



## Lukas Vischer: The Process of „Reception“ in the Ecumenical Movement

### 1. Place and Date of Publication

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### 2. Historical Context

In 1982 the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches sent theological texts on *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* to the churches for official response. The Commission, encouraged by Lukas Vischer, applied this method for the first time, to promote reception on a broad basis.

### 3. Summary

Today we often hear the complaint that discussions among the divided churches do not really change anything. Years ago the churches had greeted the ecumenical era with enthusiasm. But today they stress again their own identity and tradition. There is a danger that the consensus reached over questions which were previously insoluble will remain the business of a few professional theologians who happen to be interested in the ecumenical movement. – In the degree, however, to which the churches *experience* the ecumenical consensus will they gain the courage to leave their isolation and seek community once more. They will discover that the sense of identity which they find so necessary for their own security and witness will be realized even more fully in a renewed fellowship of all Christians. Ecumenical dialogue brings both parties together in the presence of God. Its source lies in Jesus Christ and the cloud of witnesses who have confessed him through the centuries. What is won in the dialogue is that the partners are ready to learn from the other something which they have overlooked up to this point. According to John 14 the Holy Spirit must give the disciples a *correct remembering* of everything necessary for salvation that Jesus has told them already. It may become clear to the churches that convictions which were once extremely important have now lost their significance, and that unity can be achieved through common impulses of renewal. Of course, they may be faced with the fact as well that unity can be achieved only at the deepest level of faith. But this at least puts their less important differences in proper perspective.

Last year (1982) the Faith and Order Commission laid before the churches three texts on *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* for an official response. It sought to present a text which made available the common perspective achieved by the ecumenical movement up to that point. For the churches the texts are uncomfortable insofar as they are directed at their praxis and pose concrete questions. The official evaluations show how little we still can speak of a *spirituality of reception*. The churches generally evaluate the texts on the basis of whether they are in accord with the teaching and practice of their own tradition. They do not ask to what extent the ecumenical consensus calls into question and *corrects* the teaching and practice of their own church.

Nevertheless the process of reception can be furthered by following measures: a) The churches in a given region try to develop a *common* judgment about the consensus. b) The results of ecumenical dialogues must enter into the *liturgy and catechism* of the churches. c) Everything depends on the *will* of the churches to *share a common life* and to *express and embody anew the one universal fellowship in Christ*.

The cover features a bright yellow background. Several thick, curved lines in black and various shades of grey sweep across the page from the top-left towards the right, creating a sense of movement and depth. The lines are layered, with some appearing in front of others.

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# THE PROCESS OF "RECEPTION" IN THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

LUKAS VISCHER

Today we often hear the complaint that discussions among the divided churches do not really change anything.<sup>1</sup> One Commission after another meets to discuss every conceivable topic. Papers are produced and sent to church officials. But then nothing is done with the recommendations and the churches become even more divided than before.

Why does this happen? Is it because the ecumenical discussions are too "theological," and pay too little attention to the practical life of the churches? Or is it because the church officials are reluctant to inform their members about the agreement which has been achieved? Or are the churches really not interested in unity after all? Whatever answer is correct, we see today a growing discrepancy between the far-reaching agreement which has been reached in the various dialogues, and the everyday situation in the churches. The danger is that the consensus reached over questions which were previously insoluble will remain the business of a few professional theologians who happen to be interested in the ecumenical movement. The texts which are produced run the risk of being consigned, one after another, to the "ecumenical section" of theological libraries. The question which must command our attention today is this: how can the insights gained from ecumenical dialogues penetrate the life of the churches? For there is little point in pursuing this dialogue if it will not lead to the enrichment of our common life in the churches.

The divided churches live today in a state of powerful inner contradiction. Years ago they greeted the ecumenical era with enthusiasm. They found it liberating to see how the Holy Spirit, in the midst of hostile divisions, could create opportunities for mutual understanding and common work. They accepted the creation of common commissions with joy. But now years have passed and the situation has changed. Today the churches stress their own identity and tradition. What is the reason for the shift in emphasis?

Surely the reason is not difficult to see. The churches have been deeply shaken by their radical encounter with the contemporary world. Spontaneously they are seeking a basis for their identity and their confession of faith. This the ecumenical movement cannot supply, for it has gone only halfway on its pilgrimage. The churches

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1. This paper is based on a lecture delivered May 20, 1983 at the Catholic University of Lublin.

are no longer completely divided, but neither are they yet one in faith. They are on the way to unity, and we cannot tell how long it will take to reach the goal. It is therefore understandable that the churches suddenly long for the relative security of their own traditions, and emphasize again their own identity. Ecumenical participation is still affirmed, but in practice there is a return to the distinctive life and witness of earlier days.

Thus, remarkably, at the moment when the years of careful theological work are bearing fruit, the churches are not in a position to receive it. The ecumenical consensus does not find the open ears and hearts necessary for its proper reception.

This only emphasizes the urgent necessity of achieving such a reception. For the return to one's own tradition must not be the final word. The call to unity is too deeply rooted in the Gospel itself to be ignored or bypassed. We must again take up the path to unity; and in the degree to which the churches experience the ecumenical consensus will they gain the courage to leave their isolation and seek community once more.

They will discover that the sense of identity which they find so necessary for their own security and witness, will be realized even more fully in a renewed fellowship of *all* Christians.

### 1. What does "Consensus" mean?

It is important at this point to clear up a misconception which is always connected with the word "consensus."

What happens when divided churches struggle together with a controversial subject and seek to reach agreement on it? Does consensus mean that each party gives up its own view, so that all join finally in some "average" position? Is ecumenical dialogue like a political negotiation, so that the agreement which is reached is comparable to a "joint communique"? That would be a most unfortunate misunderstanding. Ecumenical dialogue is not only the encounter of two parties with different interests. Rather it brings both parties together in the presence of God. It is nothing less than the readiness of the partners to stand together in their responsibility to the Gospel itself, as it has been delivered to us. Its source lies in Jesus Christ and the cloud of witnesses who have confessed Him through the centuries. We do not create the results ourselves; they are not due to clever inspirations which enable us to make fancy proclamations. What is won in the dialogue is more that the partners turn together to Jesus Christ, that they correct each other in their hearing and understanding, that they are ready to learn from the other something which they have overlooked up to this point. The consensus which results from such a conversation is thus a kind of new revelation of the one Truth. It has nothing to do with either compromise or indifference, as anxious Christians always fear. Rather it is the search of this generation to lay hold of the truth of the past together and to claim it for our own.

A Biblical text serves to make this still clearer. Jesus proclaims the coming of the Holy Spirit to his disciples (John 14:26). He emphasizes that he has spoken to them about it: "This have I told you." He continues that the Holy Spirit will teach them all things, and that they will remember everything which he has told them. A remarkable thing: he has told them *everything* necessary for salvation, and yet the Holy Spirit *will* teach them *everything* later on. Obviously the disciples will not be able to remember correctly everything that Jesus has said. The Spirit, then, is the power which gives a correct remembering. One could say that ecumenical dialogue wants only to stand in the service of this remembering. It wants to illuminate, in different ways in the different churches, our dim recollections. It seeks always a more complete picture of the Truth.

"Remembering"—does ecumenical dialogue, then, have only to do with the past? Many ask this question. They have the impression that the dialogue is far removed from the realities of this world and they are not entirely incorrect.

When divided churches encounter one another seriously they must turn their attention to the time when their separation arose. They must seek to understand the controversies which once came between them. They can do that only when they immerse themselves in the language of that time and seek to uncover the deepest aspects of the things which divided them. Consensus however is more than the expression of differences which have been overcome. Dialogue must try to show how the churches can offer a common confession of the faith today. Consensus is really consensus only when it opens a way into the future. It is a dynamic "remembering" which presses on towards the future. And every church can learn something new from this remembering.

Is the working out of consensus really worth all this trouble? Do the churches really need to achieve an agreement on every single question which divides them in order to enter into unity? Is an exhaustive handbook in which "the teaching" of the Church is laid out really a prerequisite for unity? We misunderstand efforts toward unity when we visualize them leading to a new catechism. It is more a matter of the churches, presupposing their unity in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, jointly investigating and testing the things which divide them, asking whether they must still stand in the way of fellowship. This investigation may lead to various conclusions. They may determine that the differences are not mutually exclusive, and that a correct interpretation will reveal them to be complementary rather than opposed. They may come to the conclusion that certain differences have become interwoven, over the course of time, with secondary factors.

In this case a new focus on the essential issues at stake in each position may open the way to new fellowship. It may become clear to them that convictions which were once extremely important have now lost their significance, and that in the current situation unity can be achieved through common impulses of renewal. Of course,



they may be faced with the fact that the differences, wholly or in part, simply cannot now be overcome. At this point they must rest content with the fact that unity can be achieved only at the deepest level of faith. This at least puts their less important differences in proper perspective.

At any rate it is essential to remember that the consensus won in ecumenical dialogue is not part of the "creed" of a future universal church. Ecumenical texts are only tools which allow the churches to grow together in community. By concerning themselves with such texts they learn to make ever more clear the things which unite them. They will learn to understand differences, which they had previously understood as divisive, as differing expressions of the same truth. The one Church is held together through its confession of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There can be no question of "development" through the addition of new themes. Rather the churches must grow together in their common recognition of the basic confessions of the first Christian centuries, and discover how to confess the faith today in this fellowship. The constant deposit of faith must be constantly made effectual by the church.

## 2. The Work of the Faith and Order Commission on *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*

The significance of reception can best be understood if we turn our attention to a specific text. I will now examine the texts on *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, which the Faith and Order Commission in 1982 laid before the churches for their consideration.<sup>2</sup> These texts occupy a unique place among all those produced by the professional theologians. The problems connected with the reception of ecumenical insights can be seen especially clearly from this example.

First, the history of these texts. Their first formulation was achieved over some ten years of work by the Faith and Order Commission (1965-1976).<sup>3</sup> Many theologians from various confessional traditions took part, including, since 1968, Roman Catholics.

At its meeting in Accra, Ghana (1974), the Commission decided to send the document to all the churches for an official response. This decision was confirmed by the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches<sup>4</sup> and a year later by its Assembly in Nairobi (1975).<sup>5</sup> The churches were asked by the Assembly to present their

2. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982 (Faith and Order Paper 111).

3. *One Baptism, One Eucharist and a Mutually Recognized Ministry. Three Agreed Statements*. (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1975) (Faith and Order Paper 73).

4. Central Committee, Minutes of the Twenty-Seventh Meeting, (West Berlin, 1974), p. 28.

5. *Breaking Barriers: Nairobi 1975*, ed. by David M. Paton. (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1976), pp. 68-69.

evaluation of the texts by December 31, 1976. A very large number of the churches fulfilled this request; about 110 of them sent in more or less exhaustive memoranda. The Commission then had the difficult task of reworking the texts in light of these replies.

A most demanding program was developed to do this. First, the replies were collected and analyzed carefully during sessions in Cret-Berard, Switzerland (1977). Then the Commission entered into direct correspondence with those churches which had replied in a particularly insightful and extensive way. This was to remove possible misconceptions and to achieve a greater clarity about the necessary approach to be taken in revising the texts. An interim progress report was given to the Central Committee in 1977.<sup>6</sup>

These early steps showed clearly that several conversations and consultations would be necessary in order to achieve a meaningful reworking of the texts. Two meetings occurred in this connection—one with representatives of the Baptist tradition (Louisville, April 1979)<sup>7</sup>, and one with Orthodox theologians (Chambesy, May-June 1979).<sup>8</sup> A special effort was made to make possible the rethinking of the section on ministry. A meeting on episcopé and episcopate brought the awaited breakthrough (Geneva, August 1979).<sup>9</sup> It was possible to prepare a new text. The three revised texts were then presented to the appropriate subdivisions of the Faith and Order Commission, first to the Standing Committee (Annecy, January 1981)<sup>10</sup> and then to the Commission as a whole (Lima, January 1982).<sup>11</sup> After a sizable number of small corrections and improvements had been made, it was unanimously decided to lay the texts once again before the churches for their official response. The Churches are asked to reply by December 31, 1985.<sup>12</sup>

What were the principles which guided this long process? What was the Commission aiming at?

6. *Towards an Ecumenical Consensus: Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry*. (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1977) (Faith and Order Paper 84).

7. "Consultation on Baptism," in: *Review and Expositor: a Baptist Theological Journal*, XXVII, 1, Winter 1980 (also published as Faith and Order Paper 84).

8. Published in *Minutes of the Meeting of the Standing Commission on Faith and Order*, Taizé 1979, pp. 81ff. (Faith and Order Paper 98).

9. *Episcopé and Episcopate in Ecumenical Perspective*. (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1980) (Faith and Order Paper 106).

10. *Minutes of the Meeting of the Standing Commission on Faith and Order*, Annecy 1981 (Faith and Order Paper 106).

11. *Towards Visible Unity*, Commission on Faith and Order, Lima 1982, Vol. 1. (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), p. 80 (Faith and Order Paper 112).

12. Among the theologians who have worked on the revision of the texts since Nairobi, the following should be mentioned: Vitaly Borovoy, Stephen Cranford, Nils Ehrenström, Metropolitan Emilianos, Bert Hoedemaker, David Holeyton, Anton Houtepen, Ulrich Kuhn, Gerald F. Moede, Nikos A. Nissiotis, Hans-Christoph Schmidt-Lauber, Max Thurian, Günter Wagner, Geoffrey Wainright, W. M. S. West, John Zizoulas, among many others.

a) The Commission sought to present a text which brought together the entire ecumenical discussion up to that point concerning baptism, eucharist, and ministry. Ecumenical conversation has a tendency to diffusion, with themes being taken up over and over again, and agreements reached here and there, only to be forgotten later on. The ecumenical discussion suffers from an exceptionally short memory. Therefore the Commission wanted to make conveniently available the common perspective achieved by the ecumenical movement up to now.

b) It wanted to produce a text which could be presented to the *churches*. The Commission realized that theological discussion, in and of itself, could not really capture and enable the reality of fellowship among the churches. Theological work is really dependent upon the involvement of the churches. Naturally, theological disputations can be continued indefinitely; texts can always be redistributed and "improved." But a genuine breakthrough on the way to unity can be achieved only when a new situation is created through the churches themselves. The churches—more precisely, the People of God—must be able themselves to grapple with the results of ecumenical dialogues. They must take the necessary steps to bring common fellowship closer. The theological discussion of the last ten years has probably achieved all that can be achieved at the present time. It can be taken up again, with the promise of new achievements, only on the basis of new impulses from the churches themselves.

c) The Commission also wanted to present a text which contained the essential results of the *bilateral conversations* between various confessional traditions. Today the churches find themselves in a confusing situation. The ecumenical "explosion" has led to numerous encounters and conversations. Each church now has many different contacts with others. Since Vatican II an extensive network of bilateral relationships has developed. Some have already achieved concrete results, which themselves call for reception. Others have at least altered the climate between the churches involved. The difficulty, of course, is obvious. Which texts should a church take as authoritative? How can they be sure that, in achieving rapprochement with one church, they will not be alienating themselves from the others? How can it avoid a mishandling of the whole reception process, if only because of unclarity about the priorities involved? In giving the churches a comprehensive text, the Commission wanted to try to meet these difficulties. While the results of the bilateral conversations are relevant for the specific partners involved, this text should express the convergence which *all* churches are experiencing.

d) At the same time the text should help churches facing the task of proclaiming the Gospel in a non-Christian cultural situation (such as Asia or Africa). The multiplicity of our traditions is a definite handicap here. All of them have been imposed upon the culture from outside. While all of them might be interpreted so as to be relevant in the new cultural and political situation, the reality is

often otherwise, depending upon the presuppositions of those who bring the message. The result is that divided Christian traditions arise even in these new situations. Against this tendency, the consensus which has been achieved can suggest common approaches. It is therefore of special relevance for those who are concerned with the cultural translation of the gospel.

### 3. The Process of Reception

The decision of the Faith and Order Commission in Lima (1982) was so important because it continued with such decisiveness the process of "reception" which had been begun by the Assembly in Nairobi. The replies of the churches have been collected and studied carefully. Now, seven years after Nairobi, the question to the churches—to what extent they can recognize in the BEM texts the faith of their particular church—is much more insistent than before. The texts are no longer merely the common opinions of an international and ecumenical commission of theologians, but already represent the results of an extended discussion with the churches. Thus the process of reception has entered a second phase.<sup>13</sup>

The decision of the Assembly in Nairobi, to present the three texts to the churches for a specific time and for an official reply, was undoubtedly of profound significance. Certainly the churches previously had been asked to give their opinions about texts and recommendations from the World Council of Churches. But the task set by Nairobi was new in inviting the churches to an active involvement in the formulation of the eventual unity. As a rule, theological texts simply had been sent to the churches. These were asked to consider the texts, and draw the appropriate conclusions. This time the assignment went much further. The Assembly was no longer satisfied with simply announcing the project; it called the churches to active participation in it. What lessons can we learn for the future from the process of reception up to this point?

#### A. Positive Effects of the *BEM* Texts

First, we will mention some positive aspects of the process:

a) The concern with specific texts has made clear to the churches that the ecumenical movement demands more from them

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13. It is striking that the reports of the meeting in Lima constantly referred to the fact that the decision to send the texts to the churches was unprecedented. The strength of the Lima text, of course, lay partly in the fact that it was being sent to the churches for the *second* time. See especially Michael Kinnamon's article on the Lima meeting in *Ecumenical Review*, 34, April 2, 1982, p. 134. See also his Preface to *Towards Visible Unity*, Commission on Faith and Order, Lima 1982, Vol. 1, p. 1, and finally "Survey of Church Union Negotiations," *The Ecumenical Review*, 34, #4, pp. 361-390, esp. p. 362 (also published as Faith and Order Paper 115, see p. 4). The 6th Assembly at Vancouver changed the date of first response from 1984 (Lima's proposal) to 1985.

than general statements about church unity. As long as we talk about the "essence" and "goal" of the ecumenical movement, then the churches need fear no concrete consequences for their own life. But the texts from Faith and Order are directed at their *praxis*. Insofar as they pose concrete questions, they make people uncomfortable. The first survey created a new situation. Some churches found the "assignment" so difficult that they began to question whether they could continue membership in the World Council of Churches. It became clear that "playing Ecumenical Movement"<sup>14</sup> was not good enough any more, and that concrete steps toward unity were going to have to be made.

b) It was highly significant for many churches that representatives of all the great Christian traditions had taken part in formulating the text. This "bird's-eye view," a perspective common to all Christians, made it possible for them to place their own tradition within the ecumenical movement as a whole. What are the unique qualities of the particular tradition, those things which cannot be given up? What are those more negative elements, which must be given up if the church is to play an active role in achieving fellowship among the churches as a whole?

c) Besides this, the texts have certainly confirmed that the ecumenical movement will achieve visible success only through a *common effort*. Many churches were eager to respond to the BEM texts because they knew that others were doing likewise, and the results would later be shared with all. This suggests the possibility that the churches can move *together* from one level of consensus to the next.

## B. Difficulties Which Have Come to Light

The replies of the churches, however, also indicate what difficulties we must face when the reception process is taken seriously. What do we observe in this connection?

a) However much the official evaluations were guided by a spirit of mutual understanding, they still show how little we can speak of a "spirituality of reception." Generally speaking, the churches evaluate the texts on the basis of whether they are in accord with the teaching and practice of their own tradition. They do not ask the contrary question: to what extent does the ecumenical consensus call into question and correct the teaching and practice of their own church? They have read the accord reached over baptism, eucharist, and ministry in the light of their own convictions, without taking up the task of examining their own church in the light of the consensus which has been achieved. If the texts agree with a particular tradition, then congratulations are offered; it will be said that highly significant progress has been achieved. But if difficulties are found,

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14. The expression comes from Ernst Lange, *die ökumenische Utopie oder was bewegt die ökumenische Bewegung?*, Stuttgart 1972.

then it is said that the texts "are not yet fully developed." A genuine reception, however, can only take place when the churches are ready to ask themselves how the common tradition can help *them* achieve an ecumenical breakthrough.

b) Up to now the churches have been far too little aware of the fact that community can be created only when the churches are ready for reform. For the most part, the churches have dealt with the texts on a theological level only. In order to create unity, they must grow together in teaching and practice. Therefore it is essential that the churches do not restrict their responses to the realm of theological reflections, but keep practical church life constantly in view as well. Even where this is recognized, the readiness to reform for the sake of achieving a new community is still weak. Each church views each specific step as a concession it is being asked to make, and tends to wait for the "other church" to make the first one.

This fear must be overcome before further progress can be made. This will happen only when we can make crystal clear that the demand for reform comes straight from the Gospel and is necessary if we are going to witness to our faith in the contemporary world. The reforms in worship set in motion by Vatican II have undoubtedly brought the churches closer together. However, they were undertaken primarily for the sake of the reform of the Roman Catholic church. Or to take another example: it would certainly promote fellowship among the churches if the Evangelical churches (German Lutherans, etc.) would celebrate communion every Sunday. This reform is currently in progress. But its primary advantage is that it lends additional credibility to the life and witness of these churches themselves. Indeed, it would have to be done even if there were no church unity movement at all. The ecumenical movement has been a blessing to the churches in that it has given them the freedom to make such necessary reforms. In the past, reforms often came to nothing because each church had to distinguish itself from others. There was a sense that making certain changes necessarily implied that one had previously been "wrong." To adopt "catholic" elements or to "Protestantize" was greeted with shock and disdain, for thereby the identity of one's own church was endangered.

c) The task of reception is hindered by the fact that the churches have different understandings of authority and different decision-making processes. Allow me to mention only one example here. Some churches recognize the power of specific officials to make authoritative decisions, and thus they are in a position to establish a clearly-defined process of reception. Other churches, however, base their conception of the church on the recognition and experience of the local congregation: synods and other church structures play a necessary role, providing for representative discussion and evaluation of suggested reforms. But the final

decision lies with the local, gathered congregation of believers. Here everything depends upon a process of communication which can bring the church as a whole to a clear decision.

The different processes of official reception of the BEM texts reflect these differences. The text is handled differently depending on the starting-point of those reviewing it. For some churches a provisional reply—perhaps by a relatively low-level official—is sufficient at first. They assume that a proper reply to a fully-developed text can only be given by the official “church” itself. Other churches do not hesitate to disseminate the texts to their members, and to involve them in the process of forming a consensus about them.

Therefore the official responses cannot be judged solely on the basis of their content. To compare them meaningfully we must also be aware of how, and with what intention, they were arrived at. If the reception process itself is going to teach us anything, it is essential that the churches draw closer in the *method* by which they move toward agreement. For this reason the Faith and Order Commission has undertaken a special study entitled “How Does the Church Teach Authoritatively today?”<sup>15</sup>

#### 4. How can the Process of Reception be furthered?

How can these difficulties be overcome? How can the process of reception be supported and furthered?

##### A. Consultations at the Regional and National Level

The results of the various theological discussions, both bilaterals of the various theological discussions, both bilaterals and multilaterals, are sent to the relevant churches. Each must reply in one way or another. But does this really help the churches to draw closer together? Would it not be more useful for the churches in a given region to try to develop a common judgment about the consensus which has been suggested in BEM? Representatives of the appropriate churches in each region must meet to determine the kind of unity which already can be achieved in their area, as well as what steps each church needs to take to be free to move further. This common discussion is all the more important because virtually every church has already begun to grapple with the results of the bilateral dialogues. The common concern with the results of multilateral conversations is necessary to prevent the reception of bilateral ones

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15. “*Verbindliches Lehren heute*,” *Beiheft zur Oekumenischen Rundschau* 33, Frankfurt 1978. See also “How Does the Church Teach Authoritatively Today,” *The Ecumenical Review* 31, 1 (also published as Faith and Order Paper 91).

from creating "special partnerships" within the overall ecumenical movement. Churches in many countries are already holding such conversations about their different understandings of baptism. In many cases the results of such discussions have already been published.<sup>16</sup> This beginning must be extended to other themes in the theological dialogues. The churches in each region must work together to express the *one* Christian tradition.

### B. Reception through Worship and Catechism

Reception is not only a matter of information. The results of ecumenical dialogues can be truly received only when they penetrate the life of the churches. But that means that they must enter into the liturgy and the catechism of the churches. The texts should not be approved merely by theological commissions. Liturgical and catechetical commissions must be involved also. How does the liturgical order of each church relate to the consensus being developed on baptism and eucharist? For example, if ecumenical conversations have affirmed the importance of *epiklesis* (the calling of Christ to real presence in the Eucharist), then what role does this concept play in the celebrations of baptism and the eucharist in the individual churches? Another example relates to the Baptist tradition. To foster understanding between Baptists and other Christians, can the significance of personal belief in baptism be expressed more clearly, and in such a way that we could simply leave open the question of whether infants or adults should be baptized?

The critical evaluation of catechetical teachings is at least as important. It must concern itself with a multitude of questions. Does the use of a traditional catechism tend to preserve a position which the churches, in reality, have already moved beyond? Does the desire to distinguish oneself from other churches lead to ignoring important elements of the biblical witness? Is too much emphasis placed upon the unique features of the different churches? To go to the heart of the matter: does the catechism adequately express our focus upon the Gospel of Jesus Christ—that is, upon the sole source of the life of the church?

The danger is that progress made in the dialogues will find no satisfactory expression in catechetical teaching. Then the next generation will be entrusted again with those differences which divide the churches, and expected to walk the same ecumenical path which already has been trod in today's dialogues. Our task then consists in handing on to the next generation, the community which we have won, so that it can build upon this foundation.

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16. Nils Ehrenström, *Mutual Recognition of Baptism in Interchurch Agreements*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1978 Faith and Order Paper 90).



### C. Reception in the Lived Community of Faith

It is the deepening and intensifying of fellowship among the churches, however, which will do most to promote the reception of the results of the theological discussions. We must not think only of our carefully-formulated conclusions and how to bring them into the life of the churches. We must be equally sensitive to the community which is to receive them. For finally everything depends on the churches having the *will* to receive them. And this will grow to the extent that the churches are ready to share a common life. Unity cannot be presented as a theory first, then found in everyday life. It grows rather from the soil of the experience of community. It is therefore of the greatest importance that the churches are taking seriously the rule formulated at the Third World Conference on Faith and Order (Lund, 1952): "to do together everything which our conscience does not compel us to do apart." Behind this statement lies the deep realization that the Spirit is seeking to create unity where Christians gather in the name of Christ, and await the work of the Spirit. "And when the day of Pentecost arrived, they were *all gathered in one place together.*"

Over the years, confessional differences have become combined with many additional factors. Frequently, confessional positions are not divided by a concern for the purity of their teaching. The real motive is often simply preservation of one's identity which has developed over the course of history. One may not be willing to take steps toward unity because one believes that "historical continuity" must be preserved—even in purely secondary matters. These may be matters of language, ethnic identity, national pride, or other things. For this reason the ecumenical movement must pay attention to these ancillary factors. By breaking through these secondary barriers—which are no less resistant for all that—the church will win the freedom for its process of reception.

The ecumenical movement is not only a matter of leaving behind the differences which have arisen between us in the past. It is also a question of expressing and embodying anew our universal fellowship in Christ. Over the last few centuries, and above all in the 19th and 20th centuries, the Gospel has been carried to other parts of the world. New churches have arisen in cultures which have not previously felt the impact of the Christian faith. All the factors are in place to enable the universal fellowship of the churches to become visible in today's world. We must oppose whatever stands in the way of this goal, whether the domination of Western civilization, indifference about the tension between rich and poor nations, nationalistic messianism, or something else. To the degree to which the churches take up this task together, they will become receiving churches. For every boundary which they cross together—whether from the past or the present—will only show them how essential

unity is. But whoever hides within his own little circle will never perceive the utter necessity of reception. No church today is compelled to stay in its own ghetto. Any church which does this has only itself to blame.

### Summary

The author draws attention to the discrepancy between the extensive agreement reached in ecumenical dialogues and the continuing divisions among churches. A consensus like that emerging from the work of the Faith and Order Commission on *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* can be instrumental to the deepening of communion among the churches only if it is seriously received by the churches. For such a reception to take place churches are called to develop a "spirituality of reception," a readiness for reforms and structures of common decision-making. Every consensus invites the churches to jointly express the *single* tradition in their midst and newly make it their own.