indeed. Add to this that evangelicals do not agree on the issue of paedobaptism versus credobaptism, any more than do Christians who would not align themselves with the evangelical movement. On the other hand, evangelicals often achieve quite remarkable degrees of unity with other evangelicals at the local level, despite considerable differences in churchmanship. Moreover, a number of evangelical denominations allow individual clergy to follow their own conscience in the matter of baptism, while encouraging them to accept the baptism of quite different traditions. This is possible precisely because for most evangelicals baptism does not loom as large an issue in inter-church cooperation as it does for many others.

5. *The statement on 're-baptism'*: This occurs as the culmination of an historical and theological vignette of the rise and significance of the diverse baptismal practices found within the church today (B11–B13). Although most credobaptists amongst WEF constituents would question the likelihood 'that infant baptism was also practiced in the apostolic age' (B11), the rest of the historical vignette in this section is p. 299 unobjectionable. However, many statements in B12 seem to becloud the issue (e.g. the faithfulness of Christ as the ground of baptism is not relevant in this particular debate). The distinction 'between those who baptize people at any age and those who baptize only those able to make a confession of faith for themselves' (BCom 12) holds interest, but the real distinction, as we see it, is between those who baptize only those who do make a confession of faith for themselves, whatever their age, and those who do not. Both positions require similar attitudes to Christian nurture; this point is well taken. Nevertheless, historic credobaptist conviction cannot accept the two positions as 'equivalent alternatives', for the simple reason that credobaptists, to be consistent, normally consider paedobaptism to be no baptism at all.

In BEM (B15, BCom 12), essential disagreements between paedobaptists and credobaptists are treated as if they were differences in emphasis only. In reality, the differences are historic and profound. What is quite clear is that, in the nature of the case, no credobaptist (including the Baptist, Brethren, many free churches, almost all Pentecostals) can accept the proposition that 'any practice which might be interpreted as "re-baptism" must be avoided' (B13). Credobaptist conviction, by and large, is that re-baptism is a misnomer. The plea in BEM amounts to asking credobaptists to renounce their conviction. By thus writing off more than half of Protestants around the world, BEM becomes needlessly divisive.

EUCCHARIST

A. Introduction

Especially since the sixteenth century, the bread of fellowship has become a major source of discord in Christendom. The framers of the Lima document entered a sensitive area indeed: they deserve our appreciation and their work requires rigorous scrutiny.

Evangelicals differ widely on the importance and the nature of the Lord's Supper. The views range from a minority who do not observe the ordinance at all to those for whom it is an integral part of Christian worship, and from those who consider the Lord's Supper only as a symbolic remembering of Christ's death to those who maintain that Christ is bodily present under the elements of bread and wine. Nevertheless, we would generally agree on the following:

1. that the Lord's Supper commemorates the death of Christ for our sin and points to our communion with Christ in an eternal kingdom; p. 300
2. that it is a means by which God blesses and strengthens us, though without spiritual grace being imparted through the physical elements;
3. that participating with faith and a clear conscience is essential;
4. that a sacramentalist understanding of the Lord's Supper should be rejected (cf. Appendix II); and
5. that the understanding of the Lord's Supper as a sacrifice we offer with Christ is unacceptable.

Our concern in this evaluation of the Eucharist section of BEM has been to assess the depth of the agreement reached, to see whether it can accommodate evangelical orientations on faith and church order pertaining to the Lord's Supper, and to evaluate the document in the light of the apostolic teaching of the New Testament.

B. Areas where evangelicals appreciate the eucharist section

Among the emphases for which evangelicals are grateful are the following:

1. The text stresses that the sacrifice of Christ on the cross is unique and unrepeatable (E10).
2. BEM affirms that only through the Holy Spirit is Christ present in the Lord's Supper.
3. The text recognizes communion as 'the meal of the New Covenant—as the anticipation of the Supper of the Lamb' (E1).
4. The section of thanksgiving acknowledges that 'this sacrifice of praise is possible only through Christ' (E4).
5. The Lima document acknowledges that the celebration of holy communion includes the proclamation of the Word—indeed, it is itself an effective proclamation of God's mighty acts and promises (E3, 7, 27).
6. The text affirms that sharing in the Lord's Supper demonstrates the oneness of God's people, and makes plain that personal and social ethical demands are entailed by participation in the eucharist (E19-21).

C. Aspects of the eucharist section with which evangelicals have difficulty

This section reflects rather fully, although in moderate tones, a sacramentalist view, as distinguished from an evangelical one. The word 'eucharist', historically little used in Protestant churches, may p. 301 already indicate this slant. (We recognize, however, that the term is less important than the substance.)

Sacramentalist emphases are obvious in the following traits:

1. The eucharist is hailed as ‘the central act of the Church’s worship’ (E1) and alluded to in mysteric terms: Christ, as he presides at the meal, is ‘the priest who celebrates the mystery of God’ (E29).

2. The eucharist is considered the means by which, or the locus in which, the grace of God is actually communicated to the faithful. Although some formulations might be understood in a weaker sense, the repetition of the theme strongly suggests a sacramentalist meaning. This impression is reinforced by the description of the rite as an ‘effective sign’ (E5—the traditional Roman Catholic definition of a sacrament).

3. The rite is interpreted in terms of ‘real presence’, a real presence so unique and so closely related to the elements (E13) that it remains a property of the elements after the celebration itself is over (E15). Presumably this view underlies the appeal to respect the practice of the reservation of the elements (E32). BEM refrains from using the term ‘transubstantiation’ (E13 and ECom 15) but allows the concept within the range of acceptable options, a point implicitly acknowledged by the Commentary (‘the deepest reality is the total being of Christ’ [ECom 15] states this dogma in non-technical language).

4. The eucharist is emphatically understood as a sacrifice of praise offered to the Father (E3, 4, 23), and as intercession that the church offers not only through Christ but also in communion with Christ (E8). Indeed, after initially and rightly emphasizing that the eucharist is the ‘sacrament of the gift which God makes to us in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit’ (E2), BEM’s discussion predominantly construes the Lord’s Supper in terms of what we offer to God. The *anamnesis* (‘memorial’) theme is used to justify the idea of a ‘representation’ beyond ‘a calling to mind of what is past and of its significance’ (E7): the idea of memorial, we are told, ‘refers to this present efficacy of God’s work’ (E5). At least in the Commentary, the unique and unrepeatable sacrifice of the cross is understood to be ‘made actual’ (Comm. 8). It is in this context, we are told, that the traditional Roman Catholic designation of the eucharist as ‘propitiatory sacrifice’ may be understood. This construction is satisfactory neither to traditional Roman Catholics nor to evangelicals.

5. The BEM claim that the world is ‘present in the whole eucharist celebration’ seems to us to be not only unduly speculative but without Scriptural sanction. The eucharist, we are told, ‘is the great sacrifice of p.302 praise by which the Church speaks on behalf of the whole creation’ (E4, 22, 23).

6. We question whether the need for faith for reception of the rite has received adequate attention in the document. Though one may presume that for BEM, as for the whole Christian tradition, the sacraments are sacraments of faith, it is remarkable that the only reference to faith in the eucharist section of BEM is related to ‘discerning the body and blood of Christ’ (E13). Most evangelicals believe that God effectively grants his gift of grace through the Lord p. Supper only when the promise of the gospel in the sacrament as the ‘visible word’ is apprehended by faith. Stressing the necessity of personal faith is a way of honouring the freedom of the Spirit and the purity of justification without works.

In short, BEM’s strong sacramentalist emphasis and its relative silence on other views appear to marginalize non-sacramentalist understandings of the Lord’s Supper.

D. The Eucharist and the New Testament

It appears to us that extra-biblical (though traditional) developments have been used, consciously or unconsciously, as the hermeneutical key in BEM’s study of the New Testament, and this we consider an unfortunate choice. Scripture can play its normative role with respect to the human process of reception and application in the church, only when it interprets itself. By this we do not mean that human interpreters can cut themselves off from their cultural understanding and heritage, but that the unique

revelatory status of Scripture must be preserved: in our understanding, Scripture judges all cultures, and not the reverse.

The following points might be mentioned:

1. Though we want to stress that the Lord's Supper is an integral part of what Christians do when they gather together ([1 Cor. 11:2](#)), the primary focus on such occasions is the declaration of the Word of God so that God's people may worship him in word and deed: 'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God' ([Col. 3:16](#); cf. [Rom. 12:1-2](#)).

2. Biblical passages on the Lord's Supper offer little warrant for the idea of causal efficacy attributed to the sacrament. Most evangelicals would not apply the words of Jesus in [In. 6](#) directly to the eucharistic elements. As to the communication of saving grace, the constant [p. 303](#) emphasis in the New Testament falls on the mediation of the preached Word of God.

3. Similarly, most evangelicals (but not all) will accept that careful exegesis of the words of institution—'This is my body ...'—finds no intimation of a change affecting the bread and the wine, apart from the adding of their new function and meaning as signs. To us, the truth of the ascension ([In. 20:17](#); [Acts 3:21](#)) raises insuperable difficulties with the logic of 'real presence', in the sense of bodily presence.

4. As to sacrificial language, it is strikingly absent from New Testament references to the Lord's Supper. 'Eucharist' (Greek *eucharistia*), to be sure, is a New Testament word for the Christian sacrifice of praise: but it refers to the accompanying prayer, not to the meal itself ([1 Cor. 11:24](#); [14:16](#)). The fact that thanks is offered does not transform the meal into a thank-offering. No clear proof from Scripture may be adduced to support the BEM conception of 'memorial' as 'making present' or 'actual' a past event. Although BEM affirms the unrepeatable nature of Christ's sacrifice (E8), its construction of 'memorial' undermines this affirmation and conflicts with the New Testament emphasis on the once-for-all character of the atonement, set forth, for example, in the Epistle to the Hebrews. Proclamation, yes ([1 Cor. 11:26](#)); actualized sacrifice, no.

These biblical considerations on the Lord's Supper must be seen in the context of the evangelical understanding of the gospel. It is centred in Christ's redeeming work on the cross where he died for our sin as our righteous Substitute. On the basis of this work of Christ the Christian church lives, not as an institution that dispenses salvation, but as a community of those who have been justified by grace and who proclaim salvation. Our assessment of BEM's understanding of the Lord's Supper stems therefore from our deep conviction about the essentials of Christian faith.

MINISTRY

A. An evangelical approach to ministry

In accordance with biblical usage, 'ministry' refers first of all to the varied service by the whole people of God. It consists in the communal or personal communication of the blessings of the gospel. These relate to initial salvation, edification and the meeting of other human needs. As a result of this service or ministry, its recipients become aware of God's presence and power and more attuned to his will and purpose. [p. 304](#)

The term 'the ministry' (or 'minister') may be used to refer to the officially appointed ministers working within a reasonably structured situation. The purpose of the 'appointed ministers' is to equip others for the work of ministry ([Eph. 4:11-13](#)). One should not infer, however, that effective ministry is in any way restricted to this group of

people as they function in formal situations. Nor is it to be supposed that by virtue of such membership or appointment members of this group possess any permanent character or qualities. The key dynamic is God working in the ‘ministers’ (official or unofficial) to enable them to become channels of his gracious presence.

The ways in which the officially appointed ministry is exercised are many. These are not restricted to any set list, but range from personal testimony to all kinds of serving relationships. The titles that may be given to formally appointed, official ministers vary, often according to the type of activity in which they are involved. Such names include bishop, pastor, elder, deacon, evangelist, missionary, preacher, counsellor. These are primarily functional terms rather than being indicative of status. Official appointment (which may be known as ‘ordination’ or ‘induction’ or ‘commissioning’ or ‘setting apart’) implies recognition of a God-given ministry. While such appointment may confer certain authority within the group making the appointment (and those in fellowship with it), this authority is conditional upon continued exercise of faithful ministry. Such formal appointment or ordination is not *necessary* for ministry.

The qualities required in a person for fruitful ministry include prior gifting by God, spiritual sensitivity and maturity, trust in and obedience to God. Normally such ministry cannot be exercised without a sense of divine calling and an obedient response. Faithfulness and fruitfulness in ministry depend on obedience to the guidance of God and on the continual blessing of God. Such ministry calls for acknowledgement and intercession on the part of those whom it serves.

These are, in brief, some of the distinguishing features of the concept of ministry held by most evangelicals. Many evangelical churches exhibit these features in whole or in part and consider them to be biblical, rather than simply denominational or historical.

It is to be noted that some issues treated as basic in the BEM report (such as ‘validity’ and ‘apostolic succession’) are also important in an evangelical approach to church and ministry. Nevertheless, we deal with them in ways so different from BEM, and so commonly express them in other terminology, that they are hardly recognized as the same issues. It is therefore difficult for us to comment directly on those parts [p. 305](#) of BEM that touch on these particular technical terms; the underlying issues themselves need to be identified and discussed. It is at this fundamental level that WEF wishes to interact with the BEM section on ministry.

SPECIFIC COMMENTS

1. The calling of the whole people of God (M1–6)

In general, the first six paragraphs of the Ministry section of BEM set out a valid framework for considering the question of Christian ministry, with their focus on the sinful state of humankind, the redemptive work of Christ, and the calling of the people of God through the Spirit. We applaud the fact that reflection on ministry is set within the context of the question, ‘How, according to the will of God and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is the life of the Church to be understood and ordered, so that the Gospel may be spread and the community built up in love?’ (M6).

Given the significant differences amongst Christians ‘in their understanding of how the life of the Church is to be ordered’ and especially of ‘the place and forms of the ordained ministry’ (M6), it is understandable that the theme of ordained ministry should have been singled out for special consideration. Nevertheless, it is a pity that, in seeking to answer the fundamental question about the way the church is to be ordered, the Lima document largely fails to capitalize on the excellent foundation laid in M1-6. Instead, it largely restricts its discussion to the traditional patterns of ordained professional clergy.

By focusing its attention on this topic, BEM has perpetuated the problem by defining church unity in the narrow terms of the nature and role of the ordained clergy, rather than placing it in the broader context of the ministry of ‘the whole people of God’.

2. The church and the ordained ministry (M7–18) and ordination (M39–55)

While the observation that ‘the church has never been without persons holding specific authority and responsibility’ (M9) is unobjectionable, BEM’s understanding of the nature and role of such ministry presents serious problems. We will deal with the following: the constitutive role ascribed to the ministry of official clergy; the designation of a particular form of ministry as priestly; the sacramental understanding of ordination; the notion of the ordained ministry as the focus of unity; the ordination of women.

First, we find it incompatible with the New Testament to claim that the ordained ministry, or the service of persons who are ‘publicly and [p. 306](#) continually responsible’ for the church, is ‘constitutive for the life and witness of the church’ (M8). Rather, the church is constituted by the presence of the resurrected Christ through the Holy Spirit in the believing community ([Mt. 18:20](#); [28:16–20](#)), the members of which minister as the priestly people of God to one another and to the world. The ordained ministers can be validly described as ‘representatives of Jesus Christ to the community’ (M11), as long as it is clear that they represent Christ in a way that is not *essentially* different from the way in which any believer is called and gifted to represent Christ.

Second, evangelicals query the suggestion that presidency of the eucharistic celebration might legitimate calling ministers ‘priests’ (M17); they would not find in the metaphorical language of [Rom. 15:16](#) a warrant for a ministerial priesthood distinct from the priesthood of all believers (cf. [1 Pet. 2:10](#)).

Third, undoubtedly the ordained minister can be—and often has been—a ‘focus of unity’. Normally ministers are qualified to guide the Christian community according to God’s Word, and it is the duty of the members to follow this guidance. The moral authority of the minister and his loyalty in expounding the Scripture are an important force to keep the church united in the bond of peace. But the ordained ministry in itself is not a guarantee against strife and division; indeed, the ordained ministry can be the source of such strife. And it must also be said that unity has often been reached or maintained at the cost of serious doctrinal deviations.

Fourth, reservations must be expressed when BEM claims that in the rite of ordination the authority of Jesus Christ is conferred on the minister (M15). From the biblical point of view the problematic nature of such conferral is compounded by the sacramental understanding of ordination elaborated in M39–50. Though BEM stresses the importance of the involvement of the congregation, the invocation of the power of the Spirit and the commitment of the ordinand (M41–44), ordination is still said to be ‘a sign performed in faith that the spiritual relationship signified is present in, with and through the words spoken, the gestures made and the forms employed’ (M43).

Fifth, considering ordination as conferring this special status also compounds the difficulties for some churches in regard to the role of women in ministry. It is therefore not surprising that BEM offers no solution to the controversy over this matter, but simply expresses the need for further study of the issue. But the theological problems are considerably simplified if ordination is seen as public recognition by the church of a call to exercise a spiritual gift for ministry and the commitment of the church to the support of the gifted person in the [p. 307](#) exercise of his or her ministry. In this case, ‘male-ness’ or ‘female-ness’ is not the primary issue, but gift and calling. Amongst evangelicals the question is whether or how the constraints on certain types of ministries in the New Testament (e.g. [1 Tim 2:12](#)) apply today.

3. The forms of the ordained ministry (M19–33) and succession in the apostolic tradition (M34–38)

BEM suggests that ‘the threefold ministry of bishop, presbyter and deacon may serve today as an expression of the unity we seek and also as a means for achieving it’ (M22). Yet BEM makes this proposal despite its acknowledgement that no such precedence can be established from the New Testament (M19, 22), that the form of the threefold pattern itself has changed remarkably over the centuries, and that currently it ‘stands evidently in need of reform’ (M24). The only reason given for recommending the threefold ministry as an expression of unity or as a means for achieving it is that of historical development. For an evangelical this is clearly insufficient warrant. Why should the contemporary church be narrower in its understanding of ministry than the New Testament, where we find a variety of forms of ministry (cf. M19)? To press for a specific, hierarchical form of ‘threefold ministry’ is to turn a legitimate diversity into a divisive issue. Thus BEM’s commendation of the threefold ministry achieves the opposite of what is intended.

Historical development is also taken as the basis for a particular understanding of the apostolic succession. It is argued that the ‘succession of bishops became one of the ways ... in which the apostolic tradition of the Church was expressed’ (M36). Accordingly, it is claimed that non-episcopal churches should see the virtue of the episcopacy, especially when it is recognized that ‘the reality and function of the episcopal ministry have been preserved in many of these churches’ without the use of the word ‘bishop’ (M37). ‘Apostolic tradition’ is understood as ‘continuity with the apostles and their proclamation’ and ‘continuity in the permanent characteristics of the Church of the apostles’ (M34), such as witness and proclamation of the gospel, fellowship, service and worship. If apostolic tradition were to be understood in this sense only, then the primacy ascribed to ‘apostolic tradition’ would mean the acknowledgement of Scripture as critical norm over all subsequent tradition, a position to which evangelicals subscribe. But in BEM ‘apostolic tradition’ also refers to the extended tradition handed down and preserved by the churches in unbroken episcopal succession. In that case, the normative Scriptures become subservient to the church tradition.

Most evangelicals feel that the plea BEM makes for episcopacy a [p. 310](#) communions is an incentive to us to bring our understanding of Scripture to bear in the dialogue with other communions.

3. Because our perspective on the authority of Scripture, the nature of salvation, the role of the church, and the means of grace differs from the prevailing views of BEM, evangelicals are less likely than some others to use the Lima document for guidance in matters of worship and witness. Those amongst us, however, who have tended to underestimate the importance and value of the Lord’s Supper should be encouraged to review their theology and practice.

4. We wish to encourage Faith and Order in its endeavour to focus on the substance of the faith as the basis for true unity. We pray therefore that the long-range project ‘Towards the Common Expression of the Apostolic Faith Today’ will serve to that end. We make two suggestions:

a. that in the quest for unity in faith, the Scriptures function as supreme norm, and that traditions, including our own, be regarded as *interpretative* traditions—themselves subject to Scripture;

b. that in this project Faith and Order take into account more carefully the convictions of the millions of active believers who live and serve Christ in the context of a non-sacramentalist understanding of Christianity.

At the same time, we frankly acknowledge that the failure of Faith and Order to do so in the past has in part stemmed from our failure to make our views known clearly,

charitably and persistently. We would like to think that this response will contribute something to that end.

APPENDIX I

WORLD EVANGELICAL FELLOWSHIP STATEMENT OF FAITH

We believe in the *Holy Scriptures* as originally given by God, divinely inspired, infallible, entirely trustworthy; and the supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct;
One God, eternally existent in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit;
Our *Lord Jesus Christ*, God manifest in the flesh, His virgin birth, His sinless human life, His divine miracles, His vicarious and atoning death, His bodily resurrection, His ascension, His mediatorial work, and His personal return in power and glory;
The *Salvation* of lost and sinful man through the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ by faith apart from works, and regeneration by the Holy Spirit; [p. 311](#)
The *Holy Spirit*, by whose indwelling the believer is enabled to live a holy life, to witness and work for the Lord Jesus Christ;
The *Unity of the Spirit* of all true believers, the Church, the Body of Christ;
The *Resurrection* of both the saved and the lost; they that are saved unto the resurrection of life, they that are lost unto the resurrection of damnation.

APPENDIX II

MYSTERY, SACRAMENT, ORDINANCE

Part of the contemporary debate on baptism, eucharist and ministry lies hidden behind the terminology. Indeed, the stance of many evangelicals cannot easily be understood apart from an appreciation of some terminological developments during the earliest centuries of the Christian era.

Although the term ‘sacrament’ does not appear in BEM until B23, in the eyes of most readers of all persuasions, evangelicals included, the approach toward baptism, eucharist and ministry in this document is evidently ‘sacramentalist’. Unfortunately, ‘sacrament’ and ‘sacramentalist’ have diverse meanings for different speakers and writers. Some review of the rise and the use of the terms therefore seems advisable.

In contemporary evangelicalism, some define ‘sacrament’ as a religious rite instituted by Jesus Christ. With so simple a definition, few would find theological difficulty. Even credobaptists (i.e. those who believe that only those who articulate their own faith should be baptized) would not find fault with the first known application of the term to baptism, found in Pliny’s letters. Writing to Trajan, Pliny describes what he has learned from apostate Christians of early Christian faith and practice:

... they had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately among themselves in honour of Christ as if to a god, *and also to bind themselves by oath* [Lat. *dicere secure invicem seque sacramento*], not for any criminal purpose, but to abstain from theft...
(Letters X. xcvi. 7)

Scholars usually recognize that ‘oath’ (*sacramentum*) refers to baptismal vows.

The history of the church shows that from this earliest usage three linguistic developments contributed to the contemporary situation.

First, the Greek term *mystērion* (‘mystery’ in older English versions of the New Testament, often ‘secret’ in more recent versions) was [p. 312](#) applied to the Lord’s Supper and to baptism, even though no such use is found in the New Testament. The word designated in common parlance the secret ceremonies which lay at the heart of various

‘mystery-religions’, as they are called for that very reason; the central rites were thought to mediate divine benefits. The mystery-religions were forms of devotion warmer and more personal than the official exercises of city and imperial religion. Because they had a considerable appeal throughout the Roman Empire in the first centuries of our era, contacts with Christianity were inevitable. Superficial similarities between the mystery-rites and the church’s baptism and holy supper made it an easy step to transfer the term *mystērion* to the Christian observances.

Second, an effort was then made to relate this new usage to the teaching of the New Testament. The argument was one of analogy: just as miracles and signs are the visible manifestation of the powerful presence of the *mystery* of the kingdom ([Mk. 4:11](#) par.), just as Jesus’ physical body is the visible demonstration of the *mystery* of the Word made flesh ([1 Tim. 3:16](#)), and just as the church is the bodily manifestation of Christ, expressing the *mystery* of the relationship between Christ and the church ([Eph. 5:32](#)), so also the bread and wine are the visible manifestations of the presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper—and therefore another ‘mystery’. That link is not made in the New Testament, where *mystērion* almost exclusively refers to divine revelation in some measure hidden in previous ages but now revealed in the coming and teaching of Jesus Christ and his Spirit-anointed disciples.

Third, the Greek word *mystērion* was translated into Latin by the term *sacramentum*, from which our word ‘sacrament’ derives. The Latin *sacramentum* meant ‘a thing set apart as sacred’ and, more specifically, referred to ‘a military oath of obedience as administered by the commander’. In the latter sense, it had been used very early for Christian baptism, as we have seen in Pliny’s quotation, in harmony with the popular simile of the church as the ‘militia of Christ’. As the rendering for *mystērion*, however, ‘sacrament’ took over the connotations of the Greek word, and the idea of ritual efficacy, for salvation and blessings, attached to it. That was reinforced by the association with sacredness. Later generations within the Roman Catholic and Orthodox branches of the church not only elevated the sacraments to a place of prominence in the church’s worship, but increasingly stressed that sacraments are efficacious signs, conveying the grace that they contain, and that grace is communicated by virtue of the rite. [p. 313](#)

Since this view, which may be called sacramentalism, lacks biblical support, it is rejected by most evangelicals. Because of its connotations some of them studiously avoid the use of the word ‘sacrament’ itself; they rather speak of ‘ordinances’, i.e. things which the Lord has ordained. [p. 314](#)

Attesting the Evangel Evangelically: Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism

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