

Reformed-Methodist International Consultation

Together in God's Grace

Report of the international Reformed-Methodist consultation held
at Cambridge, United Kingdom, July 23-27 1987

Introduction

The Second International Consultation of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the World Methodist Council met in Cambridge from 23 to 26 July 1987. We took up the central questions committed to us by the first consultation in 1985 as the principal issues requiring further discussion. Within the context of broad general agreement on the nature of the gospel and the church, the following main questions were those which were addressed by means of papers and discussion: the Christian tradition and our particular traditions within it; fundamental questions about salvation and, particularly, its origins in the grace of God and its realization in the Christian life; the nature of the church as a covenant community; and the ways in which our churches have lived and understood their diverse relationships with the state.

Affirmation

These conversations have reassured us of our common rootage in the gospel and of the compatibility of our expressions of it. In many places in the world, churches in our two traditions have already entered into close relationships, including both federal and organic unions. These unions were entered after due doctrinal discussions; we wish to affirm that there is sufficient agreement in doctrine and practice between our two positions to justify such answers to the Lord's call to unity for the sake of mission and our common praise of God. Being convinced of the urgency of manifesting the unity God has given, we wish also to affirm that in all places churches in our two traditions are already in a position mutually to recognise membership and ministry, to join in common tasks of evangelism and service, and to share fellowship in Word and Sacrament. Historic differences of theological perspective and practice still maintain their influence, but are not of sufficient weight to divide us. More positively, they should be regarded as mutually corrective and enriching. Under present conditions, both traditions are increasingly benefiting from our common appropriation of new insights into the gospel granted through theological teaching in this century, through common worship and witness, and through our participation in the wider ecumenical movement.

The tradition and the traditions

All Christian traditions convey distinctive ways of proclaiming and living the gospel. Both of our traditions regard the Scriptures as the primary authority in matters of faith and practice and confess the shared faith of the universal church expressed in ecumenical creeds and by witnesses to it through the centuries.

Within the broad tradition, however, our two traditions originate in different historical circumstances and tend to refer themselves to different kinds of secondary authority. For the Reformed, the major orientation is to "the deeper plunge into the gospel" which was the Reformation, and to the great confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These have often operated, under Scripture, as subordinate standards for the teaching and government of the church. Methodists look to the figures of the Wesleys and to their work on behalf of evangelistic and sacramental renewal within a church already heir to the Reformation.

Wesley's Standard Sermons, his Explanatory Notes on the New Testament, and his abridgement of the Anglican Articles have provided the formal doctrinal basis for the various Methodist churches. In worship, a large part has been played by the Wesleyan hymns which, along with the adaptation of the Book of Common Prayer, have directed and nourished the faith of the people. Both traditions testify to the priority of God's grace, the sufficiency of faith, the call to holy living, and the imperative to mission. The ways in which these realities have been expressed have differed, so that distinctions of ethos, liturgical expression and church order have resulted, both between and within our traditions.

Grace

Grace has been a principal emphasis in both our traditions. From first to last our salvation depends on the comprehensiveness of God's grace as prevenient, as justifying, as sanctifying, as sustaining, as glorifying. Nevertheless, in seeking to preserve this primary truth, our traditions have tended to give different accounts of the appropriation of saving grace, emphasizing on the one hand God's sovereignty in election, and on the other, the freedom of human response. This gave rise to the dispute between "Calvinism" and "Arminianism" which has often been seen as a dividing line between the Reformed and Methodist traditions, although in fact not all in the Reformed tradition subscribe to double predestination, nor all Methodists to the Arminian alternative.

In "Calvinism" it is the elect who come to faith and therefore receive saving grace, while in "Arminianism", it is those who in freedom "will to be saved". Despite the apparent contradiction between Calvin and Wesley (who followed Arminius at this point), the debate presupposes agreement on several fundamental matters. Wesley himself affirmed his agreement with Calvin: "1. In ascribing all good to the free grace of God; 2. in denying all natural free will, and all power antecedent to grace; 3. in excluding all merit from man, even for what he has or does by the grace of God."

It was only when, from the basis of this fundamental agreement, the question "who are the saved?" was approached, that the conflicting stances identified as Calvinist and Wesleyan were adopted. In each case the stance taken leaves questions that demand answers consistent with the three accepted tenets just mentioned. Methodists who follow Wesley must face two objections in particular from Calvinists. First, Calvinists object that the necessary freedom to choose salvation was lost in the fall, and that to claim otherwise is Pelagian. Wesley in response agreed that all are dead in sin by nature, but maintained that none is now in a mere state of nature. Prevenient grace, which he saw as the universal inheritance of Christ's atoning work, restores this lost freedom of choice, while not guaranteeing salvation. Calvinists then object that this dishonours God by denying his sovereignty, since it claims that human freedom to deny is greater than God's will to save. Wesley's reply was that in creating people with free will, God chose to limit his power at this point. Therefore the human capacity to say no to saving grace is, according to Wesley, just as compatible with God's sovereignty as is the human capacity to sin.

In their turn, the Reformed who follow Calvin must face two questions in particular from Wesleyans. First, Wesleyans ask how the predestinarian approach avoids understanding God's freedom as anything more than arbitrariness, and human freedom as anything other than illusion, if the eternal destiny of every creature is already determined. The Calvinist answer is that since God as creator is the author of justice and his ways are not our ways, it is a fundamental category mistake for us to judge him at the bar of our human and limited reason. The second Wesleyan question is, how can the missionary and evangelical imperative be maintained if, no matter what, the saved will be saved and the lost lost? Calvinists affirm in reply that obedience to the sovereign God commits the church to proclamation of the Gospel so that people may hear and believe, and thus God's will to save be fulfilled. Consequently, impetus for and result of missionary and evangelistic outreach are evident no less in the Reformed than in the Methodist tradition, although the motivation may be understood and expressed somewhat differently.

These questions that we put to each other lie in the realm of theological problems, and answers can be given which in each case are consistent with the basic agreed affirmations and find scriptural support. But for both Methodists and Calvinists there is a question which cannot be answered, not because it is difficult, but because to propose an answer would be to destroy the very terms of the problem. Those who claim that prevenient grace gives to all the freedom to come to faith cannot answer the question "why do these choose salvation, and not those?" without denying the very human freedom they wish to affirm. Those who contend that only the elect may come to faith, and thus be saved by grace, cannot answer the question "why does God choose these and not those?" without limiting God's sovereign freedom which above all they wish to maintain. That these questions, which are unanswerable in principle, exist at all, points to the fundamental mystery underlying both the theological problem and the answers. Both traditions have gone wrong when they have claimed to know too much about this mystery of God's electing grace and of human response.

Therefore, that Wesley and Calvin advocated conflicting ways of holding together what they affirm in common should

not constitute a barrier between our traditions. Even if Wesley and Calvin are followed without modification (which gives their approaches greater authority than they themselves allowed any human interpretation), what they both affirmed is not only the fundamental mystery of God's saving grace witnessed to in Scripture. It is also the underlying theology of grace that was stated in three points at the beginning of this section and that provides the context without which that mystery is to be recognized, received and celebrated.

The church as covenant community

Both traditions have found the concept of covenant to be a central way of understanding the church. Nevertheless, there has been diversity of understanding even within the traditions, and our conversations have sought clarification and common ground. The Reformed tradition began as an attempt to reform and restore the western church on the basis of the newly perceived Word of God and in new obedience to that Word. The Reformed family understands the church as a covenant community called together by God's grace. Election and covenant find their expression in the existence of the church. The church is grounded in the eternal purpose of God to send Jesus Christ into the world as the head and saviour of all things. The Methodist movement began as a mission to the unevangelized, and saw itself at first as a society within the established church. In different places and at different times, it came to understand itself as a distinct church. John Wesley thought of Christian community as a means by which members build each other up in faith and life. Within Methodism, covenanted life has been realized through societies, conferences and Christian fellowship, and is reaffirmed in annual covenant services.

Both traditions confess that we have allowed individualism to undercut our sense and practice of corporate churchly life. Often our religion, under the influence of contemporary culture, has retreated into a merely private realm. The recovery of the centrality of covenant is therefore urgent. Through a conversion of the heart, one appropriates the covenant relationship with God and with other people. Thus, the sacraments are to be understood as signs and seals of faithful participation in the covenant community, and not individualistically. Accordingly, baptism is the sacrament of adoption into the family of God, incorporation into the Body of Christ, and reception into the *koinonia* of the Spirit. Likewise, our communion with the Lord and with one another in him is expressed and sustained at his Table. We acknowledge that our life together in our present church structures is in constant need of re-evaluation and reformation as we look forward to the consummation of the covenant when Christ will be all in all. Our acting as if we could exclude others from the covenant, and our failure to exercise our stewardship of the world and its resources, are both a denial of the covenant which God has established with humankind and all creation.

Church and state

Our concern to honour God's covenant in the practical implementation of the faith necessarily involves some form of relationship with civil authorities. Within both our traditions there is a wide variety of relationships, ranging from forms of establishment to contexts in which there is considerable tension with the powers that be. We confess that among ourselves there are places where those who are in a position of privilege give less than due respect to Christian minorities. We also acknowledge that the Christian church has repeatedly used its privileged position for social and political aggrandizement. While the church has the permanent responsibility to challenge and to let itself be challenged by society, the form of challenge and response vary from time to time and from place to place. Both of our traditions share a conviction of the power of Christ as prophet, priest and kin to transform all life in the world.

Perfect salvation

Both Reformed and Methodist traditions affirm the real change that God by the Spirit works in the minds and hearts and lives of believers. By the sanctifying grace of God, penitent believers are being restored to God's image and renewed in God's likeness. To imitate God, says Wesley, is the best worship we can offer. What God is in heaven, says Calvin, he bids us to be in this world: the loving kindness of God is to be reflected in the love Christians bear toward their neighbours. Our traditions agree that, on the human side, salvation consists in the perfect love of God and neighbour, which is to have the mind of Christ and fulfil his law. We are to love God with singleness of heart, and to seek God's glory with a single eye. We are to love without reserve the sisters and brothers for whom Christ died.

The work which God has begun in us, says Calvin, he will surely complete. What God has promised, says Wesley, he is ready and willing to realize now. In the two traditions we are taught to strive and pray for entire sanctification. The Reformed stress on election and perseverance gives believers the confidence that God will keep them to the end. The Methodists preaching of perfection affirms that we may set no limit to the present power of God to make sinners into saints.

Methodists and Reformed agree that "man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever." The heavenly

fellowship of praise and bliss is, by God's grace, to be anticipated now, as we "with one heart and one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" and together share his benefits. We are saved into community; and, as Jesus prayed that his disciples might be "perfected into one", so the closer sharing of life between Christians in the Reformed and Methodist traditions will be evidence of growing participation in the communion of the Triune God.

Conclusions and recommendations

We report, as a result of our conversations, a new-found confidence that our two traditions witness to a common gospel and embody authentic forms of obedience and faithful discipleship. Our complementary ways of Christian thought and life are built upon a foundation in God's grace, in covenant existence, and in the goal of perfect salvation. We have found in each other faithful witness to the Christian gospel, and we have been renewed in our sense of oneness in Christ. In particular, we have found that the classical doctrinal issues that we were asked to review ought not to be seen as obstacles to unity between Methodists and Reformed. Certain implications flow from this conviction for the development of our relations to one another as Christian world communions. We therefore recommend:

1. That our world bodies invite their member churches to consider the implications of our finding and to communicate their responses.
Possible questions for consideration are:
 - a. Can Reformed and Methodist churches cooperate more closely in local worship, study and witness?
 - b. Can Methodist and Reformed churches cooperate more closely regionally and nationally - for example, in joint doctrinal commissions, evangelistic outreach, and social service?
 - c. Are there countries in which Reformed-Methodist union negotiations might be initiated?
 - d. Ought our two international bodies to grow closer together by tackling common tasks by sharing human and other resources?
2. That where one or other of our churches is a majority church, the utmost care should be taken to ensure that the smaller partner or partners not be given reason to feel unwanted or undervalued.
3. That in each nation our member churches should together examine the question, "How can the covenant people of God relate to the state and bear faithful witness to their society in a rapidly changing and divided world?"

The people of our two traditions, to whom this report is addressed, exist in varying relationships to each other. It is our earnest prayer that whether they find themselves within a church union, are contemplating such a step, do not have the other partner as a neighbour, or are not yet part of a wider union, they will find both encouragement and challenge in this report.

The text is available at:

http://ecumenism.net/archive/docu/1987_meth_warc_together_gods_grace.pdf

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