

"RECEIVING AND HANDING ON THE FAITH:  
THE MISSION AND RESPONSIBILITY OF THE CHURCH".  
REPORT OF THE THIRD PHASE OF INTERNATIONAL DIALOGUE BETWEEN  
THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH (DISCIPLES OF CHRIST) AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH  
1993-2002

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. From the beginning of the Disciples-Roman Catholic Dialogue in 1977 the goal was to enable all Christians to be together in the visible unity of the one Church of God. In the report of the first phase, the Commission accepted 'as a basic principle of ecumenism that there can be only one Church of God (*unica Ecclesia*) and that this Church already exists'; furthermore it stated, 'We see ourselves as having a communion *in via*... Now we have the task of giving external expression to the communion *in via*' (*Apostolicity and Catholicity*, p. 11). This was reaffirmed in the report of the second phase: 'Disciples and Roman Catholics continued their dialogue in order to discover the degree of communion they already share. Their goal is to be together, growing in this communion and fostering it' (*The Church as Communion in Christ*, § 9). After restating some of the agreements about the vision of unity in the first report, the second report continued, 'the goal of this statement of convergence is to elucidate a shared vision of the Church' (*The Church as Communion in Christ*, §§ 19-20). As we report on this third phase of dialogue, we reaffirm these convictions about our goal.

1.2. This Report is a theological reflection. But it arises out of regular meetings each year in which we prayed and studied the Bible together, met with members of local congregations, and studied and discussed together the similarities and differences that characterize our two communities.<sup>1</sup> This sharing locally and internationally is a vital part of the 'spiritual ecumenism' referred to in the first report.

1.3. Both the previous reports referred to the relationship of the individual and the Church. *Apostolicity and Catholicity* noted that 'each Christian's faith is inseparable from the life of the community. Personal faith is an appropriation of the Church's faith and depends on it for authenticity as well as for nurture' (p. 9). *The Church as Communion in Christ* stated that 'the inner dynamism of the gift of faith – the power of the Holy Spirit which draws believers into spiritual unity – sustains the interaction of the faith of the individual and the faith of the community' (§40). From this starting point, we reflected on how the faith is handed on from one generation to another through history; and came to see that the proclamation of the Good News provided a crucial context for understanding the whole process of receiving and handing on the faith.

1.4. Disciples and Roman Catholics share a commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ; they place a similar emphasis on the Church as communion, and on the sacraments of baptism and eucharist. They share some common beliefs about the nature of the Church; yet there are also some differences, which reveal themselves in different structures. Perhaps the major query from a Roman Catholic perspective is how Disciples, with an apparent lack of structure and creedal formulations, have handed on the Gospel. For Disciples, on the other hand, the main question is whether the more elaborate hierarchical structure of the Roman Catholic Church, with an apparent emphasis on uniformity, gives people sufficient freedom of conscience in their response to the Gospel.

1.5. Both Disciples and Roman Catholics acknowledge that in the New Testament the community of believers is primary, and that the identity of individuals is defined by their membership in the community, not *vice versa*. This understanding, which has been traditional for Roman Catholics, finds its own expression among Disciples. Throughout Disciples history there has also been a concern to identify with that which was believed always, everywhere and by everybody (to use a phrase of St Vincent of Lérins). The common sense philosophy characteristic of the early Disciples

leader, Alexander Campbell, depended on an appeal to that which the community as a whole could accept. This community is the context in and through which the Christian message is received and lived out.

1.6. The conviction that it is necessary for every Christian to come to a personal confession of faith (which has sometimes been regarded as representing an individualistic emphasis) does not in any way deny the logical and chronological priority of the faith of the whole Christian community of believers. Rather than arguing at length about the relative importance of the individual and the Church, the Commission affirms that a believer's Yes to Christ incorporates that person into the Yes of faith spoken by the Church throughout the ages (cf. *2 Cor* 1:20).

1.7. This Report therefore begins with a discussion of the Word of God, proclaimed and received (section 2) and continues with a discussion of how the Church in history holds to the faith (section 3). It then considers the question of the relation between the teaching office of the Church and Christian freedom (section 4), and concludes by considering the mission of the whole Church in handing on the faith (section 5). We offer this Report hoping to remove mutual misunderstandings, to diminish the differences which still separate us and to renew the vital link between the mission and unity of the Church.

## 2. THE WORD OF GOD, PROCLAIMED AND RECEIVED

### *The Missionary Nature of the Church*

2.1. The Christian faith announces that God has reached out to humanity decisively in the Incarnation. Jesus Christ is the living Word, the mediator and fullness of revelation. New Testament writers express, in a variety of ways, the truth that God wills to gather all humanity into the community that shares in the communion between the Father and Son in the Spirit (cf. *Eph* 1:9-10, *Col* 1:19-20, *1 Jn* 1:3). The Holy Spirit, sent to make real the work of Christ in mysterious ways which are not all revealed, is thus the agent of mission. The Church is gathered by God to carry on the work of the twofold mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Thus, the Church is essentially a missionary community, a community of those sent into the world to proclaim the offer of God's gifts to all persons.

2.2. In living out its missionary identity the Church proclaims the Word of God and invites persons to be converted and become part of the communion of believers. Only there can the full meaning of the Gospel be known. Our two communions are convinced that, in all the Church says and does, its call to proclaim salvation is accompanied by the presence of the Holy Spirit empowering the Church to discern that which is necessary for salvation.

### *Hearing the Word of God*

2.3. One way in which the Holy Spirit has assisted the Church in its call to proclaim salvation to all is in the writing and identification of the books that came to be in the Bible. The books of the Bible had human authors to be sure; nevertheless, God is heard speaking through these books. We agree that we hear the Word of God through the Bible when it is used in celebrating the sacraments, in preaching, in teaching the faith and in personal devotional activities.

2.4. Members of each communion participate in a living tradition of scriptural interpretation and prayer, which they pass on to others. The shaping of distinctive common ways of understanding and sharing the scriptural text links each Christian and each generation of Christians with those who have preceded them. It is through the reading and interpretation of the Scriptures in the congregational life of each communion that the Word of God is made real in both praise of God and Christian discipleship. Thus, the Gospel message leads necessarily to life in community, which in turn helps to shape the understanding of the message for subsequent generations (cf. *The Church as Communion in Christ*, §§ 13-14, 21-23). Both Disciples of Christ and Roman Catholics affirm that the Holy Spirit guides the Church, which because of this guidance will not finally fail in its task of proclaiming the Gospel. Our ultimate confidence is in God's promise to bring about the divine purpose for all.

2.5. Disciples of Christ and Roman Catholics agree on the necessary link between the Word and the sacraments. The Word of God has its own efficacy: and its saving power is experienced most fully when the Word is received together with the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. The fullness of the Good News is received in the gift of communion with God and with each other, a communion beginning through baptism and incorporation into the Body of Christ and extending throughout one's life. In both the Roman Catholic Church and the Disciples of Christ the sacraments; make real the communion the Gospel announces (cf. *Apostolicity and Catholicity*, pp. 9, 12). The sacraments are by their nature integral to the life and being of the Church. They bring a new believer into the community, creating a link between the believer and all other Christians in every time and place. Thus each believer receives the living Tradition, becomes part of it, and participates in passing it on.

### 3. HOLDING TO THE FAITH: THE CHURCH IN HISTORY

3.1 As they waited in expectation for the return of the Lord, Christians wanted to remain faithful to him while they celebrated his presence in word and sacrament. The Church has always recognized the need to hold on to the memory of the apostolic community about what God has done in Christ. Both Disciples and Roman Catholics recognize that the canon of the Scriptures, councils of the Church, and creeds confessing the faith were developed as instruments to do this, under the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit (*Jn 14:26*) (*cf. The Church as Communion in Christ*, § 36). In our dialogue we have also come to appreciate more deeply the process the Church used in discerning these instruments of faithfulness; this process of discernment continues whenever the Church seeks to confess the Gospel with courage in the face of new situations and challenges. Through our discussions on the formation of the canon, on councils and the declaration of the faith, and on the process of discerning the Gospel in every age, we have enriched our understanding of the ways that the Church holds on to the faith throughout history.

#### FORMATION OF THE CANON

3.2. Why did Christians develop a canon of the books they came to regard as their Scriptures? The reason can be stated simply: Christians wanted to hold on to the same faith preached by the apostolic community. In the face of controversies about the content of the faith, the Churches in the East and the West began to list the venerable books, which they considered as the genuine documents of God's revelation, containing the substance of the apostolic faith and expressing the will of God for Christian life. In this diverse group of books the Church recognized the authentic Word of God in its written form inspired by the Holy Spirit.

3.3. The early churches included those begun by the apostles; but in addition churches were considered 'apostolic' in which the apostles preached or to which they wrote letters. Some books not written by apostles were included in the early lists making up the canon because they too came from the apostolic era, they were sometimes read aloud during liturgical celebrations, and they were in agreement with the apostolic tradition. The canon also enabled those churches with no direct personal link to the apostles to have the assurance that they too proclaimed the apostolic faith in communion with the apostolic churches. The books which constitute our New Testament are those in which, from apostolic times, guided by the Holy Spirit, the local churches in communion with one another had come to recognize the apostolic faith.

3.4. The way in which sayings and deeds of Jesus were transmitted helps us to understand concretely what the authority of the canon means. The deeds and words of Jesus were known and 'received'<sup>2</sup> in the communities of believers from the teaching and preaching of the apostolic witnesses to the Christ-event. But not all these deeds and words were included in the written gospels; and not all the written gospels, but only four, were judged to have a reliably apostolic origin and 'received' in the official canon.

3.5. The making of a list of books to serve as a canon does not imply that the truth concerning God and the norms for the guidance of Christian life are to be searched for only in these documents. But if Christians want to hold on to their faith, to preach authentic Christian doctrine, to live according to authentic evangelical norms, they must look at these documents and conform their words and deeds to these teachings. The intention of the canon is to indicate where the heart of Christian faith is authentically to be found, because the Church is sure that in the documents listed – after centuries of testing – the 'memory' of the Church of God has been faithfully preserved and transmitted since earliest times.

3.6. Moreover, the Church believes that the books which comprise the canon belong to the work of the Holy Spirit in history which keeps the Church indefectibly attached to the revelation disclosed in the history of the People of God and ultimately given in Christ Jesus. Thus setting the canon was at the same time an act of obedience and of authority. In obedience to the Holy Spirit the Church discerned which books contained the authentic apostolic witness, and acted with authority to set these books as its norm.

3.7. By holding together the Old Testament and the New Testament in this canon of inspired books, the Church shows its recognition of the links between the books inherited from the Jewish community and the books recording the Church's memory about Christ Jesus. And by holding together the rich but limited variety of books within the New Testament itself, the Church manifests that the diversity found there is compatible with the *koinonia* of all the faithful in 'one faith, one Lord, one baptism' (*Eph 4:5*). The canon is therefore a symbol of unity in the diversity of the Church's life; it is also part of the givenness of that life.

3.8. The formation of the canon was a process of ecclesial discernment which lasted many years and involved many aspects of the life of the Church. Today Roman Catholics and Disciples recognize the significance of this process and the criteria which, at least implicitly, functioned to determine which books were to be included or not to be included in the canon. These criteria included apostolicity, conformity with the Gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ, and use during liturgical celebrations. But these interlocking criteria did not function in isolation during the Church's discernment process.

3.9. Although official lists were authorized by local churches as early as the second century, only in 1442 did the canon enter a conciliar decree when the Council of Florence listed the books of the canon within its statement on union with the Copts. While this was quite a long time after the canon-making process of the early Church, the center or heart of the canon had not been questioned. Disagreements between the Reformers and the Council of Trent about the canon of Scripture concerned only the somewhat imprecise edges of the canon of the Old Testament.<sup>3</sup> The differences between Roman Catholics and Disciples on the number of books in the Old Testament need not be Church-dividing.

3.10. There is a close relationship between the canon of the Scriptures and the unity of the Church. Because it is held in common by Christians, the Bible holds Christians together with one another as they read and proclaim the same Word of God received from the Church of the apostles. The diversity of the Bible also helps to explain why the same Word of God has led to different emphases among different Christian communities. The canon of the Scriptures determines and supports the faith of both of our communions, so Roman Catholics and Disciples again and again recognize each other as brothers and sisters in Christ.

#### *Councils and the Declaration of the Faith*

3.11. Disciples and Roman Catholics share the desire to hold on to the emphasis on Church unity which characterized the patristic period of the Church's history. For Roman Catholics the patristic writers are witnesses to the Tradition who have a special authority because their foundational insights on the central trinitarian, christological, and sacramental teachings have been received by the Church, notably through the great councils. Disciples for their part have received the major teachings of the patristic period without necessarily always using its texts explicitly. However most Disciples theologians turn less readily to the patristic writers, the councils and creeds, than do Roman Catholics.

3.12. Roman Catholics and Disciples agree in recognizing the theological definitions of the first seven ecumenical councils as part of the common history of the Church. In these councils the Church responded to new controversies about the content of its faith and sought to hold on to the authentic teaching received from the apostles.

3.13. We discovered that we share more agreement about these seven early councils than previously recognized. Disciples and Roman Catholics together recognize the first seven councils as authentic gatherings of the Church able to speak in the name of the whole Church for four main reasons:

a) The councils articulated and defined the mystery of the Triune God manifested in history, revealed through Christ Jesus, which the Church has to proclaim 'until he comes again'.

b) The councils were conscious that Christ is in their midst because they were gathered in his name. In their teachings received by the Church they always remained 'under the Gospel': the Holy Spirit was at work in the community to maintain it in an authentic communion with what Christ did and taught despite the sometimes questionable tactics of some participants.

c) In their decisions the councils respected and preserved the diversity of traditions present in the Scriptures. As the councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon themselves demonstrate, councils wished only to be at the service of the Scriptures. Conciliar definitions were not intended as substitutes for the language of the New Testament authors; they clarified and made explicit the main affirmations of the Scriptures.

d) The councils gathered the bishops, who were seen as succeeding to the apostolic community. As leaders of their communities presiding at the Eucharist, they were considered to embody their local churches and as such were able to speak for them in the process of clarifying or defining the faith. Subsequent to the councils, the bishops were responsible for interpreting the councils' decisions to their churches. All local churches were drawn into the decisions of the councils through reception afterwards.

3.14. Roman Catholics believe that their life continues to be shaped by the work of the seven ecumenical councils celebrated and received by the Eastern and Western Churches together. The Roman Catholic Church is assured that some of its provincial councils and its general councils assembled since the separation between the West and East and

the Reformation divisions are providential instruments the Spirit of God uses to keep the People of God faithful to the Gospel. Moreover the Roman Catholic Church claims that, when the college of bishops meets in an ecumenical council which is confirmed or at least recognized as such by the Bishop of Rome, it is able to define doctrine as divinely revealed, to be accepted with the obedience of faith.

3.15. The situation is not the same for the communities of the Disciples. Certainly Disciples recognize that their life continues to be shaped by many of the declarations and decisions of the councils – the seven ecumenical councils and some of the Western general councils – celebrated before the Reformation. The Disciples tradition has never held the theological positions condemned by the early ecumenical councils. Disciples hold that the conciliar christological and trinitarian definitions belong to the providential *oikonomia* (ordering) by which the Church of God kept within the path of the Gospel and preserved from grave distortions in its confession of Christ Jesus, the Savior. To the extent that they have accepted the decisions of those councils, Disciples have acknowledged their authority.

3.16. The first generation of Disciples leaders was critical of the way in which confessions of faith were used as tests of fellowship, particularly at the Communion Table. The main targets of their criticism were the Reformation and post-Reformation confessions such as the Westminster Confession and the Secession Testimony,<sup>4</sup> rather than the Apostles' or Nicene Creeds. The motto 'No Creed but Christ' was not intended to exclude the use of creeds for the purpose of teaching the faith. Disciples, however, have preferred to use New Testament confessions of faith; they emphasize the dependence of the conciliar creeds on the New Testament.

3.17. Today both Disciples and Roman Catholics draw on the central teachings of the first seven councils when judging new ideas or practices proposed in our churches. These conciliar teachings 'define the boundaries within which to search for faithful interpretations of the Gospel. For example, a wide diversity of theological understandings of Christ can be used in preaching and teaching, but an understanding of Christ in opposition to the teaching of Nicaea or Chalcedon is not acceptable. At the same time, affirming the teachings of these councils does not imply affirmation of their world view or conceptual structure. Both Roman Catholics and Disciples recognize that no statement exhausts the mystery of God to which it points and that attempts to express in human language the mystery of God's saving work for humanity are open to restatement. A distinction may be drawn between the language in which conciliar definitions are expressed and the reality to which they bear witness. It may be necessary to restate that reality in different terms in later ages, but such restatement will always be faithful to the truth originally intended, and not contradict it. In fact, the councils demonstrate that sometimes the Church finds such restatement necessary precisely in order to remain in continuity with the faith it has received.

3.18. The ecumenical commitment of the Second Vatican Council acts today as an invitation to Disciples to explore together with Roman Catholics what more may be received from the heritage of the councils. Ecumenical dialogue has become one of the most important channels for the diffusion and reception of conciliar teaching, and because of such dialogue Disciples are more ready than in the past to use the Nicene Creed in the celebration of the eucharist as Roman Catholics do. In fact, today some Disciples congregations are in a process of 're-reception of the doctrinal formulations of the early councils. Yet ultimately the full reception of the work of councils will be unselfconscious, reflected in the everyday teaching and worship of the Church.

3.19. The history of councils reveals God's guidance, but human sinfulness and frailty can be seen there as well. Sometimes councils failed to overcome divisions. Despite this, the history of the conciliar process itself gives our churches a record of a series of solutions to problems threatening the Church's unity in faith. The heritage of the councils shows that a common faith can be maintained along with a diversity of theological interpretations. Disciples and Roman Catholics can take hope from the struggle for unity in this conciliar heritage.

#### *Discerning the Gospel in Every Age*

3.20. As the Commission discovered many unexpected agreements about the canon of the Scriptures, ecumenical councils and the declaration of the faith, we also discovered agreements about the process by which they came to be received into the life and teaching of the Church. In fact, this process of discerning the Gospel is central to the life of the Church because of what God has done 'for us and our salvation' (Nicene Creed).

3.21. Christians believe that God has acted within, indeed has entered, history in Jesus Christ. Living in Christ, the Church is both an eschatological and an historical reality. The Church belongs to the reality of salvation and to the *oikonomia* (ordering) revealed in the incarnation of the Son of God, who became flesh in an authentic and concrete humanity marked by its historical and cultural context.

3.22. The discernment of the meaning of the revealed truth and of the imperatives of Christ's will for his people takes place in this historical situation. It cannot be detached from the contingencies of human dependence in regard to history. Time provides the opportunity for the Church to sift authentic from inauthentic developments in its tradition.

3.23. The discernment and reception of the Word of Truth are the fruit of the presence in all the faithful of the *sensus fidei* (the sense of the faith). It belongs to their Christian being, The Spirit gives to all the baptized believers this *sensus fidei*, together with a diversity of charisms. Among these are the gifts attached to the functions of exercising *episkope* (oversight), of teaching, of searching the meaning of the revealed Word through study and research. (The process of authoritative teaching is discussed further in §§ 4.9-4.16.)

3.24. This meaning is not discerned by the mere addition of individual insights. It is the result of the communion of all these diverse charisms expressing the mind of the entire Body of Christ, through a process of mutual reception. To be authentic, ecclesial agreement in matters of faith will include ordained ministers with responsibility for teaching in the Church, scholars working within the community of faith, and the body of the faithful who receive and celebrate this consensus in their worship and witness.

3.25. Disciples and Roman Catholics agree that the Church must always be sensitive to contemporary questions and to diversity of cultures when discerning authentic developments in its understanding of the Gospel. Elements harmful to the Gospel must be distinguished from the insights necessary for its effective proclamation in that time and place. In every changing circumstance of its history the Church stands under the judgment of God.

3.26. In many cases an immediate discernment is impossible because the community as such has to be involved in the complex dynamism of reception. Disciples and Roman Catholics both recognize the importance of the way in which the Gospel has been received and handed on from generation to generation for an authentic understanding of Scripture. They recognize a process of development in the understanding of doctrine in the Church which can be traced through history. Reception plays a crucial part in this ongoing process. Disciples and Roman Catholics are not unanimous on the ways in which reception is achieved, but they agree on its necessity.

#### 4. RECEIVING THE FAITH: THE INDIVIDUAL IN THE COMMUNITY

4.1. Receiving the faith from previous generations is an important and complex process. Through the life and teaching of the Church each generation seeks to work out the meaning and implications of obedience to the Word of God in that time and place. Here there is a difference of emphasis between Disciples and Roman Catholics on the relative weight given to individual discernment and conscience, on the one hand, and to the communal mind of the Church on the other. In *The Church as Communion in Christ*, we wrote: 'Roman Catholics are convinced that, although they must decide for themselves, they cannot decide by themselves. Disciples, on the other hand, are convinced that, although they cannot decide by themselves, they must decide for themselves' (§ 16). This section explores this difference further. Nevertheless both Disciples and Roman Catholics agree that obedience to the Word of God has priority.

##### *Conscience, Freedom and Being in Christ*

4.2. The mission of the Church is to proclaim the Word of God. As it does so, the Church respects the freedom of every human being created 'in the image and likeness of God' (cf. *Gen 1:26-27*). Both Roman Catholics and Disciples agree that the Church affirms each person's freedom; but the Church also has a responsibility to help its members make informed decisions, not to misuse the freedom that is God's gift, but use it for following God's will.

4.3. Consideration of Christian freedom necessarily involves examination of the role of the conscience in matters of belief. For people need to be convinced about the teaching they receive. The words of St Paul come to mind, 'The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God' (*Rom 14:22*).

4.4. What is the role of conscience in matters of belief? Disciples of Christ and Roman Catholics agree that what we call human conscience is rightly described by the classical image of a voice of God, present in the heart of every human being. This is shown by St Paul's discussion of the position of Gentiles in relation to the Mosaic law when he writes, 'They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience bears witness' (*Rom 2:15*). Conscience may also be seen as a spiritual perception of what conforms with the dignity of the 'image of God' and what has to be done according to this dignity. This first level of conscience is the work of God and, although sin can cloud conscience, it cannot destroy it.

4.5. The Church has a truth to teach which its members cannot discover only by themselves: it has been revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ and kept in the memory which is guarded by the community of believers. In order to say a free human Yes to the Gospel Christians need to know to whom and to what they are called to say Yes. Indeed they will remain free to say Yes or No. It is their responsibility to form a conscience which is open to what God is saying. Nothing can oblige them to act against their perception of the will of God. Family, school, friends, and the culture all play a part in influencing human decisions. Because the Church has received from God the mission to teach the Gospel, it has a duty to help its members to make the faith of the Church their own in order to inform their conscience. This is therefore the second level of Christian conscience – to make a reasoned response to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

4.6. Sometimes in the history of the Church individuals or groups, acting in obedience to the Word of God as they discerned it, have disagreed with the prevailing teaching or practice. Disciples and Roman Catholics respond to this situation differently. Disciples came into existence because their leaders were unwilling to accept the restrictions which Presbyterians placed on access to the Lord's Table. This memory has shaped their attitude towards the issue of disagreement with prevailing views. The nature of the history of the Roman Catholic Church means that it has no similar dominant memory; it also places a strong emphasis on the value of unity. Further work and reflection is needed on these differences. Nevertheless Disciples and Roman Catholics agree that certain groups in the history of the Church have made an important and prophetic witness which has not immediately been recognized.

4.7. If men and women want to be in harmony with God, they have to hear and obey the voice of their conscience, informed and enlightened by the Word of God, assisted by the gifts of the Holy Spirit and prudent advice, and guided by the teaching of the Church. Christians respond to the Gospel as the first disciples responded to the call of Christ; but like those first disciples they discover the truth of the words of Jesus, 'You did not choose me but I chose you' (*Jn* 15:16). In so doing they are led to the peace and happiness of the Kingdom for which they are created and redeemed.

4.8. The Commission's discussion has been important in dispelling old stereotypes, such as the idea that the Roman Catholic Church has no place for freedom of conscience, or the idea that Disciples place no limits on the freedom of conscience. Both communions teach the place of the freedom of conscience and both see limits to its exercise within the community. This leads to two important agreements. Disciples and Roman Catholics both recognize that commitment to the Gospel should be freely made. They also recognize that living the Christian life is a continuous process of receiving and; living by the teaching handed on in the Church and making personal decisions which are themselves shaped by life in communion with other believers.

#### *Teaching with Authority*

4.9. Both Disciples of Christ and Roman Catholics agree that the faithful and truthful expression of the Gospel is inherently persuasive, because its authority comes from God. Members of both communions also agree that the discernment of the authentic meaning of the revealed Word belongs to the whole community, and that some members from within the community are called and empowered by the Spirit to teach the Word of God. These are the pastors. The Church as Communion in Christ stated that 'the ordained ministry is specifically given the charism. for discerning, declaring and fostering what lies in the authentic memory of the church! (§ 45). The ordained ministers have a specific mission to teach the teaching Church; and their teaching role is primary among their pastoral duties. Beyond that, Roman Catholics and Disciples would locate and describe the exercise of ministerial authority in different ways.

4.10. For Roman Catholics the discernment of the authentic meaning of the revealed Word is expressed especially in the charism of ordained ministry. The unity of the ordained ministry is found in the communion of the bishop with all the other bishops, a unity sustained by the Bishop of Rome. In this way the authority to teach is linked intimately with all the churches in the communion of the Apostolic Tradition. In the sacrament of Holy Orders bishops are charged to 'preach the Gospel faithfully and constantly... keeping in its authenticity and its integrity the deposit of faith according to the tradition always and everywhere transmitted since the apostles'. Moreover, their service of the faith extends from their preaching and pastoral care to the celebration of the sacraments, culminating in the Eucharist.

4.11. For Disciples this teaching is the function of theologically educated, ordained ministers. These are faithful persons, possessing the qualifications required to hand on the apostolic records of Christ's teachings, and to teach correctly what they contain. Alexander Campbell stated that 'it is indeed the Holy Spirit and not the congregations, which creates Bishops and Deacons. The Spirit gives the qualifications both natural and acquired' (*The Christian System*, p. 185). The office of what the first generation of Disciples called bishops (although the title was afterwards abandoned) or elders is specifically related to teaching and oversight within a particular local congregation. This office developed differently in different countries.<sup>5</sup> Local ministers do not teach alone but in consultation with their colleagues. They use teaching materials prepared regionally, nationally or internationally, often in collaboration with other churches.

4.12. In the Roman Catholic Church the bishops in communion with the Bishop of Rome are responsible for the ordinary teaching of the Church. The purpose of such teaching is not only to inform the faithful, but also to form their consciences so that they may take responsible decisions, confident that they are acting in accordance with the will of God. The special charism of the bishop is to keep the church in his care in communion with the whole Church. Thus individual bishops are sometimes necessarily cautious in responding to new expressions of the faith. The Roman Catholic Church has a clearly identified teaching office which especially in contemporary times has articulated, with due regard for consultation, an increasingly large number of positions on new challenges or questions. Part of Roman Catholic life includes understanding these explanations of current magisterial teaching and also understanding the different levels of authority with which they are taught. Thus for Roman Catholics the authenticity of the faith is assured when bishops teach in communion with the Bishop of Rome and the other bishops.

4.13. Among Disciples the teaching of the Church is in the hands of ministers of local congregations, and the whole community is encouraged to read and study the scriptures daily. Following the confession of Christ celebrated in baptism, members are nurtured by regular church attendance and participation in the Lord's Supper. Disciples expect ordained ministers to teach a common faith, taking account of the ecumenical consensus shared by other churches with whom they are in fellowship. Those persons with regional oversight also seek to keep their congregations in communion with the whole Disciple fellowship and they are responsible for exercising a prudent approach to the teaching of new ideas. But Disciples are more reluctant than Roman Catholics to provide official teaching on a wide range of matters. They often do not seek to articulate an official position when a question is under debate, preferring at times to leave the question open until time, debate and continuation in eucharistic fellowship lead to a consensus. This is an important difference in teaching practice. Beyond that, church members have a significant measure of freedom and personal responsibility to work out their own pattern of discipleship according to their conscience.

4.14. Among both Disciples and Roman Catholics teaching takes place within a set of limits or boundaries accepted by the community. However, there are differences of emphasis. Roman Catholics have emphasized that individuals cannot ignore the faith which the Church has received through the Holy Spirit when proposing a new understanding of some point. Since the community of faith precedes the individual, anyone proposing new understandings of Christian teaching must be prepared to accept the community's discernment of those understandings. This communal discernment, in which the teaching office has a special role, acts as a discipline within which the theologian must work. Gradually a new consensus may emerge. The Disciples' process encourages continued conversation as the Church seeks to identify those expressions of the faith that best show a clear relationship to the faith witnessed in the New Testament. When responding to people whose views or practice of the faith seem outside the common norms, the process is primarily pastoral.

4.15. In both communions, especially when crucial doctrinal and pastoral issues are at stake, it is the authority of the pastors, guided by the Holy Spirit, which is the instrument of God to keep the community in the right direction. It is their responsibility to show how their teaching is in communion with the faith of previous generations. Nevertheless bishops and pastors have not only to be aware of the needs of the community but also to weigh the various insights of the people and to 'receive' those insights that are an authentic expression of the *sensus fidei* (sense of the faith) of the whole Church of God. Their pastoral charism implies what the Catholic tradition designates as 'pastoral prudence' enabling them to take into consideration inseparably the authentic evangelical truth and the concrete situation of their flock within the whole People of God. Disciples have used the term 'common sense', that is, the sense common to the believing community. This prudence and common sense oblige the pastors to teach always within the common faith of all the Christian communities, with which they are in communion.

4.16. For both Roman Catholics and Disciples the authority of the Church's teaching derives from a combination of elements: the truths of revelation, the theological arguments based upon them to guide human thought and behavior, the position and experience of those responsible for teaching, and reception by the whole Church. However, the relative weight attached to the elements differs between Roman Catholics and Disciples. Thus the claims made for the authority of the Church in matters of conscience differ in our two communities. In the Roman Catholic Church those with episcopal or primatial oversight, who hold the apostolic teaching office conferred by ordination, can at times make decisions binding on the conscience of Roman Catholics. For Disciples ultimate oversight rests with a General Assembly or Conference (comprising both ministers and other church members), but their decisions do not bind the conscience of individual members. The Commission needs to reflect further on whether these different emphases can be held together within the one Body of Christ.



## 5. HANDING ON THE FAITH: THE MISSION OF THE WHOLE CHURCH

### *Equipping the Faithful for Evangelization*

5.1. Christ gave the whole Church the commission to transmit, teach and nurture the faith. Through baptism all members of the Body of Christ become partakers in the dignity and mission of Christ – prophet, priest and king. Hence they are called continually to receive and understand rightly the Word of God. Furthermore, as the Commission stated in *The Church as Communion in Christ*, the members of the Church, because they are bound into a communion with the Father and with one another, ‘are called to live in such a way that, in spite of their failures and their weakness, this communion becomes visible and is constantly in search of a more perfect realization (§ 47).

5.2. Being bound together in a common mission undergirds our joint understanding that no teaching of the faith can ever be a completely solitary task. Teaching the faith occurs in many contexts: the loving mother or father showing a child how to pray, Sunday School teachers and catechists struggling to respond to the questions posed by young people and adults, university and seminary professors instructing future ministers and lay leaders, Roman Catholic bishops exercising their office as teachers of the faith, Disciples leaders with regional oversight guiding congregations through a church controversy, and many more. All these experiences of teaching and learning deepen and strengthen the ecclesial communion we have in Christ. This vision of the whole Church’s commission is crucial for our two communions.

5.3. Faith is normally taught to the younger generation in the family, especially through the charisms God bestows on faithful parents. It is their responsibility to give a child the first experiences of love and constancy of care. These experiences can help that child see himself or herself as a child of God. When parents explicitly teach Christian truth to their children and when they help them to be formed in virtue, they are working to form in them a Christian conscience. But they do this also through the examples they themselves offer of their own visible struggle to live lives that are faithful to the Gospel and by presenting to their children opportunities to learn about other witnesses to faithful Christian living. Catholics and Disciples agree in considering that the function of parents is rooted in the grace of God. The Catholic Church emphasizes that this grace is a particular gift of the sacrament of matrimony, and accordingly is integral to the sacramental life of the Church.

5.4. In Catholic and Disciple congregations, systematic initiation and education in the essential matters of faith (catechesis) plays an important role, through Sunday Schools and catechetical programs. For the Roman Catholic Church a very important part is played by church schools, which have often been founded and staffed by religious orders or congregations with the official approval of the bishops or of the See of Rome. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, an authoritative exposition of the one apostolic tradition and a sure norm for teaching the faith, is used by local episcopal conferences in ways adapted to the local situation, but always in conformity with the common teaching of all the local churches in communion with the See of Rome. The discipline of the sacrament of penance and of participation in the eucharistic liturgy, following the course of the Christian liturgical year, with the example of Mary and the saints constantly presented, is also a major occasion of catechetical instruction in the context of prayer. Pastoral preparation for baptisms, marriage and death is another. The responsibility for catechesis shared by all the baptized is exercised by the bishops in a way unique to their office. Among Disciples the regular pattern of worship, including the weekly celebration of the Lord’s Supper and preaching, provides opportunity for spiritual growth and instruction. As well as preaching, ministers teach Sunday School classes and prepare candidates for baptism. Adult church school classes, and women’s and young people’s fellowships form competent persons able to nurture Christian faith. In different ways, both our traditions enable individuals to explore the implications of Christian discipleship for themselves and to share their experience with others.

5.5. In both our communions, professors, theologians and scholars in universities, seminaries and elsewhere are involved not only in the search for the right understanding of the sources of the faith or the history of their transmission, but also in teaching the teachers. An important contribution can also be made to the life of the faithful by spiritual writers.

5.6. The essential test for the Church’s teaching is its faithfulness to the Gospel. Teaching the faith is more than communicating the content of a catechism or a book on Bible history and doctrine. It is inseparable from the witness of a faithful life and authentic devotion to God and the Church. Here the authority comes from the baptismal and eucharistic grace at work in the lives of Christians, especially those whose faithfulness captures the imagination of the community. Conversion to Christ is a lifelong process, and in the Church Christians are challenged repeatedly to receive the fullness of the Gospel.

5.7. The Church itself is also called continually to receive the fullness of the Gospel. This is normally the fruit of a long process of interaction within the community. However, there may be occasions when an immediate decision needs to be taken for the sake of the Gospel. Such was the decision of the early Church to admit Gentile Christians without requiring them to conform to the whole Jewish law; in more recent centuries the decision of certain Christians to oppose slavery without waiting for a church consensus might be a similar example. The discernment process can be enhanced as the voices of other Christian communities and the insights of ecumenical work are taken into account. The teaching and living in the Gospel of one communion may bring to mind an aspect of Christian faith or practice which others have neglected, and are therefore called to 'receive'. The implications of this for our understanding of communion require further patient discussion.

#### *Evangelization by Word and Witness*

5.8. In Jesus Christ the truth of God has come into the world in an historically unsurpassable and definitive way. The news of this is liberating and life-giving, yet also demanding; it is simultaneously gift and call. The good news calls for faith in the one who died and was raised by God to new life; it calls for repentance and a radical transformation of life. This proclamation of the good news is what is meant by evangelism or evangelization. The Church is by nature a missionary community, a community of those who are sent by God into the world to share in the proclamation of the good news (*Mark* 16:15-16). Its proclamation of the Gospel through preaching and the celebration of the sacraments requires intentional commitment to the task of evangelization. The message must be communicated in words to those who have never heard it, to those who have heard it but are no longer active in the life of the Church and to those who continue to shape their lives in and through the Church.

5.9. Speaking and telling are not the only ways to evangelize. The witness of holy lives, strengthened by the Eucharist, is also integral to the mission of the Church. God's good news can be expressed in sacrificial lives and acts of mercy, before any word is spoken. Authentic witness to the Gospel takes place through lives of faithfulness to God sustained by prayer, self-denial and acts of love.

5.10. Evangelization, which brings persons into life-giving communion with God and with others, requires both persuasive words and the effective expression of the new life being offered. Those who are led to profess the Gospel will also show lives truly turned from concern for self to love of neighbor. Such love today will issue in witness to the cause of justice. When the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the U.S.A. and Canada approved new principles for its Division of Overseas Ministries in 1981, it stated that 'Evangelism is incomplete unless deed matches proclamation. In fact, in some contexts the deed is the only possible proclamation'. Pope John Paul II stated that through the Gospel message, the Church offers a force for liberation which promotes development precisely because it leads to conversion of heart and ways of thinking, fosters the recognition of each person's dignity, encourages solidarity, commitment and service of one's neighbor, and gives everyone a place in God's plan, which is the building of his Kingdom of peace and justice, beginning already in this life' (*Redemptoris Missio*, § 59). Disciples and Roman Catholics therefore agree that the Church must be a community with structures which facilitate evangelization and one which is a credible witness to the Gospel it proclaims.

5.11. All Christians are called to the work of evangelization, although some take on special roles. Parents and teachers hand on the faith to children; religious orders devoted to evangelization emerge; missionary societies encourage and support the work; Christian schools, youth movements and lay adult organizations appear on the scene to do specific tasks. Through all of these efforts, the work of evangelization is strengthened. Ordained ministers have the special responsibility to lead and build up the community. Furthermore, the teaching office supports the work of evangelization by serving the church's unity in faith and life. Thus the Church is extended by the establishment of new local churches of those committed to the cause of evangelization. When all work together, the Church witnesses to the fact that the Gospel is not only a dream, that with the grace of the Spirit it is possible to live according to the Word of God.

5.12. Evangelization and the unity of the Church go together. The concern to link evangelization and the unity of the Church is a particular characteristic of Disciples of Christ and of Roman Catholics. The *Decree on Ecumenism* of the Second Vatican Council states that the division among Christians 'is clearly contrary to Christ's will. It is a scandal to the world and damages the sacred cause of preaching the Gospel to every creature' (§ 1). Pope John Paul II, in *Ut Unum Sint*, said that, 'However true it is that the Church, by the prompting of the Holy Spirit and with the promise of indefectibility, has preached and still preaches the Gospel to all nations, it is also true that she must face the difficulties which derive from the lack of unity' (§ 98). Both Thomas and Alexander Campbell and Baron Stone, as well as later Disciples teachers, expressed in various ways the importance of Christians being united as they take up the task of evangelization. Stone, for example, wrote that Christian unity was 'indispensable to the conversion of the world' (*Christian Messenger*, 1936). Thus we agree that the disunity of the Church undermines the proclamation of the Gospel.

5.13. The Church invites people into communion with God and each other, but because of its divisions it fails to manifest that communion fully. All believers gathered at the eucharistic celebration are sent out into the world to proclaim Christ, but we cannot celebrate the eucharist together. That proclamation is therefore weakened. In this dialogue, we have increasingly come to recognize that the structures and instruments for the visible unity of the Church of God are part of the necessary obedience to the command of Christ who said, 'Go... and make disciples of all nations' (Mt 28:19).

## 6. FUTURE WORK

6.1. During this phase the Commission has taken up only one of the tasks set out in *The Church as Communion in Christ*, namely exploring the nature of the rule of faith in a changing history. The other tasks – exploring issues related to the understanding of the Eucharist, the structure of the Church gathered around it, and the primacy of the Bishop of Rome – remain. As we have grown to understand each other better, we have also become aware that we often do and say the same things but for different reasons. There is a need to investigate whether there is mutual recognition of the legitimacy of different ways of arriving at the same practices or the same conclusions. We also sometimes do different things to achieve the same purpose, and there is a corresponding need to reflect upon the legitimacy of that.

6.2. Because of the centrality of the eucharist in each of our traditions, we believe that the time may now be appropriate to return to that topic. Therefore we propose that there should be a further phase of our dialogue, and that its focus should be the presence of Christ in the Church, with special reference to the eucharist. In *The Church as Communion in Christ* we said 'Even if we agree on the signification and function of the Eucharist, we feel that we still have to discuss our traditional teaching and practice concerning the presence of the Lord in the celebration of the Supper, its sacrificial nature, the role of the ordained minister and the role of the community. This is important, given the emphasis that both Disciples and Roman Catholics put on the weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper and its link with the visible unity of Christians' (§ 53a).

6.3. This third phase has seen some significant changes of membership in our dialogue. The Most Revd. Samuel E. Carter, SJ, (former Roman Catholic Co-Chairperson) and the Revd Dr. Kilian McDonnell, OSB, have retired from the Commission. We have also lost by death the Revd Dr. J.M.R. Tillard, OP, a founding member of the Commission. We place on record our debt to them for the contributions they made to our work.

May 22, 2002

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## ENDNOTES

1. For this third stage of our discussions, the dialogue met ten times: in Rome, Italy (1993); Indianapolis, Indiana (1994); Bose, Italy (1995); Bethany, West Virginia (1996); Venice, Italy (1997); Aibonito, Puerto Rico (1998); St Meinrad, Indiana (1999); Halifax, Nova Scotia (2000); Rome, Italy (2001); and Bose, Italy (2002).
2. The word 'receive' is used here (and later) in its theological sense to refer to the appropriation by the whole Church of the apostolic faith.
3. For many centuries Jews in different countries used slightly different collections of books as their Scriptures, depending on whether the language was Greek or Hebrew. These differences were debated in the sixteenth century among Renaissance Catholic humanists and eventually in the Reformation disputes. In 1546 the Council of Trent rejected Luther's view that the Jewish canon of Old Testament books should be decisive and repeated the list used by the Council of Florence. Roman Catholics affirm the decree of the Council of Trent where the canon consists of 46 Old Testament and 27 New Testament books. Disciples, following the Reformers, have a canon of 39 Old Testament and 27 New Testament books. Because the Reformation churches did not receive Trent's decree on the canon but followed Luther's view, the Disciples inherited the canon used by the Reformers with seven fewer books in the Old Testament than in Trent's list. The seven books in question are sometimes called by Roman Catholics 'deuterocanonical'. These books are today sometimes found in Protestant Bibles grouped together under the heading of the Old Testament Apocrypha.
4. The Westminster Confession (1646) was adopted by the Church of Scotland as its Confession of Faith in 1647, and subsequently became the standard confession in the English-speaking Presbyterian world. The Secession Testimony was a statement by those Presbyterians who seceded from the Church of Scotland in 1733 and was part of the doctrinal heritage in which Thomas and Alexander Campbell were reared in Ireland.
5. In some, such as the United Kingdom, it was emphasized that there should be a plurality of elders in each congregation, the minister being regarded as one of them; in others, such as the United States, the minister of the local congregation became the chief pastor. More recently, ministers have begun to exercise oversight of a number of local congregations in a given area. The way in which this has happened has varied, but some form of regional episkope exists in the United States, Canada, Australia, the Congo, North India, Jamaica and the United Kingdom.