Lukas Vischer: Consensus

1. Place and Date of Publication

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2. Historical Context

This WCC dictionary demonstrates how the churches have converged their teaching on theological and other issues during the 20th century. Lukas Vischer was research secretary and then director of the World Council of Churches Commission on Faith and Order from 1961 to 1979.

3. Summary

To ask about the unity of the church means inevitably asking about the kind of *consensus* that is necessary for unity. Starting point for exploring the consensus is the church's conception of itself as a community which has its origin in Jesus Christ. The word consensus, from there, may refer either to the agreement that characterizes a particular community or to agreement in the form of a specific accord or joint statement.

In the ecumenical movement various concepts of consensus have been used over the years: the Evangelical Alliance, the International Missionary Council, the Faith and Order Movement, the Life and Work movement. When the World Council of Churches was founded in 1948, a simple idea underlay this step: If a sustainable consensus is to be found among the churches, they must begin to *share their life* together. The WCC lives in the hope that the common experiences and common efforts of the churches will form the basis on which a consensus will gradually grow and allow the churches one day to declare full fellowship with one another.

The Faith and Order commission was able to reach agreement on what kind of consensus was necessary for unity: consensus in the apostolic faith; in baptism, Eucharist and ministry; and on structures making possible common deliberations and decisions. More important still, perhaps, is the consensus achieved in the WCC regarding the common responsibility for the poor countries, the struggle to combat racism, defence of human rights, the community of women and men in the church. At the same time the debates on these issues caused profound tensions. The consensus reached at the level of the WCC met with rejection in some churches. And in coming to terms with new issues such as the ordination of women, the WCC must work through exactly the same difficulties as individual churches. - The Roman Catholic Church attaches particular importance to bilateral talks. With the exception, however, of the Lutheran-Reformed Leuenberg conversations in Europe (1973) none of these dialogues has so far led to full communion between two traditions.

It is obvious that the consensus necessary for unity has to be built up by various means at once. Above all, a valid consensus has to be implanted in the minds of *ordinary church members* (*sensus fidelium*). Consensus cannot be worked out at the level of official representatives alone. Attention needs to be given to the experience which members of different churches have had and continue to have in the ecumenical movement; for a tradition is growing up here which can lead to a common interpretation.

Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement

Edited by

Nicholas Lossky
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This distinction is important. The consensus which makes community possible and sustains it is far more fundamental and comprehensive than anything that can be expressed in specific agreements and declarations. It rests on common experiences, on certain commonly acknowledged authorities, on customs evolved over a period of time. It is expressed in stories, songs, rites and other communal actions. Consensus in the narrower sense is the attempt to understand the agreement that is rooted in the life of the community, to interpret it and express it in appropriate ways, e.g. through a constitution or a confession of faith.

The two senses of consensus are intimately related and mutually interactive. Without the preliminary agreement of the community *(consentire)*, explicit agreements and statements are inconceivable. Conversely, interpretations and formulated statements can help to strengthen and deepen the basic consensus of the community and perhaps even guide it in new directions.

The starting point for exploring the consensus that characterizes the church is that it understands itself as a community which has its origin and its raison d'etre in Jesus Christ. It did not constitute itself but was called into being on God's initiative. It is the church so long as it reflects this fundamental understanding in its life, its prayers, its words and its action. The content of the consensus that characterizes the church is therefore God's gracious gift in Jesus Christ. It is first and foremost accord with Jesus Christ, the head of the body, and only afterwards, and on that basis, agreement among ourselves.

This raises the difficult question of the relationship between truth and community. How can consensus reflect the truth of the gospel and at the same time represent the common convictions of the church as a human community? The accord with Jesus Christ may be watered down by certain compromises made for the sake of "unity". But the fellowship among us can equally be placed at risk if too great a value is put on certain theological statements. The church has always been exposed to these twin dangers in its efforts to achieve genuine consensus.

In society* and church alike, consensus is never something static but is *a constantly*

CONSENSUS

THE QUESTION of the meaning of consensus for the true unity* of the church* has been the subject of intensive ecumenical theological and ecclesiological reflection in recent years. Yet essentially it is as old as the ecumenical movement itself. To ask about the unity of the church is inevitably to raise the question of the kind of consensus necessary for unity. To give an idea of the issues involved, four sets of general observations may be made.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE WORD "CONSENSUS"

The word "consensus" may refer either to the agreement that characterizes a particular community – the fundamental convictions, attitudes and behaviour common to its members, whose validity is generally unchallenged – or to agreement in the form of a specific accord or joint statement.

evolving process. New historical experiences create new conditions. Questions arise that call for answers. Things which once stood unchallenged are suddenly called in question, and the consensus has to be established all over again. This is not an easy challenge for any community. The danger is that it may shy away from the task and simply keep invoking the existing consensus. But that consensus may eventually be so undermined by such refusal to face up to the challenge that it collapses and the community crumbles with it.

The consensus has to be renewed in each new generation, and also when the composition of the community changes for other reasons. To be genuinely valid, a consensus has to be supported by the whole community. This problem is particularly acute in the church today. The missionary movement has made the church a worldwide community. Does the consensus that holds this worldwide community together really accommodate the experiences of the young churches, or does it actually represent only part of the oikoumene?*

For the church as a worldwide community today to confront seriously the difficult task of broadening the base of its inherited consensus, *appropriate structures* are required. The community must be able to keep revising its understanding of what binds it together. It is no mere chance that throughout the ages the church has gathered in representative assemblies. Only as a conciliar fellowship can the church be and remain the church. It has to live in a constant process of exchange. It has to face up to the questions asked of it and, when necessary, to take decisions to settle the issues. Councils are instruments which have often helped the church to "tune in" to what for it is the fundamental truth.

THE POSSIBILITY OF CONSENSUS

Christianity today is divided into numerous traditions and communities. How can they arrive at a consensus which will allow them to see themselves as one fellowship? The ecumenical movement works on the assumption that, despite all their divisions and differences, the churches are bound together by a fundamental consensus. They confess their faith in Jesus Christ, and this confession obliges them to assume at least the possibility of fellowship with one another. The goal pursued by the ecumenical movement is to bring to light the fundamental consensus that binds the churches together and to make them consciously aware of it. By so doing, it confronts them with their common confession* of faith* and obliges them to examine how far their respective interpretations can withstand comparison with it. Where have they become one-sided, rigid and exclusive with the passage of time? Where has the truth been betrayed? Where has legitimate diversity been suppressed? Where has the fundamental consensus been blotted out by disobedience and self-righteousness? The task of the ecumenical movement is not to create consensus but rather, in a conciliar process, to rediscover and make effective the consensus that is given in us in Christ.

CONSENSUS IN CHURCH HISTORY

Every confessional tradition is likewise held together by a particular consensus. Each has its specific teaching, its particular spirituality, forms of worship and internal organization. This consensus forms a whole which cannot be resolved into individual elements. Moreover, every confessional tradition has its idea of the kind of consensus necessary for true church unity. The differing conceptions of consensus that the churches bring into conversations make understanding more difficult to achieve.

Some may insist that the consensus which holds the church together remains essentially unchanged throughout the ages. The Orthodox church maintains that the original Tradition* has developed in its midst through the power of the Holy Spirit. It has represented across the centuries *the* consensus which marked the church of Jesus Christ from the very beginning. Unity can only come about as others likewise let themselves be permeated by this consensus. The Roman Catholic Church lays no less a claim to have preserved the original truth in unbroken continuity and free of inner contradictions: what the church's magisterium today describes as consensus may perhaps seem like a new interpretation, but in substance it is claimed to be what "has been believed by all at all times and in all places".

The Reformation* led to radically new perspectives. In view of the church's decadence the prevailing consensus had to be called in question. Genuine consensus can be achieved only when the church heeds the word of God* as it is attested in holy scripture* and allows itself to be guided by it. Consensus is formed not by tradition but by the church's following its Lord and "heeding no other voice". Therefore, true consensus may on occasion be represented by only a small flock.

At the same time, the consistent following of God's word opened the way for a new conception of unity, namely the view that agreement on the essentials of the faith was sufficient for true unity. So long as churches agree that Jesus Christ is the sole source of salvation,* they can admit differences in many spheres in regard to both doctrine and order. This path has been trodden again and again since the consensus of Sandomir (1570), which linked different Protestant groups together in a federative union, up to the Leuenberg agreement (1973), which declared church fellowship among the Lutheran, Reformed and United churches in Europe.

This conception, however, inevitably raised the question of what constituted the nucleus on which agreement must prevail. The Protestant churches have given various answers to this question over the centuries. Whereas for the reformers the essential thing was the message of forgiveness, later generations tried to define what was central in a series of dogmatic theses or rational statements about God and the human being. In the age of pietism and revival, attention focused on the experience of salvation.

There have also been attempts to bridge the contradictory concepts of consensus by appealing to a fundamental common basis. In the 17th and 18th centuries, for example, the idea of the *consensus quinquesaecularis* was discussed – i.e. the suggestion that, on the strength of the tradition of the supposedly undivided ancient church, the churches should come together. The Lambeth Quadrilateral* of the Anglican communion took this idea up in a new way.

CONSENSUS WITHIN THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

In the ecumenical movement various concepts of consensus have been used over the years. The 19th-century movements such as the Evangelical Alliance continued the Protestant idea of agreement on essentials: they called on Christians of all (or at least all Protestant) traditions to come together for exchange and common witness on the basis of a confession of faith which synthesized the indispensable core of the gospel. In the first half of the 20th century different concepts of consensus were pursued by three movements. The *International Missionary Council** held the conviction that the decisive consensus comprised the common affirmation of the church's missionary task. If the churches faced up to the urgency of this mission,* they would also be brought together. Arguments about questions of doctrine, initially at least, were therefore deliberately set aside and postponed. The *Faith and Order* movement*, in contrast, set itself the task of gradually working out, in patient conversations, the agreement in doctrine and order that is necessary for church unity. The same concept underlay the discussions on union which have led to the formation of a number of united churches, particularly in North America, Asia and Africa. The *Life and Work* movement* held the view that the churches can come together only at the level of action. While the churches were divided at the level of doctrine and would in all probability remain so in the foreseeable future, at the level of action they were confronted with challenges to which they could respond only by referring back to the original tradition. As they faced up to these challenges, they might be brought to confess the gospel together in a new way. The consensus that was formed simply on the level of action might develop into a common confession of faith. In this respect the experience of the Confessing Church* in Germany at the time of the Third Reich broke new ground. The response to the challenge of that time revealed a consensus which was not incorporated in that form in any of the established confessional traditions.

The founding of the WCC in 1948 led beyond these three approaches. A simple idea underlay this step: conversations, exchange of ideas and occasional meetings are not enough. If a sustainable consensus is to be formed among the churches, they must begin to share their life together. The WCC

gives the churches the chance to come together in a fellowship of exchange and common witness,* based on their common confession of "Jesus Christ as God and Saviour", but without relinquishing their distinctive identity. The three concepts of consensus previously followed in the three separate movements are now linked together. *Within* the fellowship into which they have entered, the churches are trying to extend the consensus on doctrine and order, to fulfill their missionary task and to respond in action to the challenges of the times. The WCC lives in the hope that their common experience and common efforts will form the basis on which a consensus will gradually grow and allow the churches one day to declare full fellowship with one another.

The consensus within the WCC has gradually been deepened over the decades. The basis was expanded by a reference to the Trinity* (1961), and while for the moment no definition was given of "the unity we seek", the assemblies in New Delhi (1961) and Nairobi (1975) adopted extensive texts on the goal of unity. Following the Nairobi assembly, which described unity as a conciliar fellowship, the F&O commission was able to reach agreement on what kind of consensus was necessary for unity: consensus in the apostolic faith; in baptism, eucharist and ministry; and on structures making possible common deliberation and decision (Bangalore 1978). The work on both the church's confession of faith and on its understanding of baptism, eucharist and ministry were initial steps in this direction.

More important still, perhaps, is the consensus it has been possible to achieve in the WCC regarding the response to certain contemporary challenges, such as the common responsibility for the poor countries, the struggle to combat racism,* defence of human rights,* the community of women and men in the church.* At the same time the debates on these issues also caused profound tensions. The consensus reached at the level of the WCC met with resistance and rejection in some churches. In coming to terms with new issues, the WCC must work through exactly the same difficulties as individual churches (e.g. the debate on the ordination of women* in the Anglican communion).

The Roman Catholic Church attaches particular importance to bilateral talks (see **dialogue, bilateral**) between the different confessional traditions. Since it decided in favour of active participation in the ecumenical movement during the Second Vatican Council, a network of bilateral conversations with almost all the confessional traditions has developed. The aim of these conversations is to determine the degree of consensus in teaching, worship* and church order.* To what extent does consensus exist? To what extent do different statements ultimately mean the same thing? How far is mutual recognition possible? The bilateral dialogues of recent decades have undoubtedly contributed to bringing the churches closer together.

The partial consensus noted in the talks has come to symbolize the lively relations between the churches. But at the same time the limits of the bilateral conversations must be recognized. With the exception of the Lutheran-Reformed conversations in Europe (Leuenberg 1973) none of these dialogues has so far led to full communion* being declared between two traditions. The results up to now are no more than instruments which can help in formulating an acceptable consensus.

How can a comprehensive consensus be achieved? It is obvious that the consensus necessary for unity has to be built up by various means at once. Above all, it is becoming increasingly clear that a valid consensus has to be implanted in the minds of ordinary church members *(sensus fidelium)* (see **consensus fidelium**). Consensus cannot be worked out at the level of official representatives alone. This aspect has not been sufficiently considered in the ecumenical movement up till now. Attention needs to be given to the experience which members of different churches have had and continue to have in the ecumenical movement, for a tradition is growing up here which can lead to a common interpretation.

See also **conciliarity; dialogue, intrafaith; teaching authority; WCC, basis of.**

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