



Lukas Vischer:

Church History in an Ecumenical Perspective: A Preliminary Discussion Paper The Council of Basle: A still Unfinished Debate

1. Place and Date of Publication

Lukas Vischer (ed.): Church History in an Ecumenical Perspective. Papers and Reports of an International Ecumenical Consultation held in Basle, October 12-17, 1981, Bern 1982, 5-25.

2. Historical Context

How can the history of the Church be presented in an ecumenical perspective? The 550th anniversary of the Council of Basle (1431) was the immediate occasion to raise the question. But the significance of the issue far transcended the occasion. So an International Ecumenical Consultation was held in connection with the anniversary. Lukas Vischer was in charge of both programme and organization.

3. Summary

The question of *Church History from an Ecumenical Perspective* was dealt with by the World Council of Churches as early as in 1956/1959; but it was not pursued any further. Since then, the situation has altered in many respects. So the question arises in a new way today.

On May 7th, 1437, the conciliar session in the Minster of Basle broke up in disorder. During the years before, the Council had worked in four deputations on ecclesiastical reforms, on matters of faith, on peace, and on general business. Its efforts to restore unity with the evangelical Hussites had been quite successful. The main problem, however, the reform of the Church, retreated into the background after some promising progress. Instead of being free to tackle the major issues of the time, the Council's attention was focussed more and more on its authority over against the Pope. Any agreement was made impossible by the papal nullification of the Council. So the Council tried to impose the synthesis by electing an Anti-Pope. Not surprisingly, this strategy failed. Had the idea of reform councils been shown to be inadequate? Interpretations vary. Roman Catholic interpretations point out that the falsity of the thesis that a Council was superior to the Pope was plainly demonstrated by the course of the Council itself. Protestant interpretations usually see the conciliar movement as a harbinger of the 16th century reformation. They describe with sympathy the emerging determination to review the Church in head and members.

What were the consequences of the then failure to achieve reform for the whole Church? 1) The lesson is that work for unity is indivisible. Only a common vision and mutually synchronised efforts can lead to the goal. 2) The unsettled conflict between Council and Pope led to a further postponement of the reform of the Church. 3) The disintegration of the Council of Basle can be interpreted as a victory for papal authority. The conciliar movement had failed to carry the day. Its central conviction was that legally the Council was superior to the Pope, and, indeed, in a universal sense. This conviction was based on the view that the Church as a whole is invested with sovereignty and that the Council represents the Church. The triumph of the papal theory could repress but not eliminate this conviction which - in a modified form - became a leitmotif of the Reformation. The idea of the sovereignty of the people would even surface again in the political constitutionalism. - Basically the problems which confronted the Church at the Council of Basle have remained unsolved down to our own day. Why should the Council of Basle not be a stimulus to reflect on the *conciliar process as a possible way to the recovery of the unity of the Church*?



Church History in an Ecumenical Perspective

**Papers and Reports of an
International Ecumenical Consultation
held in Basle
October 12–17, 1981**

edited by Lukas Vischer

Church History in an Ecumenical Perspective

**Papers and Reports of an
International Ecumenical Consultation
held in Basle
October 12–17, 1981**

Veröffentlichung Nr. 2

Evangelische Arbeitsstelle Oekumene Schweiz
Sulgenauweg 26, CH.- 3000 Bern 23

1982

CONTENTS

Preface	5
I Church History in an Ecumenical Perspective A Preliminary Discussion Paper	7
II The Council of Basle: A Still Unfinished Debate (Lukas Vischer, Switzerland)	15
III Towards a History of the Whole Church - New Horizons	27
1. The History of the Church in Latin America: An Interpretation (Enrique Dussel, Mexico)	29
2. The History of the Church in the Pacific (John Garrett, Fiji)	51
3. The Church History Association of India: An Ecumenical Experiment (Henry S. Wilson, India)	65
4. Doing Church History in Africa Today (Ogbu U. Kalu, Nigeria)	77
5. History as Lived by the Christian People Hypotheses For a New Methodic Approach to Christian History (Francesco Chiovaro, France)	92
IV Report on the Findings of the Discussion Groups	105
V Appendix: List of Participants	117

PREFACE

How can the history of the Church be presented in an ecumenical perspective? It was to discuss this question that forty or more church historians from different confessions and continents met in Basle, Switzerland, from October 12th to 17th 1981. The present volume contains the papers given at this conference and the report resulting from its discussions.

The initiative for the conference came from the Evangelical Reformed Church of Basle-City. The year 1981 was the commemoration of the opening of the Council of Basle (1431). A Committee was set up under the presidency of the late lamented President of the Evangelical Reformed Church of Basle-City, the Rev. Peter Rotach, to consider appropriate ways and means of commemorating this important landmark in the history of the city of Basle. The Theological Faculty of the University of Basle and the three churches of the city - the Evangelical Reformed, the Roman Catholic, and the Old Catholic - were all represented on this committee. Agreement was soon reached that a conference of scholars should be organized on the theme "Church History in an Ecumenical Perspective", in connection with this 550th anniversary of the Council of Basle. The development of the programme and the organization of the conference were entrusted to the Rev. Professor Lukas Vischer, Director of the Protestant Office for Ecumenism in Switzerland.

The significance of the theme for the conference far transcended its immediate occasion. The question of how the history of the Church is to be presented in an ecumenical perspective is one which is raised with some urgency by the contemporary ecumenical movement and requires an answer if the churches are to advance along the road to unity. The committee was mindful of this. Its chief concern was not to direct attention to the Council of Basle but rather to use the opportunity afforded by the conciliar jubilee to make a contribution to the ecumenical discussion.

Church historians from the different theological faculties in Switzerland met twelve months before the conference to discuss and make preparations for it. They set themselves the task of drafting a brief memorandum summarizing the questions raised by the theme. This document was sent in advance to participants in the conference and served as the starting point for its discussions.

The ambiguity of the word "ecumenical" in the title was recognized from the beginning. An ecumenical presentation of the history of the Church must be "interconfessional" and, at the same time, "universal". It must transcend the confessional boundaries and, at the same time, embrace the history of the churches in Latin America, Asia, the Pacific, and Africa. To deal with this theme in any even remotely satisfactory way, therefore, it was not enough to invite representative historians from

the different confessions. What was also needed was to discover from historians of other continents their understanding of the task of producing an ecumenical history of the Church. This encounter between the "continents" was the outstanding feature of the conference in the Mission House in Basle.

Given these clues, the reader will have no difficulty in understanding the structure of the conference programme and therefore of this volume, too. The conference had three stages. It concentrated firstly on the differences in presentation which originate in the confessional rivalries. The Council of Basle was selected as an example, for quite obvious reasons. How has this event been interpreted in Roman Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox and Old Catholic historiography? Next, attention was focussed on recent attempts to describe the history of the Church in Latin America, Asia, the Pacific and Africa. Wherein lies the relevance of these presentations? What questions do they raise? In the third phase of the conference programme, making use of the wealth of material presented to us in this way, we then turned to the question: What do we mean by church history in an ecumenical perspective?

This pattern is reflected in the present volume. First comes the text of the preliminary discussion paper (p. 7), followed by an analysis of the Council of Basle (p. 15)(*). The central portion of the book gives accounts of developments in historiography in Latin America, the Pacific, India and Africa (p. 27). In conclusion a summary is given of the main findings of the discussion (p. 105).

A bibliography prepared for the conference has not been included in this volume but a copy of it will readily be sent to those interested in seeing it.

It is not easy to capture an animated discussion in written form. The most important developments at an ecumenical conference are the fruit of personal encounter and exchange. New vistas open up as old questions are illuminated from a fresh angle. Undoubtedly what is most urgently required if we are to make any inroads on the task confronting us is a direct exchange between church historians of the different confessions and continents. Our hope is that this volume will act both as a spur and as a contribution to this kind of contact and exchange.

A special word of thanks is due to Karin Bredull and Heinz Rüegger, two colleagues who gave indispensable help in the preparations and arrangements for the conference. They did much of the work for it. Heinz Rüegger also undertook the preparation of the manuscripts for the press. I also want to express my gratitude to the "Stiftung für ökumenische und historische Theologie" for making available a substantial grant to the publication of this volume.

Lukas Vischer

(*) The German edition of this volume includes all the four papers delivered to the conference on the theme of the Council of Basle by Erich Meuthen (Roman Catholic), Hans Schneider (Protestant), Deno Geanakoplos (Orthodox) and Herwig Aldenhoven (Old Catholic). See *Theologische Zeitschrift*, Basle 1982, No. 5.

I CHURCH HISTORY IN AN ECUMENICAL PERSPECTIVE

A PRELIMINARY DISCUSSION PAPER

How can the separated churches agree in their understanding and presentation of the history of the Church? Today they are still unable to do so. They differ in their approaches. Practically, every church has its own distinctive picture of the Church's journey through the centuries. Churches and church historians are therefore confronted with the question: How is the past to be seen as a common past? How are the different perspectives to blend together into a single perspective?

The symposium in Basel will be examining this problem. How can we achieve a presentation of church history from an ecumenical perspective? In the following paper an attempt is made to identify the most important problems in this connection.

I THE PRESENT SITUATION

The question of the possibility and the limits of a "Church History from an Ecumenical Perspective" is not a new one. Two conferences were organized on this theme by the Bossey Ecumenical Institute in the fifties (1956 and 1959). Historians from different confessional traditions were brought together to try to establish criteria for an ecumenical history of the Church. They concentrated mainly on the way church history is taught in the theological colleges of the different churches. The proceedings of these conferences were never published, however, and the theme itself was not pursued any further under the auspices of the World Council of Churches in the following years.

The situation has altered in so many respects since the fifties that the question now arises in a new way. The main changes to be noted here are as follows:

- The ecumenical movement has become more inclusive. In the fifties it was still mainly supported by churches of the Orthodox and Protestant traditions. But since the Second Vatican Council the Roman Catholic Church has taken a very active part in the ecumenical dialogue.
- Various attempts have been made in the sixties and seventies to establish an understanding of historical events and processes which transcends the confessions. Confessional factors have tended to take a back seat, particularly at the level of scholarship and research. In interconfessional discussions, churches have had an opportunity to re-examine together certain disputed interpretations of historical facts. Intensive efforts in the study of the history of heresy call for special mention here. Attempts have also been made in a number of places to produce common teaching materials. Although the confessional bias in the writing of church history has certainly not hereby become

a thing of the past, least of all in textbooks and popular presentations, it is now possible to draw at least on some experience of an ecumenical approach to church history which was still not available in the fifties.

- Within the ecumenical movement, the churches have become more keenly aware of the universality of the Church. The horizon has broadened. Historians have become more conscious of the fact that the Church has put down roots in all continents. How a genuinely universal fellowship is to be achieved is now a matter of intensive discussion, argument and even conflict. The two conferences in the fifties still primarily discussed the differing approaches of European and North American historians. Today it is much more a question of whether and in what way church history can be presented in a way which does greater justice to the expansion of the horizon to include all continents.
- Twenty five years ago independent accounts of church history in Latin America, Asia and Africa were still considered a desideratum. Since then a good many efforts have been made in this direction. Historians went to work in Latin America, Asia, the Pacific, and Africa, and have already produced a number of fresh presentations. These works sharpen the question of the form an inclusive presentation of church history should take today. But they also raise the question of how the history of each particular area is to be presented in the light of this inclusive perspective. They confront European historians, in particular, with the question the history of the Church in Europe calls for reinterpretation and in what ways.

The developments in the past two decades have led to a new sort of encounter between the churches and religions and ideologies. This new departure has had as a consequence a renewed interest in the Church's attitude and behaviour to religions and ideologies throughout the centuries. Matching similar developments in secular historiography, increased interest has also been taken by church historians in social, political and economic dimensions as well as in social history and in social psychology. Contemporary presentations of church history seek increasingly to throw light on the influence of such factors on how the church has developed and acted in its representatives, institutions, and in its theological concerns and ideas. Cooperation with secular historians has proved fruitful in this respect. At the same time, this cooperation raises in a new way the question of the boundary between church history and secular history.

- In recent decades, the scientific enterprise has undergone still further compartmentalization and specialization. The requirements of detailed research have made it more difficult than ever to achieve a complete synoptic view. On the other hand, a good deal of fresh thinking has been done in recent times on historiographical methods. We are much more aware today of the limits of our individual perspectives than we were even a few decades ago.

II THE TASK OF CHURCH HISTORY

How is the task of church history to be defined in the light of present developments in the ecumenical movement?

1. The task is to present the history of the una sancta catholica. In the presentation an attempt must be made to recall the history of the whole Church. The presentation must lead up to the una sancta catholica which is called to bear witness together to the Gospel today. It cannot simply be an introduction to one particular church community. Even when limited themes are taken up, they must be set within the context of the whole Church.
 - The presentation must be characterized by catholicity in time. In other words, all periods of history have a claim to be remembered. Ecumenical church history seeks to trace the course of history through all centuries.
 - The presentation must also be characterized by catholicity in space. In other words, it must be interested in and pay attention to the churches in the whole oikumene. Ecumenical church history seeks to transcend the geographical limits in which some presentations are imprisoned.
 - The presentation must be informed by awareness of the catholicity of the whole People of God. In other words, it must pay attention to the whole Church, and not least to the history of the believing laos. Its interest must not be dictated by conscious or unconscious hierarchical class or sectional distinctions. Ecumenical church history sets out to include in its presentation even groups whose history is all too easily ignored for example, because no written source materials are available. This applies in particular to oppressed and persecuted groups.
2. To carry out the task of ecumenical church history, a catholic spirituality or spirituality of the whole is required. What does this mean?
 - A realization that the una sancta catholica is greater than one's own church. The basis of this catholic spirituality is the expectancy that the Holy Spirit is at work wherever Christ's name is invoked. It does not limit His operation to a particular community. It does not accept that, on the basis of certain ecclesiological or doctrinal presuppositions, certain Christian communities are from the outset excluded from attention and interpretation. It is not satisfied with an agreement on a "purely historical level", but reflects on the consequences of such agreement and deliberately seeks to clarify the effects of earlier interpretations in history.
 - The spirituality of the whole requires a willingness not to ignore the dark aspects of history. It is aware that the history of the Church includes errors and failures. It does not dispute these negative aspects nor repudiate its own responsibility for their consequences (e.g. the Church's role in the slave trade, antisemitism, witch hunting, etc.).
 - This spirituality means the conviction that the Church is called in Christ to be one community and that division is therefore a contradiction of the will of Christ. This summons to unity accompanies the Church throughout the generations.

3. If we are to advance in the direction of a common interpretation of history, we need a clear agreement about the criteria underlying the presentation and the methods employed.
 - No presentation is innocent of theological and ecclesiological assumptions. A common presentation will only be possible if these assumptions are brought out into the open and critically examined.
 - A critical comparison of the different assumptions can help us to recognize that the previous presentation rested on too narrow a basis and needs to be corrected and supplemented.
 - It is absolutely indispensable that we should be prepared to examine our own interpretation in the light of the sources and other data. This critical study of the facts can make us aware of unconscious theological and ecclesiological assumptions. It enables corrections to be made.
4. Every interpretation of history remains, in principle, open to revision. Our attempt to present church history from an ecumenical perspective will not produce the definitive account. The conflict about the significance of the history for the contemporary Church will continue. The object of the exercise is rather to achieve a new style of approach. The debate about the significance of history is not conducted primarily between different traditions but takes place within the ecumenical fellowship which holds the different traditions and cultural contexts together.

III UNSOLVED QUESTIONS AND PROBLEMS

To obtain a clearer view of the possibility and the limits of ecumenical church history, it is vital that we should recognize the following unsolved questions and problems.

1. How does the confessional bias affect the presentation of history? At what places does it operate? Every approach to the sources of church history is confessionally influenced. This applies equally to the angle of vision and to the methods employed by the historians to examine the sources. The natural desire to show the positive contribution of one's own tradition is already at work at this stage.
 - Confessional bias is particularly obvious in the case of historical events which are fundamental for the existence of a particular confessional tradition and naturally enough are frequently the theme of repeated commemoration: for example, the life and the authority of saints and founders, the contents and the history of decisions which are binding in character, etc.
 - Confessional bias is almost as obvious in the case of events which have remained alive in the memory of a particular confessional tradition and are repeatedly narrated but which also imply a negative judgement on another tradition: for example, the history of the crusades, the history of persecutions of particular churches by other churches, etc.

2. What parts do ecclesiological assumptions play in the different church traditions?

- The presentation of history is obviously affected by the distinctive ecclesiology of the different churches. Particularly important in this connection is the view taken of the continuity of the Church throughout the centuries. Whereas the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches start from the assumption that the Church of Christ has remained in unbroken continuity in their history, the Protestant churches were by the experience of the Reformation compelled to conclude that continuity of the church is a much more hidden reality. The Holy Spirit maintains the church in unbroken continuity even through apparent ruptures but it is a continuity which is not automatically recognizable and perceptible. On the basis of these different ecclesiological perspectives, different pictures of the course of church history through the centuries result. Whereas the tendency on the one side is to prove this continuity even in the course of history, on the other side a preeminent position is easily assigned to the Reformation period, over against other periods of church history.
- The different views of the Church's continuity can lead to different attitudes of history generally. Churches which make visible continuity one of their main doctrinal affirmations have a particularly pronounced need to keep on reinforcing their identity afresh by commemorating their history.
- Ecclesiological assumptions are also decisive when the whole of history is viewed from the standpoint of the spread of Christianity (Latourette) or from an ecumenical perspective in the sense already indicated.

How are we to determine the legitimacy of the assumptions?

3. What part is played by political and social concepts of the form of society and the role to be fulfilled by the church in society?

- A presentation can focus its attention on the interaction between the Christian faith and society. The question then arises of the source of the criteria by which this interaction is judged.
- To what extent can the Gospel itself be this source? What legitimate role can ideological perspectives play, for example, Marxist criteria of judgement?
- What is the role of other religions? What is the contribution of popular piety and folk religion?

4. To what extent is the presentation affected by the prevailing understanding of history as a science?

- To some extent the priorities both for research and the presentation of history are established by the dominant interests and methods in historiography. To what extent is this a legitimate influence on church history?
- What precisely is the distinctive character of the writing of church history within the general science of history?

5. In the presentation of historical events, what is the significance (positive or negative) of certain schemata of interpretation? Some examples are mentioned:
 - Many presentations utilize such patterns as "beginning-growth-decay", "seed-development-flowering" or "original purity-decline-repristination (post tenebras lux)". Frequently, also, the image of "spring-summer-autumn" is used which presupposes a cyclic movement of history.
 - The question of the guilt of the Church in historical events deserves special attention. What schemata of interpretation result from the judgement that the Church has incurred guilt?
 - What use is made of the idea of the "signs of the times"? Signs are patent of different interpretations. The very same events can be interpreted as pointers to the coming kingdom or as a sign of the corruption of "this world".
6. What significance does the periodisation of history have for its presentation?
 - On what criteria, and possibly also schemata of interpretation is the particular periodisation based?
 - How appropriate is the terminology employed in each case (e.g. modern period, Reformation and Counter-Reformation, etc.)?
 - Does the course of history in the last few decades suggest the need for a new periodisation of church history? On the one hand the growing fellowship among the churches poses new questions. How far, for example, is the periodisation of the western presentation appropriate for the history of the Orthodox churches? To what extent is the Reformation really a decisive watershed? On the other hand, the universal extension of the Church leads to new perspectives. What periodisation is required in view of the recent presentation of history in Latin America, Asia and Africa?
 - Decisions about periodisation are particularly important for popular presentations of the history.

IV THE TASK OF CHURCH HISTORIANS

There is also a practical aspect to the theme "Church History in an Ecumenical Perspective". Within the present enterprise of research and teaching, how is a really ecumenical presentation of church history to be achieved? The following themes may require attention in this context:

1. How can we encourage joint research and make it fruitful? There are numerous opportunities for ecumenical exchange today. How can jointly established perspectives lead to joint projects?
2. How is church history being taught in theological faculties and colleges? What provisions are made for students to learn church history, other than the history of their own church?

3. How are church history and the history of missions related to each other in theological teaching?
4. What view do church historians take of the relationship between church history and the Church, its witness and its instruction? What is the role of the church historian in the provision of popular presentations? How is an adequate and representative solution to be found on the special problems arising in this connection (criteria of presentation, selection of material, etc.)?
5. What lessons and conclusions can be derived from ecumenical projects already in progress in the writing of church history?

II THE COUNCIL OF BASLE: A STILL UNFINISHED DEBATE

Lukas Vischer

The conciliar session in the Minster in Basle on May 7th 1437 was a stormy one. Already assembled in the city for nearly six years, the Council had broken up in disorder on the question of where the negotiations with representatives of the Orthodox Church of the East should take place. The majority were in favour of Avignon, a city on this side of the Alps. The minority supported the Pope's preference for Florence or Udine or some other Italian city. Tension among the participants had mounted sharply. The Council's decision should have been announced earlier but the plenary session of April 27th had ended in complete confusion. The Archbishop of Tarent, a representative of the papal minority who had only recently returned from Italy, had seized possession of the altar in the early morning and begun to celebrate mass, obviously with the intention of preventing the promulgation of the majority decision. The representatives of the majority, arriving a little later, protested against this effrontery. The civic guard of the city of Basle had to intervene to end the brawling which then broke out. A second plenary session on May 4th likewise failed to produce a conclusive result and was adjourned to May 7th. This time the majority was determined at all costs to read out the Decree containing its own ruling on the question. Already at four in the morning, its leader, Cardinal Louis Aleman of Avignon, was in position in the Minster, to make quite sure there could be no argument over his rightful place. After he had celebrated mass, the moment came for the Decree to be read. A final attempt at mediation was rejected. But then, instead of just one voice, two were now heard. Not only the Decree of the majority was read out but also that of the minority. Since the latter was the shorter of the two, the members of the minority were already beginning to intone the Te Deum laudamus while the majority's spokesman was still reading the Decree. A few moments later, the majority took up the same hymn. Two mutually opposed Decrees were thus proclaimed in harsh discordance! Which of them was to be official? An ad hoc commission decided that the conciliar seal should be affixed to the majority Decree. But, at the instigation of the Archbishop of Tarent, the safe containing the conciliar seal was broken into and the second Decree likewise stamped with the council's seal.

These disorderly conflicts were a clear sign of disintegration. In their disappointment, an increasing number of those who took a moderate conciliarist position turned their backs on the Council. Barely a fortnight after these incidents, Nicholas of Cusa, one of the outstanding leaders of the Council, left the city and placed himself at the Pope's service. A few months later, Pope Eugenius IV felt sufficiently strong to abrogate the Council of Basle and, with a view to union with the Orthodox Church of the East, to convoke a new council in Ferrara. In the following January, in obedience to the Pope's summons, Cardinal Giuliano Cesarini, the papal legate, left Basle to return to Italy. Thereby the Council lost not only its canonical president but also the man whose breadth of vision, disinterested devotion and persuasive eloquence had

gained him the highest respect of all its participants. He was to play an important role at the Council of Ferrare-Florence.

Promising Beginnings

What had caused this disintegration? Only a few years previously it had seemed likely that the Council would be able to carry out its appointed tasks and achieve the unity and renewal of the Church for which so many were longing. Certainly the beginning had been difficult. The participants were slow to arrive in Basle. Both Martin V and his successor Eugenius IV viewed the enterprise with considerable misgiving; only reluctantly had the former agreed to its convocation. But once the Council had been finally constituted and held its opening session on December 14th, 1431, it soon won respect and authority. It saw itself as the continuation of the Council of Constance. At that Council, in the famous Decree Frequens (October 9th, 1417), it had been decided to hold conciliar assemblies at regular intervals. The first had been held at Pavia-Siena in 1423-24, and there it had been decided to meet again seven years later in Basle. When the participants assembled in Basle, therefore, it was with the hope that they would at last be able to carry out the reforms needed for the well-being of the Church. In order to take this task in hand, of course, it was necessary for them to overcome the resistance of the Pope. Already before the opening session, Eugenius IV had decided to transfer the Council to Bologna, and shortly afterwards stated this decision still more pointedly in the Bull Quoniam alto (December 18th, 1431). The Council resisted. Even the Cardinal legate urged the Pope to withdraw this decision. And Eugenius IV, whose political position was at that time becoming increasingly precarious, did just that, step by step. In the Bull Dudum sacrum (December 15, 1433), he finally declared that the Council had been legitimately assembled from the beginning and that he recognized all the Decrees promulgated by it. When the Bull was read out at the 16th session of the Council on February 5th, 1434, joy knew no bounds. The intentions of the Council of Constance, in particular those of the Decree Frequens, seemed to have triumphed. The dispute seemed to be over. The authority of the Council had been recognized even by the Pope. The way to a constructive common programme now opened up.

But the Council's standing had also been strengthened by its successful efforts to restore unity. Attention was directed first to the Hussites. The situation was no longer the same as it had been in Constance. In the intervening years, the Hussites had achieved considerable political power. Not long before the opening of the Council, a further crusade had been proclaimed against them. At Taus in August 1431 the 40'000-strong crusading army which marched against them under the leadership of Cardinal Giuliano Cesarini suffered a devastating defeat. Cesarini, who had already been nominated as president of the Basle Council, only narrowly escaped death. It is undoubtedly to this experience that we must attribute the decision of the Council of Basle to negotiate with the Hussites. Already before the solemn opening session, the invitation to send a delegation to Basle was dispatched to them. The Czechs accepted the invitation and after preliminary discussions in Eger (May 1432), detailed negotiations took place in Basle in the autumn of 1432 and the early months of the following year. These resulted in a partial agreement,

the so-called Compactata of Prague (autumn 1433). Even if full agreement was still a long way off, this was an important initial step towards reconciliation. The Council had proved itself an instrument of peace.

Heartened by this success, the Council began to turn its attention to the East. It had sent envoys to Constantinople in the summer of 1433 and in the following year had welcomed an Orthodox delegation whose task it was to negotiate the holding of a joint council either in Constantinople or in the West. At its 19th session on September 7th, 1434, the Council adopted the Decree Sicut Pia Mater in which it spoke movingly of the encounter and declared its readiness to take all necessary steps to achieve unity.

But what about the reforms in the Church? During its first two years the Council had not been able to concentrate on this task with the zeal hoped for. Its energies had been taken up with the conflict with the Pope and the efforts for unity. The development of a coherent programme of reform was also hampered by the deep differences between the members of the Council. Yet at least one important decision was taken from the start. At the second session (February 15th, 1432) it was decided to work, not according to nations as in Constance, but in "deputations" determined by theme. Four groups had been established of this kind - pro reformatorio, pro fide, pro pace, and pro communibus (on ecclesiastical reforms, on matters of faith, on peace, and on general business). The first fruits of the work on reform had appeared during the year 1433. Unanimous approval was given at the 12th session of July 13th, 1433 to a Decree on the election of bishops, abbots, etc. which limited the papal authority and provided detailed directives on the mode of election. Simony in all its forms was singled out for condemnation. A Decree on the need for regular provincial and diocesan synods was adopted at the 15th session on November 26th, 1433; this stipulated that in future every diocese was to hold an annual synod in the second week after Easter. The resolution of the conflict with Eugenius IV had given a fresh impetus to the work of the reforms. In the January of 1435, at the 20th session, a further four Decrees were promulgated. Indeed, it looked as if the Council might even decide to produce a comprehensive plan for the reform in head and members. In the early months of 1435, Cesarini had withdrawn into the Carthusian monastery in Little Basle and there drafted a detailed text in seven parts.

Only a few years earlier, therefore, the Council had been making great progress. The participants had been buoyed up by confidence and great expectations. Something of this mood is clearly reflected in the report made by Ulrich Stoeckel, a Benedictine monk, to the abbot of the Tegernsee monastery. Writing after the memorable session at which the Bull Dudum sacrum had been read (February 5th, 1434), he declares: "Therefore, dear father and brother, be glad and rejoice in our Lord Jesus Christ that He has so gloriously uplifted His Church. For since Christianity began, no greater victory than this was ever seen. The authority and strength of the Church have been established against its enemies. The blessings which flow from this victory will be felt by the Church to the end of the ages. All future councils have been strengthened and confirmed by it, and on them the life and faith of the Church depend. For the evils which have befallen it today - heresy and the decay of religious life everywhere in Christendom - are due to the failure to hold councils." (1)

The Deeper Causes of the Disintegration

Stirring words! Yet, barely three years later, the promising enterprise was radically called in question. Certainly the Council was not yet played out. Even now, the vision which inspired it still proved a powerful one. The political support given to the Council continued to make it an important factor. Cardinal Louis Aleman, a powerful figure with an obviously almost irresistible aura, was chosen as the new president; he was able to hold the assembly together and to lead it forward coherently and energetically. The Council did not even shrink from deposing Eugenius IV with due decorum and electing a successor with dignified ceremonial. The house zur Mücke in the Minster Square in Basle became the scene of a conciliar conclave. But with the abrogation of the Council by Eugenius IV, its deepest dynamic was broken. The horizon became more and more restricted. The attempts to achieve unity with the East were now continued under the Pope's leadership in Ferrara and later in Florence. Work on the reform of the Church retreated into the background. Attention was focussed more and more exclusively on the single question of the Council's authority over against the Pope. With every year that passed, the disintegration of the assembly became more and more evident.

How had this been possible? The reason is not far to seek. The enterprise was a failure because no agreement was reached between the leaders of the Council and the Pope. Only with the cooperation of the Pope was it possible for the Council to achieve its goals. The theologians in Basle did not question the institution of the papacy as such. What the Council really wanted to do was to redefine the relationship between Council and Pope. The role of the Council as representative of the Church was to be asserted over against the absolute authority of the Pope. On the question of how this relationship was to be defined in detail, opinions differed in Basle. In the early years of the Council, especially, there was a clash between moderate and radical positions. But not even the most radical champions of conciliarism wanted to manage without a Pope. It was vital, therefore, for the Council of Basle to win over the Pope to its own view of conciliar authority. The only basis on which this was possible was a synthesis, accepted by both parties, between conciliar and papal authority. But this synthesis did not materialize. It was made impossible both by the uncompromising demands of the Council and by the unyielding attitude of the Pope. The Council believed it could force the Pope to accept the authority of the Council. Eugenius IV, on the contrary, was basically unprepared to make any concessions. He regarded the conciliar reform movement primarily as a threat to the papal authority. There was no room for doubt as to his conviction in this respect. He wrote to the Doge of Venice in 1433: "We would rather renounce the tiara and surrender Our Life than bear responsibility for the subordination of the papal office to the Council. That would be contrary to all canonical decisions. None of Our predecessors did that." (2) He had consented to the convocation of the Council only under the pressure of the prevailing mood and had declared his readiness to revoke the Bull Quoniam alto only because compelled by political wrong to do so. The real object of his strategy was to establish papal authority over against the Council. At first, the Council of Basle had achieved one or two victories in this conflict. But what were a few isolated victories worth when what was really needed was a common basis! The longer the controversy lasted, the greater the inevitable drain on the Council's resources. Instead of being free to

tackle the major issues of the time, it was forced to concentrate exclusively on the question of its own authority. Whatever the theme, whatever the discussion, the controversy with the Pope was there in the background. In these circumstances, how could the Council possibly make decisions which carried conviction? And when any agreement had been made impossible by the papal nullification of the Council, the Council tried to impose the synthesis by electing an Anti-Pope. Not surprisingly, this strategem failed. Indeed, this sad spectacle of a new schism only reduced the vision of conciliar renewal to an absurdity.

Conflicting Interpretations

What assessment are we to make of this whole course of events? Was the Council of Basle a failure? Had the idea of the reform councils been shown to be inadequate? Or had the evolution of the Council been hindered by Eugenius IV and the papal party? Opinions differ widely. Interpretations and accounts of the Council vary according to the assumptions historians start from.

Roman Catholic interpretations usually offer an unfavourable picture. They point out that the underlying idea of the Council was insufficiently anchored in the tradition of the Church and that the enterprise was therefore doomed to fail from the outset. They stress all the irregularities identifiable as such and, above all, the unrepresentative character of the Council as compared with the composition of previous councils. The thesis that a Council was superior to the Pope burdened the Council with inner contradictions which it was unable to surmount. The falsity of this thesis was plainly demonstrated by the course of the Council itself. Both theologically and historically, Eugenius IV was clearly in the right. Doubts can certainly be voiced about certain aspects of his policy. Accounts of his vacillating attitude in the first years of the Council are often critical. Yet he was surely right in the main in recognizing the inherent danger of the conciliar movement. That people like Nicholas of Cusa, Giuliano Cesarini and Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini should have abandoned the Council is seen as clear evidence that conciliarist views had already proved untenable to discerning minds after only a few years. The evolution of the doctrine of papal authority amounted to a complete subsequent vindication of the attitude adopted by Eugenius IV.

Protestant interpretations usually have different emphases. To them the conciliar movement was a harbinger of the great reformation movement which would dominate the 16th century. They describe with sympathy the emerging determination to review the Church in head and members. They interpret the idea of the conciliar movement as the dawn of a new understanding of the Church and attribute responsibility for the Council's failure primarily to the stubborn resistance of the Pope. He was bounded by too narrow an outlook to be able to discern the signs of the times. Not that they ignore the failure of the Council itself. But they usually take the view that the reform of the Church could not have succeeded because it had been undertaken on too narrow a basis, spiritually and theologically. For all its criticisms, the conciliarist movement was still rooted in the moribund system of the medieval world. It had striven to achieve reform simply by changes in the existing legal structure. It

was therefore impossible for the Council to be anything more than "an overture to the transition from one era to another". (3) The privilege of achieving the real breakthrough was reserved to the reformation of the next century.

An Alternative Interpretation

Both the above interpretations of the Council are obviously based on distinctive confessional attitudes. The criteria for interpreting it derive from the later development which has become authoritative for the now divided churches. But is not another interpretation also possible? For the now divided churches, the period of the Council of Basle is in a certain sense a common past. The divisions had either not yet taken place or else were not yet so final as to exclude the restoration of communion altogether. It is also worthwhile, therefore, to reflect together on what happened in those decades. The specific question which arises, in particular today when the churches have again drawn closer to one another, is this: what was really at stake for the future in that controversy and yet was not recognized by the Church? Why was it not possible for the unity to be restored, a unity which must surely still have seemed palpably close? What were the inevitable consequences of the failure to achieve reform? What losses did the defeat of conciliarism involve for the Church? Let me offer three reflections on these questions.

1. The Work for Unity

In its early years, the Council of Basle had negotiated with the Hussites, not without success. Even if it proved impossible to eliminate the differences, the Council did manage to make them a matter for discussion. The principle of negotiation accepted at the first encounter in Eger (May 8th, 1432), often referred to later as the "Judge of Eger", had introduced a new element into the conciliar process. (4) The negotiations were certainly difficult from the very beginning. The openness of the Council of Basle was viewed with suspicion by Eugenius IV. This meant that even the Council's representatives did not feel free in the negotiations, either. They had to take into account the possibility that any agreement they negotiated might in the end be rejected by the Pope. This meant that their readiness for the concessions required for unity was only hesitant. The absence of a firm synthesis between Council and Pope had an immobilizing effect. Then, when the Council of Basle broke up, the results achieved in the discussions were also written off. The incipient estrangement of the churches in northern Europe from Rome could neither be healed nor checked.

The same can be said of the union with the Church of the East. The Council had permitted itself to hold out the highest hopes. In the Decree Sicut Pia Mater (September 7th, 1434) we read: "Although many at first regarded the Bohemian question as not just difficult but even wellnigh hopeless and considered our efforts pointless and vain, our Lord Jesus Christ, for whom nothing is impossible, has nevertheless so prospered our cause that the appeal to the Bohemians has brought far greater benefit to the Church than many mighty armies which invaded Bohemia by

force of arms. This gives us the hope of achieving unity also with the Graks..." In this second enterprise, however, the Council's chances were limited. From the outset, the envoys of the Emperor and the Patriarch of Constantinople had made it quite clear that the presence of the Pope at the Council was an indispensable condition if they were to enter into negotiations. Certainly they took the view that "unity can only be achieved at a universal council in which the Church of the West and the Church of the East meet together" (5), but they knew in their bones that a Council could reach no lasting solution without the participation of the Pope. The fact that the Decree Sicut Pia Mater mentioned the Hussites and the Greeks in the same breath was bound to offend Constantinople. To this is added that fact that, even from a purely practical standpoint, the holding of a council in Italy was an easier proposition; it is not hard to see why the Emperor and the Patriarch preferred the papal invitation.

The union achieved at the Council of Ferrara-Florence was only a short-lived success. The question can therefore be raised: had not the conditions for the discussion with the East in some respects been better in the Council in Basle? One of the chief barriers to agreement between East and West was the papal primacy. This difficulty was illustrated right from the start of the Council of Ferrara-Florence, on the opening day. Should the Patriarch of Constantinople kiss the Pope's feet at the opening public reception? The Eastern representatives rejected the very idea. The two parties finally agreed that there should be no ceremony of subordination but that this first encounter should not take place in public. Obviously, the real question was not solved by this compromise. It pervaded the negotiations right to the end and the concessions made by the Orthodox delegates in this respect were among the main reasons why the union was opposed so vigorously in the East. But would the representatives of the western churches in Basle have insisted on the papal authority in the same way that it was later insisted on in Ferrara-Florence? Was not the Council of Florence compelled to stress the primacy of Rome all the more unambiguously precisely because of the need to differentiate itself clearly from the Council of Basle?

The unresolved conflict between the Council of Basle and Eugenius IV, therefore, had far-reaching consequences for the unity of the Church. The fact that the work for unity in different places was pursued on the basis of different, even contradictory premises was bound to have harmful effects. In the end it proved impossible to solve the Bohemian question or to achieve a lasting reconciliation between East and West. The clear lesson of the councils of Basle and Ferrara-Florence is that the work for unity is indivisible. Only a common vision and mutually synchronised efforts can lead to the goal. That would have necessitated the break-up of the unholy "triangle" of Rome, Basle and Constantinople and its transformation into a unifying circle. The partners would have had to meet one another. While it is easy to understand the unwillingness of the Eastern representatives to be treated on the same level as the Hussites, surely the experience of the Council of Basle in the talks with them (the Hussites) should have acquired importance also for the controversy between East and West. On the other hand the presence of Orthodox representatives could have introduced fresh angles into the encounter with the Hussites. (6) But the necessary conditions for this were not present. The two councils were therefore bound to become early warnings of the later divisions which have lasted to our own day.

2. The Reform of the Church

The unsettled conflict between the Basle Council and the Pope also led, however, to a further postponement of the reform of the Church. The Council of Florence ended without having taken the hoped-for measures for the renewal of the Church. Criticism of the state of the Church had meanwhile increased. For years had passed without the Pope's having initiated any serious measures of reform. As a consequence, people had become firmly convinced that the "head" of the Church would never take the necessary steps. Only when we remember this dissatisfaction is it possible to understand the support which continued to be given to the Council of Basle even in its final phase.

But the Council of Basle was not in a position to fulfil these hopes. The conflict with the Pope led it to focus its attention almost exclusively on the reform of the "head". The leading figures in the Council, above all, Giuliano Cesarini, pressed of course for a comprehensive reform. But the inherent dynamic of the conflict was obviously too strong to permit any balanced programme to ripen. The publication of the Decree abolishing the papal annates (June 9th, 1435) is particularly significant in this respect. The question of donations to the Holy See had preoccupied the Council from the beginning. A solution was worked out which, while abolishing the annates, provided for the compensation of the Pope from other sources of income. For reasons which are no longer clear in detail today, the Council's Decree contained only the abolition of the annates. (7) The matter of compensation was postponed to a later date. Some participants, Giuliano Cesarini in particular, warned against this lopsided step, but failed to persuade the Council. With the inevitable outcome. The Decree deepened the Pope's distrust still further. Similar conflicts took place in other matters. So preoccupied was the Council with "its one question" that even the great plan which Cesarini had drafted in the Carthusian monastery in 1435 ultimately remained a mere document.

But even the Pope himself did not start work on the reform. Eugenius IV was content with merely cancelling the work of the Council of Basle. His answer to it was not a reform council but a union council. So the longing for a renewal of the Church continued to be left unsatisfied. The grievances continued to pile up. Inevitably the conviction that only a spiritual rebellion would bring about the necessary changes grew and spread. The Reformation became inescapable.

3. The Loss of Conciliar Practice

The disintegration of the Council of Basle can be interpreted as a clear unqualified victory for papal authority. The conciliar movement had failed to carry the day. The theory of the papal supremacy emerged the stronger from the conflict. But this conclusion would be rash.

What were the ideas which guided the Council of Basle? The central conviction was that legally the Council was superior to the Pope, and, indeed, not just in certain precisely defined cases, as the Council of Constance had declared, but in a universal sense. This conviction was based on the view that the Church as a whole is invested with sovereignty

and that the Council represents the Church. "The basis of jurisdiction lies in the universal Church; but since it is impossible to assemble the universal Church, the latter exercises this jurisdiction through the Council which represents it" - this was how Panormitanus, one of the conciliar jurists, stated the position. (8) No precise definition is given here of the form this representation takes. The basic axiom, rather, was that the sovereignty of the Church finds effective expression in the Council. It was on the basis of this axiom that the authority of the Pope was then defined. Certainly the Pope has greater authority than the individual members of the Christian community, but he is subordinate to the community as a whole and therefore to the Council. It was in terms of the structure of the medieval corporations, and therefore, to some extent, of universities and chapters, that the relationship between community and Pope was described. By installing a Pope, the Church no more surrenders its sovereignty than does a corporation by appointing a rector. Sovereignty still remains vested in the Council. This sovereignty is only enjoyed by the Pope to the extent that he, as commissioned head (ministeriale caput), interprets it. The manner in which the papal office is to be exercised is subject to the judgement of the Church therefore. (9) The Council can establish rules for this exercise. It can also depose the Pope; and do so, indeed, not only when he has succumbed to heresy but also when he is guilty of maladministration and injury to the common weal. The decisions of the Council, like those of a corporation, can be taken by a simple majority vote.

Individual spokesmen of the Council also applied these theses concerning the relationship of community and head to the secular political realm. John of Segovia, for example, declared that the community's obedience to the sovereign was based on its confidence that his commands served the common good. Once this confidence was lacking, the community itself could assemble and make its own decisions, which then took precedence over the commands of the sovereign. By arguments of this kind, John of Segovia and other conciliarists sought to show that the conciliar theory had its analogy even in the secular realm. In doing so, however, they expressed a view which might have had far-reaching political consequences.

Not surprisingly, therefore, these ideas encountered suspicion and opposition. The revolutionary element inherent in these theses inevitably provoked disquiet and, in many people, protests and determined opposition. Theologians of the papal party, John of Torquemada in particular, stoutly defended the traditional view of papal authority. Their basis thesis was that every community is, in principle, hierarchically ordered. It does not create this hierarchy but, on the contrary, depends on it for its ordered existence. Sovereignty is therefore vested in the head of the community. His authority embraces all authority exercised at lower levels in the community. Only in strict subordination to the Pope, therefore, can a Council take place. To convoke it, to lead it, to transfer and even to prorogue it, these are the prerogative of the Pope. The papalist theory was also supported by references to the political realm. A monarchy, it was argued, could only achieve peace, unity and justice if able to exercise its due authority unhindered. It cannot be subjected to the legal pressure of any other human instance. To distribute power between community and sovereign would abolish sovereignty altogether. There can never be more than one bearer of authority.

We have here, therefore, a clash between two main conceptions of authority. It is easy to see why the second conception carried the day both in church affairs and in the political realm. After the experiences they had of fruitless controversies both in church and politics, many people at that time saw a centralized form of government as the only guarantee of peace, unity and order. But what price did the Church have to pay for this? Two points strike me as important in this connection.

(a) After this victory, it was no longer possible to deal with, clarify and settle the major controversies which were to shake the western Church, at a Council. The idea of a Council certainly continued to live on for a long time and attempts to convoke a Council continued to be made. (10) The Reformers themselves frequently demanded that the differences which had arisen as a result of the Reformation should be discussed at a "universal, free Christian Council". But the call went unheeded. It was bound to go unheeded. Popes recoiled from the very idea, fearing that power would inevitably slip from their hands as the result of a Council. Only when their position had been once again sufficiently reinforced were they prepared to risk summoning a Council. But this meant in practice that the Reformation was excluded from participating. The impetus of the Reformation could only have been accepted by a much more open form of conciliar confrontation. The hardening of the division was therefore inevitable.

(b) The triumph of the papalist theory could repress but not eliminate the conviction that sovereignty is invested in the Church as a whole. It carried far too much theological and historical weight to lose its vitality. It was bound to find expression in new movements. In a modified form it became a leitmotif of the Reformation movements. At the beginning of the 16th century it was still so strong that it was no longer possible for the contending parties to reach agreement on how to settle the controversies at a Council. Elements of the conciliarist tradition were adopted and developed, above all, by the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition. The impact of the conciliar theory continued to have its effects also in the political realm. The idea of the sovereignty of the people would acquire increasing importance. The convictions which had been argued at the Council of Basle would surface again in fresh guise in the theory and practice of constitutionalism. The triumph for the papalist theory helped to ensure that at least the initial response of the Roman Catholic Church could only be one of suspicion and mistrust.

* * * * *

The study of the Council of Basle and its controversies could open up new perspectives for us today. Now that the churches have entered into dialogue and are seeking the restoration of the shattered unity, it is especially incumbent on them to reopen the question on which their unity shipwrecked at that time. Basically, the problems which confronted the Church then have remained unsolved down to our own day. But unity will not be achieved until they have been solved. Why should the Council of Basle not be a stimulus to reflect on the conciliar process as a possible way to the recovery of the unity of the Church?

NOTES

1. Cf. Joseph Gill, Constance et Bâle-Florence, Histoire des Conciles Oecuméniques 9, p. 149.
2. Gill, op. cit. p. 149.
3. The splendid title of Theodora Von der Mühl's book on the Council of Basle, Ein Vorspiel zur Zeitenwende, Munich 1959.
4. The agreed formula of Eger reads: "On the question of the four articles (i.e. for the decision of the question in dispute) ... the divine law, the praxis of Christ, the Apostles and the Ancient Church, as well as the doctors of the Church, to the extent that they are based on these sources, shall be accepted at the Council of Basle as the true and impartial judge"; cf. Gill, op. cit. p. 166.
5. This statement is quoted in Sicut Pia Mater.
6. The extent to which the questions in dispute were all interconnected may be illustrated by one example. The Hussites admitted baptized children to the Lord's Supper. This practice was shocking in the West and caused difficulties at the Council of Basle (cf. Gill, op. cit. p. 179). But the Hussite practice had always been the practice of the Orthodox Church of the East as well.
7. Edmund Bursche, Die Reformarbeiten des Basler Konzils, Diss. Lodz 1921, p. 71, suggests that intention of the blockage of the Pope's income was to hamper his negotiations with Constantinople.
8. Cf. A.J. Black, Konziliarismus und Papalismus zwischen 1430 und 1450, in: Remigius Bäumer, Die Entwicklung des Konziliarismus, Wege der Forschung vol. CCLXXIX, Darmstadt, 1976, p. 300.
9. This thesis is stated with particular emphasis, for example, in an expert opinion solicited by Bishop Zbigniew Olesnicki from the University of Krakow, cf. Bursche, op. cit. p. 107 ff.
10. An old example of this was the attempt of Archbishop Andreas Zamometic of Krain in 1482, i.e. just over fifty years later, to summon a council to Basle again; cf. on this Jakob Burckhardt, Erzbischof Andreas von Krain und der letzte Konzilsversuch in Basel 1482-1484, Basel 1854; Alfred Stoecklin, Der Basler Konzilsversuch des Andreas Zamometic vom Jahre 1482, Basel 1938.