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Ecclesiology in the Breach: Evangelical Soundings

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INTRODUCTION: ECCLESIOLOGICAL HURDLES

Writing a discussion paper on ecclesiology from an Evangelical perspective for a consultation with Roman Catholic theologians, one faces multiple hurdles. Though two of these are common to any ecclesiology, both are 'evangelically' compounded. The first is the dilemma inherent in the profession of the unity of the church in the face of its evident brokenness: in elaborating an ecclesiology one must write about *the* church, the *one* church¹—yet one can do so only from the perspective of a *partial segment* of the one church. The other problem that is common to all ecclesiological discussion is closely related to the dilemma of division, in fact, may be considered as an explication of this dilemma. Current ecumenical discussion has placed ecclesiology centre-stage: greater visible unity can be achieved only as basic ecclesiological differences are resolved. But especially those traditions with the most highly developed ecclesiologies are loath to relativize their ecclesiology as a *particular* ecclesiology, a unique, tradition-shaped window through which one views the *one church*. The 1950 Toronto statement, in fact, enshrines this problem within the heart of the ecumenical movement. After insisting that the World Council of Churches 'cannot and should not be based on any one particular conception of the church', the statement allows that membership in the Council 'does not imply that a church treats its own conception of the Church as merely relative', nor does it imply that each church must regard the other member churches as churches in the true and full sense of the word'.² While all traditions face the ecclesiological problem of the single and multiple, the one and broken church, this conundrum is compounded when examining ecclesiology from an evangelical perspective. This complication will become clear in examining the particular hurdles that lie in the way of elaborating an evangelical ecclesiological approach.

¹ 1. See Roger Haight, 'On Systematic Ecclesiology', *Toronto Journal of Theology* 8 (1992): 220–238; '... the object of ecclesiology must be the whole or universal church' (pp. 220–221). Already the Reformers were aware of the conundrum of the one-broken-church. Rolf Ahlers states that, in drafting the *Confessio Augustana*, 'Melancthon specifically avoided including a separate doctrine of the church lest it be mistaken for a doctrine of a separate church'; see Rolf Ahlers, 'The "Community of Brethren": The Contemporary Significance of the Third Thesis of Barnmen', *Calvin Theological Journal* 20 (1985): 7–31; citation from p. 9.

² 2. Michael Kinnamon and Brian E. Cope, eds., *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices* (Geneva: WCC, 1997), pp. 465, 467.

If there is one theological area in which evangelicalism is weak, it is ecclesiology.³ Many evangelical statements of faith lack an article on the church altogether, except for a reference to the spiritual unity of believers. Thus the 'Statement of Faith' of the National Association of Evangelicals (USA) affirms in its seventh and last article, 'We believe in the spiritual unity of believers in our Lord Jesus Christ'.⁴ While the World Evangelical Fellowship's 'Statement of Faith', by contrast, does refer to 'the Church' and 'the Body of Christ', such corporate language does not appear to go beyond the spiritual unity of individual believers that is mentioned in preceding apposite phrase: ['We believe in'] 'The Unity of the Spirit of all true believers, the Church, the Body of Christ'.⁵ It is not surprising therefore to observe that the World Evangelical Fellowship response to *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* states that the WEF Statement of Faith 'does not contain an article on the church'.⁶

Evangelical authors increasingly recognize ecclesiology as a serious weakness. Stanley Grenz calls the doctrine of the church 'the neglected stepchild of evangelical theology'.⁷ Donald Bloesch speaks of the 'appalling neglect of ecclesiology' in evangelicalism.⁸ In view of this deficiency, the WEF Theological Commission meeting in London in 1996, formulated some basic ecclesiological affirmations. In addition it recommended that the WEF 'undertake an intensive study . . . to consider revising the WEF Basis of Faith to produce a clearer statement on the church'. Further, the Commission recommended 'that the WEF institute a commission on evangelical ecclesiology to implement' the recommendations on ecclesiology.⁹

An additional hurdle in elaborating an evangelical perspective on ecclesiology lies in the diversity within evangelicalism regarding a basic ecclesiological building block, namely, baptism. While the majority of evangelicals practise 'believer's baptism', if baptism at all, a significant segment of those who are counted as evangelicals (e.g., Anglican and Reformed evangelicals) practise pedobaptism.¹⁰ Clearly, communions that

³ 3. Recent works by evangelical theologians are beginning to address this deficiency. See David Watson, *I Believe in the Church: The Revolutionary Potential of the Family of God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978); Bruce J. Nicholls, ed., *The Church: God's Agent for Change* (Exeter, UK: Paternoster, 1986; Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995); Everett Feguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Theology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996). While directly challenging the Roman Catholic criticism regarding the ecclesiological deficit among evangelicals, Timothy George indirectly concedes that the criticism is not without ground; Timothy George, 'What I'd Like to Tell the Pope About the Church', (*Christianity Today*, June 15, 1998): 41–44.

⁴ 4. See Arthur H. Matthews, *Standing Up, Standing Together: The Emergence of the National Association of Evangelicals* (Carol Stream, IL: NAE, 1992), p. 55; or W. Harold Fuller, [People of the Mandate: The Story of the World Evangelical Fellowship](#) (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), p. 181.

⁵ 5. See David M. Howard, *The Dream that Would not Die: The Birth and Growth of the World Evangelical Fellowship, 1846–1986*. (Exeter: Paternoster, 1986), p. 31.

⁶ 6. Paul Schrottenboer, ed., 'An Evangelical Response to Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry', [Evangelical Review of Theology](#) 13 (1989): 291–313.

⁷ 7. Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), p. 165.

⁸ 8. Donald G. Bloesch, *The Future of Evangelical Christianity* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983), p. 127.

⁹ 9. 'Faith and Hope for the Future: Towards a Vital and Coherent Evangelical Theology for the 21st Century. Summary Reports of the Working Groups', [Evangelical Review of Theology](#) 21 (1997): here citing pp. 21–22.

¹⁰ 10. In his 'Typology of Evangelicalism', Peter Toon, borrowing from a paper by Kevin Offner, lists twelve types, including 'Reformed', 'Anabaptist', 'Neo-orthodox', 'Charismatic', 'Fundamentalist', 'Social-action',

baptize infants are far more likely to emphasize the corporate nature of the body of Christ than communions that baptize only upon profession of faith. Without ignoring the important place of the pedobaptist evangelicals, I shall try to do justice to the more formidable challenge which the majority evangelical position presents to the present consultation.

Since an evangelical starting point provides, at best, a minimalist ecclesiology, and since the inclusion of infants in the Christian communion can not be assumed, the attempt to present 'evangelical ecclesiological soundings' appears to be an impossibility. Nevertheless, we embark on an evangelical voyage to chart routes through troubled ecclesiological waters believing that the separated communions cannot be isolated islands. Even amidst brokenness and splintering, there can be only one church to explore.

I have called this exploration 'ecclesiology in the breach'. This points to ecclesiology as both a problem and as a pointer to a solution. Ecclesiology is a problem in that it participates in the breach: ecclesiology is inevitably written from one side of brokenness. On the other hand, ecclesiology, rightly pursued, points to a solution: it intends the one church. One can speak ecclesologically only from within one part of a broken church but one must speak about the church that is in a real sense one. Ignoring one's locus in brokenness leads either to sectarian particularism or to imperialistic universalism. Both mutilate the catholicity of the one church.

In embarking on evangelical soundings, I shall focus initially on an existing dialogue document and on Catholic and Evangelical responses to an ecumenical document. In spite of the enormous breach between the evangelical and the Roman Catholic tradition, we are in the happy position of having the common statement entitled *The Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission*,¹¹ and a commentary by both traditions on *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*.¹²

In the present discussion on 'church and mission' the key issues of the first consultation, justification by faith and the authority of Scripture,¹³ return with concentrated and existential force. Ecclesiology is not a new and disparate topic. It concerns an arena where the key dividing issues—if they are not abstract theological tenets—are played out. Jean Marie Tillard maintains that ' "justification by faith" is not the basic question. It is related to a more fundamental issue. The problem lies in the relation between Christ, Church and the Word of God'.¹⁴ Cited long before it was clear whether this consultation would continue, let alone what the topics of a future consultation might be, Tillard's analysis mentioned in my previous paper is even more pertinent for the present consultation:

What Tillard has in mind is the 'instrumental role' of the church in salvation. Once more we are very close to the issue of Scripture and Tradition. Tillard maintains that it is 'impossible to hear the Word of God without hearing it in the voice of the Church'. Though

and 'Liturgical-sacramental Evangelicalism' (in *The End of Liberal Theology: Contemporary Challenges to Evangelical Orthodoxy* [Wheaton, ILL: Crossway Books, 1995], pp. 213–215).

¹¹ 11. Basil Meeking and John Stott, eds., *The Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission 1977–1984* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986). The document *Roman Catholicism: A Contemporary Evangelical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989) will also be consulted for additional comment.

¹² 12. For the Roman Catholic response, see Max Thurian, ed., *Churches Respond to BEM*, vol. 6 (Geneva: WCC, 1988), pp. 1–40; for the WEF response, see note 4 above.

¹³ 13. See [Evangelical Review of Theology](#) 21 (1997):100–153.

¹⁴ 14. J-M R. Tillard, 'We Are Different', *Midstream* 25 (1985): 281. Cited in my paper for the *Venice Consultation*, October 19

coming from God, the Word is revealed through a process in which the community itself, in the Old and the New Covenant, is profoundly involved and plays an important role. The 'basic divisive problem', according to Tillard, 'is the conception of the nature of the Church'.¹⁵

Ecclesiology, therefore, may be regarded as a study of the living matrix of the key issues of disagreement between distinct communions. More specifically, Tillard identifies the underlying issue, namely, the question concerning the role of the church in relation to salvation. The key issue interwoven with the major questions—justification by faith, Scripture and tradition, authority, sacraments, ministry—is indeed ecclesial mediation. We shall explore this as the ecclesial issue in the Roman Catholic—evangelical breach. To avoid repeating the discussions of the previous consultation, I shall not deal directly with the issue of justification nor with the specifics of the relation between Scripture and Tradition. Rather, I shall deal more broadly with the relationships between Word, Sacrament, Ministry, and Mission. I shall first present evangelical concerns regarding Roman Catholic understandings of ecclesial mediation. This critique will be presented not for its own sake but for in order to uncover the implicit evangelical ecclesial lineaments. This approach will inevitably uncover the breach. Subsequently, I will explore what may be required from both sides if the breach is to be at least navigable.

In the Breach: Ecclesial Mediation

We will start with the issue of sacraments. This issue concerns not merely the meaning and role of particular sacraments, but the meaning and role of the church itself. From the Roman Catholic point of view, the church as such is preeminently sacramental.¹⁶ The *Magna Carta* of the Second Vatican Council,¹⁷ the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (*Lumen Gentium*), employs various images to depict the church, such as People of God, Body of Christ, Mystery, and Communion. Yet, the sacramental character of the church is foundational. *Lumen Gentium* introduces the church as fundamentally sacramental: 'By her relationship with Christ, the Church is a kind of sacrament or sign of intimate union with God'.¹⁸ Indeed the title of the first section, 'The Mystery of the church', is an allusion to the sacramental nature of the church. The sacramental character of the church is articulated by the notions 'sign' and 'instrument'. Although the entire existence and structure of the church is instrumental, the eucharist is the core instrument for salvation. 'As often as the sacrifice of the cross in which "Christ, our passover, has been sacrificed" ([1 Cor. 5:7](#)) is celebrated on the altar, the work of our redemption is carried on. At the same time, in the sacrament of the Eucharistic bread the unity of all believers who form one body in Christ (cf. [1 Cor. 10:17](#)) is both expressed and brought about' (*LG*, 3). Subsequent passages underscore the productive power of sacrament. Baptism is

¹⁵ 15. [Evangelical Review of Theology](#) 21 (1997):142–143.

¹⁶ 16. Especially for my understanding of the sacramental nature of the church in Roman Catholicism, I am indebted to the critique which Avery Dulles presented in Tantur of the previous version of this paper. His comments have led to refinements at various points. Although I do not labour under the illusion that these changes will meet all of his misgivings about my interpretation of Roman Catholic approaches to ecclesiology, I do hope that in its present version this paper more accurately pinpoints evangelical concerns.

¹⁷ 17. Albert C. Outler uses the term *Magna Carta* to describe *Lumen Gentium*, in Walter M. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: The America Press, 1966), p. 105.

¹⁸ 18. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 1 (citations from Council documents are found in Walter M. Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, 1966). In his introduction to the document, Avery Dulles calls *Lumen Gentium* the central and 'most imposing achievement of Vatican II' (*ibid.*, pp. 10, 13).

described as a ‘sacred rite’ in which ‘fellowship with Christ’s death and resurrection is symbolized and is brought about’, and in the eucharist ‘we are made members of his body (cf. [1 Cor. 12, 27](#)) ... (LG, 7). The foundational role of the sacraments is confirmed when *Lumen Gentium* teaches that the sacraments generate the vital dynamic of the church: ‘It is through the sacraments that the sacred nature and organic structure of the priestly community is brought into operation’ (LG, 11).¹⁹ Later we shall consider the implications of the link between the sacraments and the ‘sacred nature and organic structure’ of the ordained ministry.

We are now in a position to consider a contrasting, evangelical approach to church, sacraments, and salvation. Lacking an evangelical counterpart to a Vatican Council, we shall delineate an evangelical approach by drawing primarily on the WEF response to *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* and, to a lesser extent, on the WEF response to the Apostolic Faith study. These responses are the closest available approximations to an ‘official’ evangelical position on ecclesiology. The evangelical response, in turn, will be compared to the ecclesiological dimensions of the Roman Catholic response to *BEM*. Our concern here is not the proper interpretation of a document of the World Council of Churches. Rather, for the purposes of this consultation, *BEM* will function as buffer and bridge—or perhaps simply as a common sounding board.

EVANGELICAL CONCERN: SACRAMENTALISM

The evangelical critique of *BEM* focuses primarily on two issues: the role of Scripture and ‘sacramentalism’. We shall return to the issue of the Word and the church later. At this point, we shall concentrate on the ecclesiological implications of the evangelical critique of ‘sacramentalism’. The first critical point which the WEF Response raises with respect to the *BEM* is its ‘sacramental language’ (296).²⁰ The Response then points to frequent formulations that suggest a causal role of baptism with respect to salvation. The Response considers the problem of ‘sacramentalism’ of such importance that it devotes an appendix to this topic. There, it defines sacramentalism as the view that ‘sacraments are efficacious signs, conveying the grace that they contain’, i.e., ‘by virtue of the rite’ (312). The rejection of sacramentalism is the steady undertone of the evangelical critique of each major section of *BEM*.

While recognizing that *BEM* does place some stress on the need for conversion and faith, the Response insists that the notion that baptism ‘signifies and effects’ salvation ‘implies a sacramentalist causation that few evangelicals could support ...’ (297). As becomes clear later, the Response’s concern is that in *BEM* ‘signify’ connotes more than a symbolic efficacy by attributing a grace-conveying role to ‘the operation of the rite itself’ (297). Similarly the evangelical Response finds the Eucharist section of *BEM* deficient because of its ‘sacramentalist view, as distinguished from an evangelical one’ (300). The

¹⁹ 19. Accordingly, Miroslav Volf concludes that ‘Catholic ecclesiology [as represented by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger] understands the church as constituted in the Spirit through the sacraments, above all through baptism and the Eucharist, and through the word’. The reference to the instrumentality of ‘the word’ suggests that it is on the same level as the sacraments, which in itself would distinguish a Roman Catholic from an evangelical approach. There is a further point of difference, however; as Volf points out ‘the office of bishop represents the indispensable condition’ both of the sacraments and of the word. As Volf explains, ‘the sign and guarantor of the universal significance and divine origin of the sacraments and the word’ is the bishop in apostolic succession. Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 130

²⁰ 20. The parenthetical numbers in this section refer to the page numbers of [The Evangelical Review of Theology](#) 13 (1989); see note 6 above.

Response questions *BEM*'s accentuation of the efficacious communication of grace and the actualization of the sacrifice on the cross by way of the eucharist (301). The WEF Response concludes its consideration of the *BEM* section on the eucharist by deriving an ecclesiological statement from a soteriological thesis:

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 (303)

As mentioned, whether this critique of *BEM* is warranted is, for the purposes of this paper, irrelevant. The critique is important only for what it reveals about evangelical ecclesiological motifs, especially when compared to the ecclesiological assumptions of the Roman Catholic Response to *BEM*. Before considering the Vatican Response, we must briefly consider the Evangelical response to 'Ministry' in *BEM*.

Interestingly, the Response expresses its critique of the ministry section only indirectly as a concern about ecclesial mediation. After describing the evangelical tradition as being characterized by a rather flexible and functional approach to 'the officially appointed ministry', the evangelical Response joins a chorus of lamentations prompted by the ministry section.²¹ The WEF Response decries the fact that, in its elaboration of official ministry, *BEM* 'largely fails to capitalize on the excellent foundation laid in M 1-6', i.e., the introductory section entitled 'The Calling of the Whole People of God' (305).

The Response suggests in effect that by considering ordained ministry 'constitutive for the life and witness of the church' *BEM* gives it a role and status that belongs solely to the resurrected Christ who by his Spirit is present in the believing community. Yet, the WEF Response does not artificially play official ministry off against that of Christ. The ordained ministry may properly be said to represent Christ to the community, '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' (306). Accordingly, the Response rejects the notion of a ministerial priesthood, which has a priestly status that is distinct from the priestly status of *all* believers. Similarly, it rejects the idea that by the rite of ordination 'the authority of Jesus Christ is conferred on the minister' (306). The consistent criticism of sacramentalism returns when the Response claims that such conferral of Christ's authority becomes even more problematic when linked to a sacramental notion of ordination (306, 308).

ROMAN CATHOLIC CONCERN: RELATIVIZING THE (ROMAN CATHOLIC) CHURCH

Turning to the Roman Catholic Response to *BEM*,²² the danger looms of the breach between the evangelical and the Roman Catholic tradition widening to an unbridgeable chasm. For, as we shall see, the Roman Catholic Response frequently goes in a direction

²¹ 21. For a summary of the barrage of criticism levelled at the ministry section, see *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry: Report on the Process and Responses, 1982-1990* (Geneva: WCC, 1990), pp. 74-88.

²² 22. In Max Thurian, *Churches Respond to BEM*, vol. 6 (Geneva: WCC, 1988), pp. 1-40.

diametrically opposite to the WEF Response. Nevertheless, the risk of exaggerating the differences is worth taking in order to crystallize the nature of the breach.²³

The Vatican Response to *BEM* is especially fascinating for the purposes of a consultation on ecclesiology. Resounding through the entire Vatican document is the criticism that *BEM* lacks an ecclesiological framework (5).²⁴ Accordingly, the Response frequently laments the fact that *BEM* fails to elaborate the ecclesiological dimension of particular issues. When it summarizes the key issues in need of ecclesiological attention, the overlap with the concerns expressed in the WEF Response is striking. The Roman Catholic response identifies as key issues, ‘the notion of sacrament (and sacramentality), the precise nature of the apostolic tradition, and the issue of decisive authority in the church’ (6).

In its assessment of the *BEM* section on baptism, a key Roman Catholic criticism indicates the way in which its ecclesiological approach diverges from that evident in the WEF Response. The Vatican response takes issue with *BEM*’s appeal to common baptism as constituting a ‘basic bond of unity’, testifying to our being ‘one people’, ‘one holy, catholic, apostolic church’. The Response does not dispute any of these affirmations, of course, but faults *BEM* for not giving ‘adequate attention ... to the implications of the fact that a person is baptized within a particular ecclesial fellowship in a divided Christianity’ (11). Here a very concrete church-consciousness prompts the Roman Catholic Response to insist on keeping in view the *visible* church and its disunity.

A rather different church-consciousness becomes evident in the evangelical Response, when it takes exception to the *BEM* appeal to baptism—for quite opposite reasons. It insists that ‘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](#))’.²⁵ Here we catch a glimpse of the difference in ecclesiological orientation. In the citation from the WEF Response, the term ‘rite’ is key. It calls attention to the evangelical wariness of interposing an institution between Christ and salvation, in this case between Christ and the unity of the community of the saved. The unity of the body is rooted in Christ and is manifested in the believing response to him. To the extent that baptism plays a role in the unity of the church, it does so as a secondary and symbolic testimony to the ‘spiritual unity’ of all believers. In its own way, the Evangelical approach takes into account the visible church and its disunity but insists that what is visible to the eye is relativized by something deeper. Behind visible unity lies the spiritual, and hence invisible, unity of all true believers.

Turning to the Roman Catholic assessment of *BEM*’s elaboration of the Eucharist, the comments on real presence and on sacrifice are especially striking. While appreciating *BEM*’s affirmation of the ‘real presence’ of Christ, the Catholic Response insists that this ‘intrinsic change’ can be maintained only by affirming the ‘conversion of the elements’ into the body and blood of Christ. Furthermore, this tenet is posited not merely as an explanatory theory but is declared to be ‘a matter of faith’, in fact, ‘a central mystery of faith’ (22). Accordingly, when in a commentary, *BEM* takes into account ‘some who consider it necessary to assert a change of the elements’, the Vatican Response takes

²³ 23. In spite of the fact that the Roman Catholic Response to *BEM* is twice the length of the evangelical counterpart, I shall cite the Vatican document highly selectively. The focus will be on those features of the Roman Catholic Response that relate directly to the ecclesiological motifs evident in the WEF Response.

²⁴ 24. In this section the numbers in parentheses refer to the page numbers of Max Thurian, *Churches Respond to BEM*, vol. 6 (see previous note).

²⁵ 25. *WEF Response*, p. 298.

exception: 'The phrase "consider it necessary to *assert*" is not adequate to express' the Catholic position. '*Consider it necessary to confess* would be more appropriate' (23, n. 9). Clearly this Response resists any attempt to relativize the Roman Catholic position and, instead, calls for further work on this issue 'from the perspective of the Catholic faith' (23).

The other major point at which the Roman Catholic Response takes issue with *BEM* concerns the understanding of the eucharist as 'sacrifice'. The Vatican Response appreciates *BEM*'s affirmation that the sacrifice on the cross is salvifically represented in the sacrifice of the eucharist (19). The Response, nonetheless, considers the linkage posited in *BEM* to be much too weak. *BEM* locates the sacrificial nature of the eucharist in the inclusion of the church in Christ's *intercession*. This focuses on the priestly role of the *exalted* Christ. The Vatican response considers this to be inadequate because it does not focus on the eucharistic presence of the *crucified* Christ. The unique sacrifice of the cross can indeed not be repeated. 'But since the high priest is the crucified and risen Lord, his offering of self on the cross can be said to be "made eternal". His glorified body is the body of the Lord offered once-for-all' (20).

Interestingly, the evangelical response rightly anticipated that the way in which *BEM* construes the link between the eucharist and sacrifice 'is satisfactory neither to traditional Roman Catholics nor to evangelicals'.²⁶ The evangelical document argues that in the Scriptures the notion of 'eucharist' as the sacrifice of praise 'refers to the accompanying prayer, not to the meal itself' (303). Moreover, it takes issue with a shift in focus from the Lord's gift to us in his supper to a focus on 'what we offer to God' (301). At the same time, while emphasizing the direction from God to us, the WEF Response is wary of linking this gift in any 'causal' way to the 'rite' of the eucharist (302). The gift character of the eucharist is centred in the 'promise of the gospel in the sacrament as "visible word"—a gift that is unpacked and received only by faith' (302). At almost every point, then, where the evangelical Response finds *BEM* explication of the sacraments to be too strong, the Roman Catholic Response finds *BEM* to be too weak.

The ecclesiological dimensions of the divergences between the Roman Catholic and the evangelical critique of *BEM*'s understanding of the sacraments becomes evident in the Roman Catholic response to *BEM*'s section on ministry. The Roman Catholic concern centres on the sacramental nature of the priestly state and its role. The Vatican response acknowledges that *BEM* is open to a sacramental understanding of ordination but openness is not enough. This concern represents not merely 'ministry' as a distinct function within the church. For the Roman Catholic Response, ministry is a prime crystallization point of the nature of 'church'. The 'sacramental aspect of the whole church' is 'at work in a particular way in the ministry, in its teaching office, in the administration of the sacraments and in its governing'. The Response clarifies what it means by the sacramental aspect of the church when it states that the church is 'in a real and effective sense' an 'icon of the presence of God and his kingdom in the world'. Interestingly it grounds this understanding 'evangelically', i.e., in God's actual and constant faithfulness to his *promise* in Jesus Christ' (26, emphasis added). But this promise is embodied and secured, so to speak, in the sacraments and in their ministers, the priests.²⁷ The Vatican Response maintains that we 'see something of Christ's real and sacramental presence in the ordained minister: a particular sign among others' (29). The Response explains that 'through its relation to the Archetypus Christ, the ordained ministry is in and for the church an effective and sacramental reality, by which a minister

²⁶ 26. [ERT](#) 13 (1989): 301.

²⁷ 27. This ministerial-sacramental guarantee is anchored in episcopal succession; see note 17 above.

acts “in persona Christi” (29). Consequently, the Roman Catholic response maintains that the reality of sacrifice does not lie only at the core of the eucharist but also ‘belongs inherently to the concept of ordained priesthood’ (30). Accordingly, the Response considers the title ‘priest’ appropriate to designate a specific ordained ministry, even though the New Testament uses the term only for the whole people of God. In this context, the Response reiterates the insistence of Vatican II that the priesthood of the faithful and the hierarchical priesthood differ from each other not merely in degree but in essence (30).²⁸

The ecumenical repercussions of this approach to ministry are momentous, for the Vatican insists not only on its understanding of ministry but calls into question the validity of all ordained ministries that are not somehow incorporated in the line of episcopal succession: ‘ordained ministry requires sacramental ordination by a bishop standing in the apostolic succession’ (36). If any doubt remains regarding the rigidity of this requirement, it is removed by this statement: ‘In regard to recognition of ministry, for us it is not only *agreement* on the question of apostolic succession, but also *being situated within it* that is necessary for recognition of ordination’ (38–39, emphasis added).²⁹

From the vantage point of evangelicalism a deep and wide ecclesiological chasm yawns here. The breach concerns ecclesiology, not merely as an understanding of the church but as the concrete configuration of the church. At issue is the nature of the church. Is the church primarily an institution which, through sacramental rites, administered by a sacramentally constituted priesthood, mediates the grace promised in the gospel, or is the church the gathering of believers whose faith is summoned and sustained by the promises of the gospel communicated by ordained ministers as well as others and signified in sacramental events? It is highly significant that substantially the same terms occur on both sides of this either/or formulation. Nevertheless, the terms are configured so differently as to describe two decidedly different ecclesiological approaches. Given this ecclesiological gap between evangelicals and the Roman Catholic Church, the question arises of course, whether the most that consultation and dialogue can accomplish is a sympathetic understanding of the significant differences? Although the importance of greater understanding should not be underestimated, one always hopes for more. Driven by such hope, I wish to introduce some Roman Catholic and evangelical voices that call for revisioning some of the points at issue.

ACROSS THE BREACH: CONVERSION OF CHURCHES?

It is impossible to review the creative revisioning that occurs within Roman Catholic theology on a broad range of issues. A sampling of the reexamination of a few neuralgic points must suffice. I have argued that the key difference between evangelical and Roman Catholic approaches to the church concerns its role in the communication of grace. Since this issue crystallizes in the understanding of official ministry, I shall examine more closely the understanding of the relation between the ordained ministry and the ministry of all. In order to demonstrate the perennial nature of the issue, I have selected one of the more creative revisionings of ecclesiology. As is evident in the title of his book on ecclesiology, Christian Duquoc’s stress on the provisional character of the church is an obvious choice. If even in a progressive, revisionist approach to ecclesiology the

²⁸ 28. See *Lumen Gentium*, 10.

²⁹ 29. Cf. the Vatican II Decree on Ecumenism, 22: ‘The ecclesial Communities separated from us lack that fullness of unity with us which should flow from baptism, and we believe that especially because of the lack of the sacrament of orders they have not preserved the genuine and total reality of the eucharistic mystery’.

foundational nature of the sacrament is evident, it is plausible to assume that we are on the track of a defining distinctive of Roman Catholic ecclesiology.³⁰

Duquoc construes the church as an institution that participates in a special 'symbolic order' which links the everyday world to the Kingdom of God. The three prime structures of this order are the sacrament, authority, and the Word. Though juxtapositioned, the three terms are not coordinate. The sacrament is clearly foundational: 'The sacramental structure of the church involves everyday life in a symbolic network'³¹ and 'provides the structural foundation for the functioning' of authority and the Word (104). Duquoc maintains that it is the sacrament that lifts the church above the level of a purely functional organization. Without the sacrament the church as organization would be a purely human institution, one that is shaped by the sociological function it is intended to serve.³² Since the ecclesial organization serves a transcendental reality, this reality of 'another world', the kingdom of God is determinative for the way the church is organized.³³ Duquoc describes the shape of the church as a 'hierarchical sacramental system'.³⁴ This system relates directly to the role which the church plays in communicating grace. 'The sacrament introduces an encounter in the society of the church between those who exercise authority in the place of Christ as a result of ordination and those who have not been given this representative function'.³⁵ Accordingly, Duquoc states that the sacrament 'inaugurates the church, legitimates its authority and opens up the way to discourse with the Other ...'³⁶

Speaking of the eucharist, Duquoc underscores the hierarchical nature of ecclesial mediation that is entailed in the requirement that the sacred meal be presided over by an ordained priest, within the context of episcopacy. Duquoc contrasts the Protestant and Catholic approaches to the eucharist. The Protestant tradition focuses on the brotherly and sisterly reality of a shared meal and thus mutuality. By contrast, 'the Catholic church stresses the hierarchical symbolism which shifts the centre of gravity of the meal towards the sacrificial anamnesis'. The Catholic church of course also affirms the 'democratic' nature of the meal, but, according to Duquoc this stands in contradiction to the hierarchical system. It is the hierarchical structure that determines the social organization of the church.³⁷ Later he characterizes the Protestant criticism of this structure in a way that holds preeminently for evangelical criticism of Roman Catholic ecclesiology: 'authority based on the sacrament favours an indisputable hierarchy and this then appropriates to itself the Word of God of which it should be the servant'.³⁸

Occurring in a work that relentlessly stresses the 'provisional' nature of the empirical church and painstakingly guards against all inflated notions of the church, Duquoc's depiction of hierarchical sacramental mediation is all the more significant in delineating

³⁰ 30. Christian Duquoc, *Provisional Churches: An Essay in Ecumenical Ecclesiology* (London: SCM, 1986).

³¹ 31. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

³² 32. *Ibid.*, pp. 96–99.

³³ 33. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

³⁴ 34. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

³⁵ 35. *Ibid.*

³⁶ 36. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

³⁷ 37. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

³⁸ 38. *Ibid.*, p. 103.

the gap between Catholic and Protestant ecclesiology— and *a fortiori* between Catholic and evangelical ecclesiology.

Nevertheless, to suggest that the divergence lies in the Roman Catholic tradition affirming and the evangelical tradition denying the mediating function of the church is to indulge in oversimplification. The gospel does not fall from heaven as a direct message, targeting isolated individuals. ‘How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?’ Roger Haight’s comparison of Roman Catholic and Protestant piety applies to evangelicalism as well. He contrasts them as contrasting forms of mediation, and even then, he speaks, not of an absolute, but a relative difference: ‘Generally speaking, one finds a marked difference in Catholic and Protestant piety—the former being mediated more through the sacraments, and the latter through scripture as the Word of God’.³⁹ One could marshal sophisticated theological analyses and argumentation in an attempt to prove that God’s grace is always mediated. But even sociological and linguistic dynamics point to the ubiquity of mediation. Descriptions of, for example, ‘conversion’ do not employ a universal language nor are such descriptions derived exclusively from Scripture.⁴⁰ Rather, these descriptions bear all the marks of the particular tradition and the particular community within which a conversion takes place. Although this particular, learned language in no way detracts from the authenticity of the conversion, the fact that such formulations are typical of a particular group points to the mediational role of the community. *As Luther put it, ‘Those who are to find Christ must first find the church. ...’*⁴¹ The question that remains is whether the difference between Roman Catholic and Evangelical mediation lies only in the ‘means’ or whether the nature of mediation is decidedly different depending on whether the principal medium is the sacrament or the word.

With the word as primal medium of salvation the over-against nature of the gospel is more readily safeguarded, for the word is primarily news, an address, an appeal that confronts and claims the hearer— beginning with the proclaimer. The sacraments by contrast immediately conjure up the image of the ‘celebrant’, ‘presider’, one who officially represents the church in these sacramental acts. To be sure, such sacramental agency is not for a moment to be divorced from, let alone placed in opposition to the word that comes from beyond the church and is addressed to the church. Nevertheless, when mediation is thought of primarily as sacramental, the word is construed as being already embedded in the sacramental action. Though seemingly subtle, this shift in focus is crucial. In the international Lutheran—Roman Catholic dialogue on ‘The Church and Justification’, the issue of the church as sacrament and the understanding of mediation is singled out for critical comment. While acknowledging that the church is a ‘mediator of word and sacrament’ and thus ‘the instrument through which the Holy Spirit sanctifies’, the Lutheran approach stresses the fact that the church is first of all the ‘recipient’ of salvation and that it is Christ alone who has gained and bestows salvation on believers through word and sacrament. ‘Only as recipient’ does the church ‘mediate salvation’.⁴²

³⁹ 39. Roger Haight, *Toronto Journal of Theology* 8 (1992): 226.

⁴⁰ 40. Even the choice of Scripture passages that are woven into a conversion story are co-determined by the tradition of one’s faith community; see the papers of the previous consultation.

⁴¹ 41. Cited in Lutheran-Roman Catholic Joint Commission, *Church and Justification* (Lutheran World Federation, 1994), par. 111.

⁴² 42. Lutheran—Roman Catholic Joint Commission, *Church and Justification: Understanding the Church in the Light of the Doctrine of Justification*, (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1994), par. 127, 128. Cf. the

In his study of ecclesiology, Duquoc, as we have seen, closely links the supremacy of the sacrament to the presence of the clergy as a special order, elevated in its mediating role and status above the people of God as a whole. Such sacerdotalism appears to be inherent in a sacramentally oriented church. This is evidenced by the insistence of Vatican II that the ordained priest differs *essentially*, not merely in degree, from the common priesthood. David Coffey's strenuous efforts to anchor the ordained priesthood within the common priesthood represent an attempt to counteract the tendency even of Vatican II to suggest that, in comparison to the common priesthood of God's people, the ordained priest has a privileged link to Christ.⁴³ On this issue, evangelicalism stands firmly in the Reformation tradition which rejected the notion that the priest or pastor acts '*in persona Christi*'.⁴⁴ The problem lies not in the representation of Christ as such, of course. We are restored in the image of God in Christ. Consequently, all God's people are gifted and called to act *in persona Christi*. From an evangelical perspective, the notion of acting *in persona Christi* becomes problematic only when it is construed as referring exclusively or preeminently to the status and role of those who have been sacramentally ordained.⁴⁵

The divergent views of the nature of ministry constitute a crystallization point of divergent ecclesiologies. From the Roman Catholic point of view, the rejection of the notion of sacramental ordination cannot but appear as a levelling strategy, one that eliminates the unique status of the church as 'body of Christ' and thus as a more-than-human reality. Rejecting the 'divine' dimension of the church that is reflected in the unique status of priests appears to denature the church. This 'anti-sacramentalist' approach appears to reduce the church to a sociological entity and its ministry to a functional arrangement.

This legitimate Roman Catholic fear is difficult to dispel, for it arises from within an ecclesiological paradigm with its own criterion of what qualifies as 'divine' within the church. An approach, such as that of evangelicals, which does not anchor the 'divinity' of the church ontologically in a sacramental structure is judged to derogate from the church's unique status as 'body of Christ', 'temple of the Holy Spirit', 'people of God'. Yet such derogation—widespread as it may be in Protestant theology—is inevitable only if one assumes that the sole way to secure the 'divine' status of the church is to accept a sacramental approach to the church. From an evangelical vantage point, the problem of communicating across divergent paradigms lies precisely in approaching the church in terms of 'divine' and 'human' dimensions, elements, or aspects. Often the implicit or explicit analogy that is operative in such language is that of the incarnation. Moreover, the

language of *Lumen Gentium*, 10, where the priest is presented as the primary actor and agent, while the people join this action in a receptive mode.

⁴³ 43. David Coffey, 'The Common and the Ordained Priesthood', *Theological Studies* 58 (1997): 209–236.

⁴⁴ 44. See Reinhard Messner, 'Rechtfertigung und Vergöttlichung und die Kirche', *Zeitschrift für Kirche und Theologie* 118 (1996): 23–35, esp. p. 33.

⁴⁵ 45. See the key passage in *Lumen Gentium*, no. 10: 'Though they differ from one another in essence and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless interrelated. Each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ. The ministerial priest, by the sacred power he enjoys, molds and rules the priestly people. Acting in the person of Christ, he brings about the Eucharistic Sacrifice, and offers it to God in the name of all the people. For their part, the faithful join in the offering of the Eucharist by virtue of their royal priesthood. They likewise exercise that priesthood by receiving the sacraments, by prayer and thanksgiving, by the witness of a holy life, and by self-denial and active charity'. The priests have a 'sacred power' to form and rule the people of God; and by this sacred power 'the priest brings about' the sacrifice that only the priests offer to God, though in the name of the people. Although the people join in the sacrifice, it is in a derived, 'receptive' mode.

incarnation does not function as a general analogue that has as its reference the Johannean description of the Word having become flesh and pitching his tent among us. Rather, the incarnation functions as framework for ecclesiology in a very specific theological sense. The frame of reference is, often implicitly, the Chalcedonian doctrine of the two natures of Christ. The Chalcedonian construction is intimated in the opening paragraphs of Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: 'By her relationship with Christ, the Church is a kind of sacrament or sign of intimate union with God ...' (LG 1). The two-nature-in-one-person analogy becomes explicit in a subsequent description:

Christ, the one Mediator, established and ceaselessly sustains here on earth His holy Church ... as a visible structure. ... But the society furnished with hierarchical agencies and the Mystical Body of Christ are not to be considered as two realities, nor are the visible assembly and the spiritual community, nor the earthly Church and the Church enriched with heavenly things. Rather they form one interlocked reality which is comprised of a divine and a human element [*unam realitatem complexam* efformant, quae humano et divino coalescit elemento]. For this reason, by an excellent analogy, this reality is compared to the mystery of the incarnate Word. Just as the assumed nature inseparably united to the divine Word serves Him as a living instrument of salvation, so, in a similar way, does the communal structure of the Church serve Christ's Spirit, who vivifies it by way of building up the body (cf. [Eph. 4:16](#)). (LG 8.)

As is evident here, 'Mystery', the operative term in the title of the first major section of *Lumen Gentium*, functions as a synecdoche for the church as sacramental divine-human reality. The ecclesial reality is construed *per analogiam* within the framework of the christological two-natures-one-person doctrine.⁴⁶

The use of the christological analogy for the church tends to embed within the heart of ecclesiology the problem which Christian Duquoc identifies⁴⁷ and David Coffey attempts to rectify,⁴⁸ namely, the two-tier church.⁴⁹ The Chalcedonian paradigm tends to identify the sacramentally ordained ministry as the privileged ontological anchorage for the 'divine' element. Accordingly, the authoritative 'Prefatory Note' to *Lumen Gentium* speaks of the 'sacramental-ontological office', which finds its highest communal expression in the office of bishop, consecration to which gives 'an ontological participation in sacred functions . . .',⁵⁰ and endowment with 'sacred power'.⁵¹ As to priests, in the passage that stresses the essential difference of the ordained priest, it specifies his 'sacred power' as follows: 'The ministerial priest, by the sacred power he enjoys, *molds and rules* the priestly people. Acting in the person of Christ, he *brings about* the Eucharistic sacrifice, and *offers it to God*, in the name of all the people'; the priestly

⁴⁶ 46. The same Chalcedonian analogy plays a decisive role in the Encyclical on which *Lumen Gentium* depends, namely, *Mystici Corporis Christi* (1943); see nos. 59–67, esp. no. 63.

⁴⁷ 47. See pp. 15–17 above.

⁴⁸ 48. See note 25 above.

⁴⁹ 49. The two-tiered approach to the church appears to be inextricably related to a sacramental understanding of the church. Thus, while it is erroneous to suggest that in Roman Catholic ecclesiology the divine element is attributed to the hierarchical-institutional structures in a general (let alone, exclusive) way, it appears difficult to deny that the divine element is attributed to the sacramental—and thus hierarchical-institutional structures—in a privileged way.

⁵⁰ 50. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II*, p. 99.

⁵¹ 51. *Lumen Gentium*, 18.

people, by contrast, 'join in' the sacramental act of the ordained priest and 'receive' the sacraments (*Lumen Gentium*, 10, emphasis added).

When the 'divine element' of the church finds its privileged locus in the sacramental ordering of the church, it is difficult to avoid a two-tiered church, one in which the 'laity' is subordinated to the ordained ministry.⁵² From an evangelical point of view this is an inversion of the biblical 'order'. Biblically, it is none other than the *laos* which is the body of Christ, none other than the *laos* which is temple of the Holy Spirit. In this sense it can be none other than the laity that can constitute the divine 'element'. The ordained priest can be called 'divine' only 'derivatively', or more accurately, only as part of the 'divine' laity. As a description of *laos* and thus of the entire church, the term 'divine' can no longer refer to one element in distinction from the human element. Rather, the term 'divine' is a strictly relational term.

It is crucial at this point that 'relational' be sharply distinguished from 'functional'. As has been noted, from the point of view of an ontological use of 'divine' in reference to the church, any other use appears to relegate the church (in its 'being') to the level of the purely human. The church differs from other human organizations only in its function, namely, to serve a supra-human goal. But this is an erroneous, reductionist understanding of 'relational', as can be clarified by considering the 'bride-of-Christ' metaphor.

Frequently the term 'divine' is used to describe this mystery. But it can hardly mean that this 'bride' is elevated to a divine or semi-divine level or that an aspect or element of the church as bride is to be divinized. Rather, the true mystery concerns the totally and fully *human* reality of this bride. For *divine* companionship the logos need not have become human. The unique status of this bride lies in her privileged *relationship* to Christ. Switching metaphors, notions of adoption, which, by themselves, are utterly deficient with respect to Christology, are quite appropriate with respect to ecclesiology. For here it is a new, reconciled, Spirit-filled relationship that confers on the church its unique status. This relationship indeed entails Christ's unique presence to and with and in the church, as the metaphors of 'body' and 'temple' make clear. But to hypostatize this presence as a 'divine element' of the institution called the church is to overtax the biblical images and to introduce a highly problematic ecclesiological bifurcation.⁵³ Its problematic nature comes to expression particularly in the sacerdotal bifurcation of the people of God into a priestly class and the 'laity'.

The danger of falling into a merely 'functional' ecclesiology is averted, not by hypostatizing a metaphor but by taking its meaning utterly seriously. The core significance of all the major metaphors for the church— bride, body, temple, house, is *relational*. This is in no wise to be construed as if the church *is* a human entity that *has* a unique relation to God. Rather this unique entity has its *being* only *in this relation*. The church exists only *in* and *as* uniquely related to God. The church is *constituted* as bride by

⁵² 52. Even in Coffey's determined effort to rectify the discrepancy between the common and the ordained priesthood, he nevertheless distinguishes between the witness of a lay person and that of a priest as follows: '... witness to Christ expresses a property of a lay person but not his or her essence, and therefore not his or her definition'. The priest, by contrast, is an official witness to Christ; for him witness to Christ expresses his very essence (*Theological Studies* 58 (1997): 226–227. The term 'official witness' may be serviceable in an 'institutional' sense, as long as the irrepeatability of the founding 'official' witness by the apostles is observed.

⁵³ 53. The Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue raises what it calls a 'serious questions' regarding the danger of objectivizing the holiness of the church 'in specific ecclesial components in such a way that they appear to be exempt from critical questioning. Above all this Lutheran query is directed at ecclesial offices and decisions which serve people's salvation and sanctification' (*The Church and Justification*, par. 160; cf. par. 164).

her relationship to Christ, and thus to the triune initiator, originator, creator, re-creator, and sustainer of this marriage.⁵⁴ Indeed, in its proper sense, 'divine' applies to the church in that, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, *God-in-person* makes his home within and among the people of God.

It is *by this presence* and *in this relation* that the relation between Christ and the church may be described as one of identity. The continuity between Christ and the Church is intrinsic to the nature of the church. If the searing light and crashing thunder didn't stun the zealot from Tarsus, the voice gave a whole new (ecclesiological) meaning to *coup de grace*: 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *me*?' After all, Saul thought he was merely making life miserable for a false Jewish sect. But the one Saul was persecuting had said during his life on earth that whatever is done to the least of these brethren of mine, is done to me.

A relational, indwelling approach to the unique nature of the church in no way calls into question the continuity, or even the identification, between Christ and the church. Rather, the relational dynamic characterizes the specific nature of such continuity, identification, and representation. From an evangelical point of view, the continuity between Christ and his community lies in his presence through word and Spirit; identification lies in his total compassionate embrace of, claim on, and indwelling of his body; and representation lies in being restored after Christ's image —by his presence— and being sent by him as the Father sent the Son.

Pontifex Maximus

In view of these serious divergences are we condemned simply to ply our ecclesiologies on yonder sides of the breach? If so, the present consultation devolves into a shouting across an ecclesial canyon where the echo of our own voice threatens to drown out the voice of the other. Yet there are other possibilities for bridges across the breach.

In his ground breaking book, *The Household of Faith*, Lesslie Newbigin deals in effect with the key question treated in this paper, namely, 'What is the manner of our ingrafting into Christ?' He then examines three answers, two of which have been especially highlighted here:

The first answer is, briefly, that we are incorporated in Christ by hearing the Gospel. The second is that we are incorporated by sacramental participation in the life of the historically continuous Church. The third is that we are incorporated by receiving and abiding in the Holy Spirit.⁵⁵

He characterizes these three answers as Protestant, Catholic, and Pentecostal but adds that none of these traditions treats the three ways as mutually exclusive. Rather, each tradition 'finds the centre of religious life' in one of these ways of incorporation, under which the other ways are subsumed.

Can one move beyond the negative conclusion that the Protestant (evangelical) and the Roman Catholic approaches to the church are not mutually exclusive? Reaping the benefits of the earlier Evangelical- Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission, we may indeed contemplate steps towards convergence—at least in understanding—between the two traditions. A key section of *ERCDOM* deals specifically with the relation of the 'Church and

⁵⁴ 54. Lesslie Newbigin's soteriological comments apply equally to the ecclesiological point made above. Having insisted that Christ 'alone is our righteousness, our holiness, our life', he adds, 'If that be condemned as a merely psychological or relational statement, we must surely answer that there is nothing more fundamental to man's being than this, that he was made in and for the love of God, and that any attempt to seek an ontological core to his being apart from this is vain'. *Household*, pp. 129–130.

⁵⁵ 55. *Household*, p. 30.

the Gospel'.⁵⁶ An introductory paragraph contains the acknowledgement that 'Evangelicals, because of their emphasis on the individual, have traditionally neglected the doctrine of the Church'. In spite of this the dialogue partners find agreement on what they call 'a four-fold relationship between the Church and the Gospel'.⁵⁷ The first is that 'the Church is part of the Gospel'. Under this heading, it acknowledges the failings of both Roman Catholics and evangelicals. 'Roman Catholics used to concentrate on the Church as a hierarchical institution. ... ' Evangelicals by contrast 'have sometimes preached an excessively individualistic gospel ... '⁵⁸ Secondly, 'the church is a fruit of the Gospel'. Interestingly, under this heading, the document explicitly mentions only an Evangelical defect, namely its tendency to emphasize personal salvation at the expense of 'the central place of the Church'. Nevertheless, Evangelical concerns about a Roman Catholic tendency to rely on institutional rites are implicitly addressed by the document's emphasis on the need of repentance and faith as '[t]he conditions for membership of the community'.⁵⁹ Third, the church is said to be 'an embodiment of the Gospel'. Here no specific deficiencies on either side are mentioned. Yet, in describing the church as the embodiment of the gospel, the document speaks of the church's role in transmitting the gospel in a way that may be understood as an evangelical form of mediation: The church 'is a community that makes present the obedient Lord who underwent death for us'.⁶⁰ Finally, *ERCDOM* describes the relation between Church and Gospel as follows: 'The church is an agent of the Gospel'. Interestingly, here it speaks of the church in relation to Christ in terms of continuation and prolongation. But it is striking that the dialogue document does not speak of the prolongation of the incarnation. Rather it asserts that 'the Church continues and prolongs the very same *mission* of Christ'.⁶¹ The dialogue report appears not to consider the importance of this agreement to be diminished by a divergence in the understanding of the specific agents of the gospel. 'For Evangelicals the agent of the proclamation is the whole community of believers. ... ' While Roman Catholics concur on this point, according to the report, they emphasize 'the special role and responsibility of the bishops' in ordering the life of the community and 'as successors to the ministry of apostolic times, to preach the good news of the Kingdom'.⁶² As acknowledged in the introduction, *ERCDOM* leaves a considerable number of important differences unresolved.⁶³ Equally important, however, is the conviction that such differences do not have the last word, for the differences do not nullify the important areas of agreement nor overshadow the deepened mutual understanding.⁶⁴

⁵⁶ 56. *ERCDOM*, pp. 65–69.

⁵⁷ 57. *ERCDOM*, p. 65.

⁵⁸ 58. *ERCDOM*, p. 66.

⁵⁹ 59. *ERCDOM*, pp. 66–67.

⁶⁰ 60. *ERCDOM*, p. 67.

⁶¹ 61. *ERCDOM*, p. 68 (emphasis added).

⁶² 62. *ERCDOM*, p. 68.

⁶³ 63. *ERCDOM*, p. 11.

⁶⁴ 64. The importance of the deep unity that exists despite important differences is also attested to by the U.S.A. document, *Evangelicals and Catholics Together*. This statement affirms the agreement that between Catholics and Evangelicals an important area of agreement exists, the contours of which are summed up in the Apostles' Creed. It is interesting, however, that the *ECT* statement fails to proceed from the *ERCDOM* consensus on the relation of the Church and the Gospel. Among the points that are thought to divide Roman

Contemplating the vast differences between Roman Catholicism and evangelicalism, one readily succumbs to severe bouts of pessimism. The possibility of real change, the need for which one tends to estimate to be greater and more redoubtable in *other* traditions, seems remote. Accordingly, it is not difficult to call into question the value of the present consultation. At such low points it may be helpful to listen to the testimonies of two prominent theologians, one Roman Catholic, the other Evangelical. Noting very real lines of convergence, yet doubting, whether these lines will ever fully intersect, Avery Dulles points to the need for conversion:

Protestantism, insofar as it cultivates a free, immediate relationship to God, based on Christ and the Gospel alone [a hallmark of Evangelicalism], views Catholic structures as impediments to the Christian life, or at least as not being necessary for all Christians. Roman Catholicism, committed to the principle of visible and symbolic mediation, is convinced that any church lacking full sacramental, hierarchical, and dogmatic structures, including the papacy as defined at the two Vatican councils, is institutionally deficient. Both positions cannot be simultaneously true. Thus the differences between these two major types of Christianity, at the present time, involve contradictions. Full unity cannot be achieved by convergence alone but only by conversion’.

Though seeming to hold an opposite point of view, calling as he does for continual convergence (*semper reformanda*) rather than conversion, Donald Bloesch in fact makes the same point.

Finally, we need to warn against both Catholic and Evangelical triumphalism whereby we seek to impose our particular confessional views upon others. The way to unity according to the triumphalist mentality lies in conversion to a particular confession. The Catholic triumphalist will sound the call back to Rome, whereas his Evangelical counterpart will seek a repristination of Calvin, Luther or simply confessional orthodoxy. Both parties are blind to the sins of their own churches and are only too ready to find fault with other church bodies. The way to reunion lies not in conversion but in convergence, in the strengthening and flowering in all churches of those elements that are rooted in the Gospel. We espouse not a return to Rome or Geneva or Wittenberg but a breakthrough into a new form of the church. Not the church of the past but the coming great church should be our vision and hope. And the best way to realize this vision is by each church seeking to reform itself in the light of the Gospel.

Could such conversion lie in a new appreciation of a dimension of evangelicalism that in large part accounts for its minimalist ecclesiology, and, when pushed, destroys the very possibility of ecclesiology, namely, the voluntarist principle? John Howard Yoder has declared that the future of the church—the entire church—lies in appropriating the voluntarist dimension: ‘The Church of tomorrow cannot but be a Believers’ Church’. This sounds, of course, like the triumphalism against which Bloesch warns. Interestingly, however, Yoder appeals in this context to Karl Rahner. Rahner describes the present situation as one of transition, ‘from a people’s church [in German, the term is likely *Volkskirche*], to a church made up of those who have struggled against their environment in order to reach a personally clearly and explicitly responsible decision of faith. This will

Catholics and Evangelicals, *ECT* mentions the divergence between an understanding of the church ‘as an integral part of the Gospel or the church as a communal consequence of the Gospel’ (See Charles Colson and Richard Neuhaus, eds., *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Towards a Common Mission* [Dallas: Word, 1995], pp. xviii–xxii. Although the *ECT* statement acknowledges that ‘the disparity between positions’ is not ‘always so sharp as to warrant the “or”’, this statement falls short of *ERCDOM*’s conclusion that ‘the Church and the gospel belong indissolubly together’, so that this dialogue report can describe the Church as ‘an important element in the good news’ (*ERCDOM*, p. 68.).

be the church of the future or there will be no Church at all'.⁶⁸ Issued by Rahner, this challenge cannot be a call simply to adopt the voluntaristic principle but to integrate it with a deeper sense of the corporate reality called church.

No call, no challenge, no imperative as such provides adequate ground for hopefulness regarding conversion or convergence towards greater unity. The deepest ground for hope lies to our common confession. One could cite all three 'articles' of the 'Ecumenical Creeds', but most pertinent to our current consultation is the third, especially its two-fold character. In the 'Apostle's Creed' we confess: 'I believe in the Holy Spirit; I believe in the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints'. To start with the second, we confess that the church cannot be doubled, tripled, or in any way multiplied. We *are* one. As Paul Schrotenboer has often reminded Evangelical Communities, our *primary* identity is that of *Christian*.

The confession about the one church is properly placed under the 'rubric' of the Spirit. Confessing the one church is a pneumatological confession. That this pneumatological focus is not to be taken as a rationale for resting in an invisible unity of the church is, I assume, beyond dispute. Confessing the unity of the church as a confession concerning the Holy Spirit anchors a consultation such as this in well-founded hope. Whatever stands between us and whatever 'considered opinions' we may harbour regarding the possibility, likelihood, or need of conversion on the part of our 'churches', the common confession regarding the one church is a confession regarding 'the divine'. This confession does not refer to a mere 'element' of the church. Rather the confession of the church fundamentally expresses the thrust of all of redemptive history and the pull of the coming age, namely, God's passionate desire and determined plan truly and fully to dwell among his one people. Confessing the one church means, in the title of Jürgen Moltmann's book, confessing that the one church exists 'in the power of the Spirit'. More precisely, the one church exists by virtue of the presence of the Spirit, in the *koinonia* of the Spirit. The pneumatological nature of the confession of the one church, therefore, means that no human construct—and surely division is the preeminently 'human element' in the church—is equal to the power and *presence* of the Spirit. Among the people of God the Spirit is *Pontifex Maximus*, the supreme bridge-builder. For in and by the Spirit, the Father and the Son come to make their home in and among us. No labour undertaken to manifest the unity of the church and thus to exemplify the presence and mission of the one God in our world can possibly be in vain. This is the only biblically legitimate confession of the invisible unity of the church, for this confession empowers—against all odds—the quest for the visible unity of the church. This confession empowers, more specifically, what some may regard as an unlikely consultation between representatives of the Roman Catholic Church and of the World Evangelical Fellowship.

The pressure towards visible unity of this common confession becomes even more apparent in view of mission. In this paper mission has been left out of account rather artificially because other papers prepared for this consultation are devoted specifically to this issue. Yet, the underlying missionary dynamic of the church cannot be ignored in any biblical ecclesiology. In relation to the unity of the church, three converging factors intensify 'the pressure of our common calling'. First, a strong emphasis on mission is evident both in the contemporary teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, as well as in the very origin and identity of the evangelical movement. Second, it has become increasingly clear that the church is missionary in its very nature. Third, the mission field was and is not elsewhere. The church in the West too (perhaps especially) finds itself in a missionary

⁶⁸ 68. Karl Rahner, *The Shape of the Church to Come* (London: SPCK, 1972), p. 24.

situation. For these three reasons, Newbigin's assessment is as pertinent now as when he made it nearly a half century ago:

Everything about such a missionary situation conspires to make Christian disunity an intolerable anomaly. ...

... When the Church faces out towards the world it knows that it only exists as the first-fruits and the instrument of that reconciling work of Christ and that division within its own life is a violent contradiction of its own fundamental nature. His reconciling work is one, and we cannot be His ambassadors reconciling the world to God, if we have not ourselves been willing to be reconciled to one another. It is the result of this deep connection at the heart of the Gospel itself that Churches which—within Christendom—had accepted their disunity as a matter of course, found that when they were placed in a missionary situation their disunity was an intolerable scandal.⁶⁹

Within the missionary dynamic of the one church, we face the all too human breach, relying on the divine *Pontifex Maximus*.

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The Mission of the Church

Post-Vatican II Developments in 'Official' RC Theology

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VATICAN COUNCIL II (1962–1965)

Pope John XXIII (1958–63) intended the Second Vatican Council of over 2,400 bishops from six continents to be the hope of the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) for 'a new Pentecost', 'a means of spiritual and apostolic renewal', 'an updating (*aggiornamento*) of the church on the edge of a new era'.

After four annual two-month sessions (1962–65), Vatican II promulgated sixteen documents with over 100,000 Latin words. The **Church** became the fulcrum or vital center for all *aggiornamento* themes in the two longest documents: on the church (*Lumen gentium* [LG], from its opening Latin words), and on the church in the modern world (*Gaudium et spes* [GS]). In their theological light bask the other fourteen statements, such as the decree on the church's missionary activity (*Ad gentes* [AG]).

Vatican II covered every major biblical / theological / ecclesiological issue, every major dimension of personal and communal renewal, of liturgical worship, of institutional life (laity, priests, and bishops), of relationships to 'Others' (whether other Christians, or

⁶⁹ 69. *Household*, 17–18.