

Reformed-Methodist International Consultation

Report - First Consultation

At. Albans, England, July 20-23, 1985

The first International Consultation of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the World Methodist Council was held at London Colney near St. Albans, England, July 20-23, 1985. We reviewed the way in which many of our member churches are already related in different parts of the world, reflected on the gospel which binds us together and in the light of it surveyed the issues on which we have been separated. We very quickly found that it was possible to set down a statement of our common faith to which we are called to bear witness today. We offer it to our respective world communions as a sign of what can be done to further common understanding if our proposals are adopted.

1. THE GOSPEL TO BE CONFESSED TODAY

As Methodist and Reformed Churches we give thanks to God and rejoice in our common witness to the gospel. The gospel is the love of God who so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son. As true God, Christ shows us the Father's mind and heart – full of grace and truth. As true man, he takes to himself our fallen broken humanity and redeems it, for as man he delighted to do the Father's will. He alone fulfills the two commandments of the law, for in going to the cross he loved his Father to the uttermost, and on the cross he loved his enemies to the uttermost, taking to himself the worst consequence of sin – separation from the Father. He not only forgives our sin but in love unites us to himself. So, as we abide in Christ, our broken humanity is restored and we grow into the image of God, for through him we are led to the Father. This is the work of the Spirit who takes all the things of Christ and makes him present to us in word and sacrament, and enables us to participate in his life.

Christ came preaching the kingly rule of God for every area of life: liberty for the captives, good news to the poor, sight to the blind. As he proclaimed the kingdom the Church rightly proclaims Christ, for in him is the kingdom embodied.

In his love God has given humankind two wonderful gifts: participating in the discovery of the beauty and mystery of nature and living in community rather than in lonely isolation. Sin distorts the delight of this discovery, repudiates responsibility for nature and disrupts the peace, the *shalom* of the community. The ecological crisis, fragmentation of community, spoilt personal lives, broken social relationships, hunger due to greed, injustice and racism are the result. Because God loves us he does not right these evils by mere command, but in his love has entrusted to us the ministry of reconciliation in Christ. This is the supreme work of the Church: to reflect in word and life this saving work in Christ and so to point the way to hope and freedom.

The Church having received this gift has often failed to live by it and so shares in the world's prejudice and greed, exploitation and strife. Indeed, it has often been a cause of these, God calls us to repudiate these failures. So, for example:

Against the background of a threatened creation we must witness to God's love for the universe he has made, conserve its resources and resist its exploitation.

Faced with the threat of nuclear warfare we bear witness to God's purpose of peace and work for the removal of the means of mass destruction.

Faced with the evil and injustices of racism, in the light of Christ's redeeming all humankind and embracing all people in his love, we must declare racism a sin and its theological justification a heresy. Accordingly, we can do no other than denounce apartheid in South Africa.

This understanding of the grace of God gives the gospel its total scope. Worship, mission, compassion, unity – all flow from this and should not be seen as separable interests. As we abide in Christ and live by faith in his finished work of redemption, so we more and more share in his concern for the outcast, the imprisoned, the unforgiven and despairing. We join our weak intercessions for their needs with the perfect prayer of Christ who in our humanity is our great high priest. As he has accepted us by grace alone we are bound together with our fellow Christians who are also accepted in him. As we have received unmerited grace and new hope we share these with a despairing world, so that together we may join in joyfully praising God and serving him, delighting to do his will.

II. REFLECTION ON OUR HERITAGE

We have been able to make this statement because our respective heritages have led us to place common emphasis on a number of aspects of the catholic faith. Among these are a primary emphasis on the sheer grace of God manifested in Jesus Christ, and mediated through the Holy Spirit to the lives of individual Christians, the Christian community and the world. Together we recognize the centrality of justification by grace through faith and its essential relation to obedience to the will of God. In consequence we acknowledge commitment to a faithful proclamation and service of the Gospel in and for the world and recognize its ethical and social implications in all areas of life. The foundation of these affirmations is our common acceptance of the unique authority of the Holy Scriptures for Christian faith and life.

As we reflect upon our respective heritages in the light of the Gospel we proclaim, we recognize that we have to be critical of our past as well as grateful for it. For example, some Reformed people have accorded undue prominence to subordinate standards. Some Methodists, taking Wesley out of his context, have idealized him. Again, we have each to reckon with our history of internal divisions, and the fact that in some regions members of the same world body live side by side with differences unperceived and unresolved. Furthermore, member churches on both sides can all too easily regard as normative the form of the tradition as they have received it in a particular place, and can be oblivious to alternative forms of the same tradition existing elsewhere.

All too often Christian communions, out of loyalty to the faith as they perceived it at the time, have formally condemned one another. Happily, this has not been the case between us. Consequently, in this respect, no obstacles require to be surmounted. However, sometimes acrimonious debate has raged between us in earlier times on matters central to the Gospel. There are other points too at which differences of perspective can lead to misunderstanding. Our present relationships would benefit from the clarification of these issues in the light of our current understanding of the Gospel, and we are confident that this can be done. We list some of the most important examples.

A primary instance of controversy has concerned predestination and free grace. This matter is by no means of antiquarian interest only, for distorted teaching on these points still adversely and directly affects the lives of people in some parts of the world. It is our conviction that now, on the basis of our common understanding of God's sovereign grace for all, we have an opportunity of reviewing this issue afresh, and of affirming the positive aspects of the Gospel which both sides were seeking to defend, and of avoiding the distortions to which each side was prone. We believe that the key to this enterprise must be the doctrine of Christ and God's Elect One in whom we receive our standing.

Our respective traditions have different starting points in relation to the Church. The Reformed tradition began with an attempt to reform the Church according to the word of God. The ecclesial situation which developed: Reformed, Presbyterian and Congregational, was complex. The concept of the Church as God's covenant people, for example, was prominent but variously applied. The fact remains, however, that over against Methodist origins the Reformed point of departure concerned the true nature of the Church. The Methodist movement began from a mission to the unevangelized, and saw itself at first as a society within the Church as it then was. For Methodism, the experience of conversion assumed greater prominence than baptism – which could frequently be taken for granted having been administered in infancy.

For Methodists, covenant was a personal compact between the believer and God, although it was entered into in an act of corporate worship. Since Methodism has moved from understanding itself as a society to understanding itself as a Church, and since some branches of Methodism have always regarded themselves in the latter way, there has been a degree of Methodist/Reformed convergence on this point, though differences of emphasis remain which require further investigation.

Although we both affirm that the Church is called to witness to the whole society in which it is set, and that Christ alone is head of the Church, what this implies for formal church/state relations is variously perceived within our families. In some Reformed contexts the question of establishment is raised and in some Reformed and Methodist areas there is the question of a folk church. These issues need further exploration.

There are misunderstandings of the Methodist teaching on Christian perfection which derive in part from Wesley's own exposition of it and which need to be dispelled. The center of his teaching was that holiness means perfect love although it must be admitted that Methodism has not always been true to this conviction. Similarly, distorted emphases in Reformed teaching have led to antinomianism on the one hand and to legalism on the other, and this has obscured the priority of grace.

And

III. PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL TOGETHER

In the light of the gospel we confess, and of all that we have in common, we affirm the necessity of proclaiming the gospel together. By its very nature the gospel is the "good news" and the purpose of the Church is to proclaim it. Evangelization is fundamental to our existence. The obligation of the Church to challenge and influence structures and institutions of society is also inherent in our understanding of the gospel.

The gospel calls for one people. Because the "good news" is the message of reconciliation, division in the Church contradicts the very nature of the gospel; for how can we consistently preach the good news of reconciliation unless we strive to manifest ever more fully God's reconciling love amongst ourselves?

As Methodists and Reformed Christians, we have affirmed our basic understanding of the gospel message. We recognize each other's baptism, we share the eucharist with an open table for all who love Christ, and we recognize each other's ministry. With so much in common, the question inevitably arises, "Why are we still separate?"

Member churches of our communions will have to give their own answers to this question in the light of their own situations. What steps need to be taken by WARC and WMC for the common witness of our two world communions? In what ways can these bodies facilitate common witness on the local, regional and international levels?

We respectfully propose that WARC and WMC, after due consideration of our report, agree to appoint soon a panel of consultants to prepare for a further consultation in 1987 which would take the study of these issues further.

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[*Reformed and Methodists in Dialogue*. Report of the Reformed/Methodist Conversations in 1985 and 1987. (Geneva: World Alliance on Reformed Churches, 1988) 5-8.]