A WESLEYAN PERSPECTIVE ON *CONFESSING THE APOSTOLIC FAITH*

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In the continuing struggle to restore the unity of the Christian church, the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches has called on the various Christian churches to recognize the legitimacy of and confess anew the Nicene Creed.[1] Such a renewed confession would reaffirm our connection with the faith of the ancient (undivided?) church. More importantly, it is the hope of the Faith and Order Commission that it would create a level of common confession that could warrant forming a universal ecumenical council to work "Towards a Common Confession of the Apostolic Faith Today" (Lima Report, 1982).[2]

How should we who stand in the Wesleyan tradition respond to this call? Surely the concern for a greater experience and expression of unity among Christians is consistent with the catholic spirit of our founder. However, several questions about the goal and strategy of the Lima Report must be raised.

I. Unity or Reconciled Diversity?

To begin with the issue of goal, what type of unity between the various Christian traditions/confessions should we be seeking? The Lima Report, with its hope for a "common"

[1]Technically, they recommend the form of the creed adopted at Constantinople in 381 CE.

[2]See *Apostolic Faith Today*, edited by Hans-Georg Link (Geneva: World Council of Churches), 215–27.

confession of faith, appears to assume a goal of organic unity where the present theological diversities are overcome or subsumed into a larger whole. I would suggest that operating with such a goal in mind is neither realistic nor desirable. Its almost inevitable result would be the undervaluation of the distinctive elements of the various traditions.

As an alternative, I would join those who advocate a goal of "reconciled diversity" in ecumenical theological discussion.[3] Basic to this model are three assumptions: 1) that the diversity among Christian traditions is grounded, in part, in the fact that *every* group is limited and realizes only a part or certain aspects of the truth; 2) that this focus on particular aspects of the truth brings a richness to our understanding of the truth that would be lost in any attempt to unify them into a single whole; and 3) that, nonetheless, it is possible to establish a critical mass of shared convictions which would allow us to accept and affirm one another as part of the same family.

If we conducted ecumenical dialogue on the basis of these assumptions, we would *both* be more open to the truths of traditions and, at the same time, more in touch with and loyal to our own tradition.[4] This result in itself should commend the "reconciled diversity" model to Wesleyans. In fact, I believe it was Wesley's implicit model. He was willing to accept many with whom he had ongoing theological differences as brothers and sisters, *provided* that they accepted the "substance" of vital religion—a category that focused primarily on a quality of life

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[3]The model of reconciled diversity has been particularly championed by Harding Meyer of the World Lutheran Federation. For a helpful exposition and defense by a leading Catholic ecumenist, see Yves Congar, *Diversity and Communion* (Mystic, CN: Twenty-Third Publications, 1985), 40–43, 149–52. For a contrast of this position with that of organic unity and the suggestion of a possible mediating position of "conciliarism," see Geoffrey Wainwright, *The Ecumenical Moment: Crisis and Opportunity for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 218–19.

[4]Cf. Mark Lowery, *Ecumenism: Striving for Unity amid Diversity* (Mystic, CN: Twenty-Third Publications, 1985), 5.

but that included as well those theological truths essential to such a life.[5]

II. The Sufficiency of the Nicene Creed?

Reformulated in light of the goal of reconciled diversity, the basic concern of the Faith and Order Commission to foster greater theological agreement among the various Christian traditions would take the form of a call to clarify a core of shared convictions around which the various traditions could unite and by means of which decisions might be made concerning the boundaries of legitimate claims to the title "Christian." Does the Nicene Creed provide such a core of shared convictions or might its common acceptance help promote the clarification of such a core?

Any answer to this question will be heavily dependent upon one's presuppositions concerning the nature and purpose of creeds. The presuppositions of the Lima Report are fairly clear. They believe creeds provide a summary of the central teachings of Scripture and that their authority comes from their consonance with Scripture.[6] Moreover, they appear to believe that this consonance is sufficient in the case of the Nicene Creed that it can function as *the* criterion by which one judges the legitimacy of other Christian acts and documents of confession.[7] These presuppositions do not take seriously enough the limitations of creeds in general and the Nicene Creed in particular.

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[5]For a good survey of the tension in Wesley between his irenic spirit and his affirmation of some essential theological convictions, see Jerry L. Walls, *The Problem of Pluralism* (Wilmore, KY: Good News Books, 1986), 51–67. Walls' book highlights some of the problems with the current *Discipline* statement on "Our Theological Task," problems which called forth the present revision of that statement.

[6] *Apostolic Faith*, 219.

[7]Cf. ibid, paragraphs 10–11, pp. 218–19.

What alternative presuppositions about the nature and purpose of creeds are preferable? First, creeds should be seen as primarily intended to guide the *interpretation* of Scripture, not summarize Scripture.[8] As such, they are derivative in authority to Scripture. Wesley carefully maintained such a primacy of Scripture among his theological sources—popularly called the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral."[9] By contrast, while the Lima Report *asserts* the secondary nature of creeds, it too quickly moves to substitute the Nicene Creed for Scripture as the criterion for assessing other confessional documents. Such a move treats creeds more as an *idol* taking the place of the truth of Scripture than as an *icon* of this truth.[10]

Obviously, the practical motivation for such an appeal to creeds rather than to Scripture in norming ongoing theological reflection is that Scripture's non-systematic form and internal diversity make it an unwieldy rule of faith. It is possible to appeal to Scripture for some support of a wide range of claims. Indeed, this reality gave rise to the earliest form of Christian doctrinal reflection—the clarification of principles for proper appeal to or interpretation of Scripture.[11] It is in this light that we best understand the central purpose and function of ecumenical creeds.

Fundamentally, creeds were attempts to set the boundaries of acceptable diversity in the interpretation of Scripture. For example, the various early Christological creeds were more concerned to *rule out* of contention certain claims to be "scriptural" (and, therefore, "Christian")

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[8]That is, creeds do not so much repeat Scripture as give guidelines to prevent *mis*interpretations of Scripture. For example, the Nicene Creed ensured that scriptural language about Christ as the "Only Begotten" of the Father would not be read as teaching subordinationism.

[9]The proposed new version of the *Discipline* section on "Our Theological Task" (see *Circuit Rider* [Feb. 1987]: 13–14) reemphasizes the primacy of Scripture within the quadrilateral—an emphasis not as clear in the existing statement. For a mild rejoinder to the proposed new statement by a contributor to the present statement see: John B. Cobb Jr., "I Say, 'Keep the Quadrilateral!'" *Circuit Rider* (May 1987): 4–6.

[10]For a development of this distinction and a helpful discussion of its implications, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Validity of Tradition* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1984), 54–58.

[11]Cf. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958).

than to *recommend* precise definitions of Christian belief.[12] As such, the proper contemporary use of ecumenical creeds would be more to establish the boundary markers of legitimate Christian theological diversity than to provide a definitive explication of Christian faith.[13]

A second basic assumption I would commend is that no particular ecumenical creed defines *all* of the boundaries of legitimate Christian belief. Creeds are limited human documents, whatever guidance of God's Spirit we might also want to claim for them. Their limitation arises, above all, from the fact that they are developed in the context of and in response to theological controversy. They are not simply dispassionate summaries of the Christian faith.[14]

This developmental context helps explain two obvious characteristics of Christian creeds. In the first place, they do not give equal attention to all areas of Christian belief. They typically focus with excruciating detail on a few issues (those currently under debate) while mentioning others only in passing. Moreover, many areas do not get treated at all because they are presumed to be accepted by all Christians.[15]

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[12]Note in this regard James Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977). Dunn not only points out the diversity in New Testament teachings, he identifies some fundamental shared convictions that unite these diverse viewpoints. Moreover, he suggests that these shared convictions function more at the level of what they *deny* in common than what they affirm. Finally, he suggests that the fundamental purpose of defining the canon was to establish *boundaries* of legitimate diversity in the early Christian church. I am suggesting that this same purpose and function was central to the development of the early ecumenical creeds.

[13]Like Congar, I am uncomfortable with most suggestions that there is a set of "fundamental doctrines" (either in the early creeds or elsewhere) which defines essential Christianity. Such appeals usually construe "doctrines" in an objectivized sense as definitive *explications* of the Christian faith rather than as boundary markers for the *limits* of legitimate explication of this faith. Cf. Congar, *Diversity and Communion*.

[14]Technically, I would distinguish here between the early baptismal and catechetical creeds (which were more geared to summarizing the faith) and the beginning, with Constantine, of convening ecumenical councils to formulate creeds that could adjudicate current controversies. On this distinction see: Berard Marthaler, *The Creed* (Mystic, CN: Twenty-Third Publications, 1987), 6–14.

[15]Compare, for example, the discussion of Christ in the Nicene creed with that of God the Father or God the Spirit. And, where is there any discussion of the eucharist?

The second obvious characteristic of most Christian creeds is that they focus primarily on where the group formulating them *differs* from its opponents, not on what the two groups have in common.[16] As such, creeds are often least helpful precisely when it comes to defining those Christian truths that are most central and most widely accepted.

This calls into question the hope that a wider acceptance of any single ecumenical creed would greatly facilitate a common confession of the apostolic faith. In reality, the most divisive issues in current ecumenical debates would hardly be affected by the acceptance of one, or even all, of the early ecumenical creeds. The reason for this is that these issues were not under debate at the time the early ecumenical creeds were developed and, thus, are not adequately addressed in these creeds.[17] The present debates are actually questioning what *supplementary* doctrinal boundaries are necessary to complement the early ecumenical creeds. The truth and value of Christian tradition cannot be limited to a particular time period of the church's reflection. Rather, we must seek to delineate the "wisdom" that the church has gained through the *breadth* of its life and reflection.[18]

The other major assumption about the nature of creeds that I believe we need to embrace is their fundamental contexutuality. As human creations, creeds are not abstract transcultural

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[16]This is particularly true in the Reformation period but can be demonstrated as well with the ecumenical creeds.

[17]Among important issues not treated in the early ecumenical creeds are the nature and structure of the church, the nature of the sacraments, and the ordination of women. Surely these are major sections of Christian faith and not just a few incidental items or boundary issues where the mystery of God transcends our understanding (Contrast, Lima Report, *Apostolic Faith*, paragraph 13, pp. 219–20).

[18]Obviously, I am taking issue here with one of Wesley's own tendencies. Because he accepted the common Anglican assumption that the church of the first four centuries had been more faithful to Scripture than the post-Constantinian church, he weighted the authority of this period of tradition most heavily. It is true that some epochs and strands of Christian tradition are more faithful to Scripture than others. However, we can learn from the mistakes of the church as well as from its successes. As such, the full wisdom is found in tradition as a whole, not just some portions.

embodiments of the Christian faith. They necessarily express the truths they are trying to defend in the language and concepts of their culture, and in response to the questions of their time. As such, the ultimate authority of creeds lies in the truth which they were trying to express, not in the particular cultural forms and context in which they expressed it. For those of us who stand in another culture and time, the process of appropriating these creeds is a complex hermeneutical act.[19] We cannot simply repeat the creed unchanged. We must attempt to recognize the original intent of the creed and find ways to express that same intent in our setting.[20]

Based on these proposed alternative assumptions about the nature of creeds, what would be a Wesleyan response to the Lima Report's recommendation of the Nicene Creed? Surely we can accept the Nicene Creed as one partial, but authentic, expression of the Christian faith in the context of the debates of the Greco-Roman early church. The fundamental concerns that come to expression in this creed remain normative for us today, even if we might argue over the most appropriate contemporary expression of those concerns in our context (and argue for the legitimacy of yet a different expression for an Asian context, etc.).

However, precisely because of its limited nature, we cannot accept the Nicene Creed *alone* as an adequate basis for reconciling the diversity of the Christian traditions. There is too much that the creed does not cover. In particular, it fails to cover those theological issues which John Wesley believed were most central to vital religion—issues concerning the nature and

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[19]The Lima Report repeatedly notes the need to "interpret" the Nicene Creed for our present context. However, when they suggest examples it becomes clear that they are mainly concerned with how one can *extrapolate* from the creed to address contemporary issues like racism and militarism which are not directly addressed in the creed itself. They do not seem to take seriously enough the *deeper* hermeneutical issue of whether the very concepts in which the creed is expressed needs translated for new cultural contexts (cf. *Apostolic Faith*, Sec. II, pp. 220–23).

[20]For a clear recognition of this need and resultant sensitive hermeneutical reading of the Nicene Creed, see Marthaler, *The Creed*.

dynamics of salvation. An adequate basis for greater recognition of the various Christian traditions must address the boundaries of legitimacy on these issues. For example, can a theological tradition deny the importance of a *process* of sanctification in Christian life (however they choose to describe it) and still be recognized as fully Christian? Wesley would say no!

III. Broader Wesleyan Contributions to Ecumenical Dialogue

Thus, one contribution the Wesleyan tradition can make to the attempts at creating a greater ecumenical unity in the confession of Christian faith is to bear clear and consistent testimony to those boundaries of legitimate doctrinal diversity that our particular experience and perspective have highlighted. But, is that all? Indeed, is that the most important contribution we can make? Perhaps not!

I believe there are two other contributions that the Wesleyan tradition can make to the current ecumenical discussion of the Christian faith—contributions which are more central to the "heart" of Wesley, and which have the potential of fostering a more significant rapprochement among the various Christian traditions.

The first of these contributions is Wesley's exemplification of a "practical" approach to theological reflection.[21] Rejecting the dominant models of academic theology in his time, Wesley refused to pursue theology primarily as either metaphysical speculation or scholastic debates over traditional Christian beliefs. He modeled instead theological reflection that: 1) took its point of origin in the praxis of Christian life, 2) considered the practical implications of a

[21]By "practical" I do not mean pragmatic—i.e., that Wesley simply adopted whatever would work; rather, I mean that his theological reflection focused primarily on the praxis (thoughtful action) of the church of his day with the goal of making that praxis more Christian.

doctrine its most essential truth, and 3) had as its primary goal the encouragement of more faithful Christian life in the world.[22]

Wesley actually stands in an important stream of Christian tradition in this approach to the method of theological reflection. It can be argued that the primary motivations of the early Christian creeds themselves were more practical than speculative or metaphysical.[23] It was first with Scholasticism and then with the Enlightenment focus on metaphysical and epistemological speculation that this practical focus was lost.

Today, various influences are leading to a post-Enlightenment recovery of such a practical approach to theology. Such a recovery promises several important benefits. It would facilitate a closer relationship between theology and ethics, theology and pastoral care, theology and religious education, and theology and worship.[24] It would also move the focus of theological discussion to the realm where avenues of rapprochement between the various Christian traditions is more likely to be found—the realm of faith *lived-out* in common mission in the world.

Unfortunately, these contemporary influences do not appear to have permeated the Faith and Order Commission, as reflected in the Lima Report. Its recommendation of the Nicene Creed as a "summary of Scripture" and as having consonance with the "content" of revelation[25] betray a view of creeds and theological reflection as primarily the intellectual conceptualization

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[22]On this characterization of Wesley see Randy L. Maddox, "Responsible Grace: The Systematic Perspective of Wesleyan Theology," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 19.2 (1984): 7–22, esp. pp. 8–12; M. Douglas Meeks, "John Wesley's Heritage and the Future of Systematic Theology," in *Wesleyan Theology Today*, edited by Theodore Runyon (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1985), 38–46; and Theodore Runyon, "Is the Creed Orthodox?" *OXFORDnotes* 1.5 (1987): 3–5.

[23]Cf. George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 92–96.

[24]Cf. respectively: Don Browning, *Religious Ethics and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); Don Browning, ed. *Practical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983); Thomas Groome, *Christian Religious Education* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982); and Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology* (New York: Oxford, 1980).

[25]*Apostolic Faith*, paragraph 12.c., p. 219.

of revelation. As such, one contribution which the Wesleyan tradition can bring to the discussion of the Lima Report is a consistent embodiment and defense of the proper praxis-relatedness of all theological reflection.

The second contribution is related to the first. As theologians have become more aware of the praxis-relatedness of theological reflection, they have realized that whatever consistency there might be among the situation-related reflections of a particular theologian or tradition is owed to an *integrating* fundamental metaphor or orienting concept.[26] For example, what unites the thought of Calvin is not the mere systematic structure of his *Institutes*, or any particular doctrine that he affirms; it is a perspective that he brings to all doctrines he discusses—the desire to affirm and emphasize the sovereignty of God.

Building on this realization, I would suggest that what most fundamentally distinguishes the various Christian theological traditions is that they operate with differing orienting concepts. While these traditions occasionally differ over the very affirmation of particular doctrinal themes, this is not the typical focus of their disagreement. The difference more often emerges in variations of shared themes, and varied rationales for addressing these themes.

For example, both Luther and Calvin affirm predestination. However, their understanding of this doctrine and their reasons for adopting it are very different. Calvin sees predestination as a logical implication of the *sovereign grace* of God. Luther sees it as a necessary presupposition of the *free grace* of God. As a result of this difference, Calvin is more able to explain why Christian obedience is not underlined by predestination (God is still sovereign Lord) than Luther

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[26]Cf. Maddox, "Responsible Grace," 10. While some use the term "fundamental metaphor," I prefer orienting concept because the unifying principle is typically more abstract than "metaphor" would imply.

(grace is given *despite* our disobedience).

If it is true that differing orienting concepts contribute significantly to the difference between theological traditions, then any significant future ecumenical consensus requires more than just establishing the boundaries of legitimate theological diversity within the Christian community. It requires the emergence of an orienting perspective on Christian faith and life that embraces and does justice to the orienting concerns of the major Christian theological traditions.

Briefly put, my final suggestion is that Wesley provides such a potentially unifying perspective. I have argued elsewhere that there is an orienting concept that brings consistency to Wesley's various situation-related theological reflections—a concept I termed "responsible grace."[27] I believe that the unique tension of this focal concern of Wesley's life and thought enabled him to integrate creatively the fundamental perspectives of other major traditions.

For example, he was able to emphasize God's *free grace* as strongly as Luther, without surrendering the Eastern Orthodox concern to affirm that God's grace is always *transforming grace* (deification). Likewise, he could talk of God's *sovereign grace* in terms much like Calvin, yet not at the expense of a commitment to human cooperation like that expressed in the Roman Catholic doctrine of *infused grace*.

This is not to say that Wesley was a theological eclectic. He did not accept every position the other traditions offered and he did not just pick and choose indiscriminately. He strove to integrate and transform the fundamental concerns of the other traditions into his characteristic perspective.[28] As Geoffrey Wainwright puts it, Wesley maintained the "proportion of the faith."[29]

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[27]Randy L. Maddox, "Responsible Grace: The Systematic Nature of Wesley's Theology Reconsidered," *Quarterly Review* 6 (1986): 24–34.

[28]For an example of how Wesley's perspective both affirmed and transformed the fundamental concern of another tradition (Roman Catholic), see: Randy L. Maddox, "Karl Rahner's Supernatural

Wesley's orienting perspective of *responsible grace* holds real promise for helping to transcend many of the classic theological stalemates in the ecumenical debate. It also seems distinctively sympathetic to the concerns of recent critiques of dominant Western understandings of Christian life and thought.[30] As such, the rediscovery of Wesley in contemporary Methodism need not be seen as an exercise in denominational triumphalism. It is an attempt to recover the catholic spirit of our founder and share it with the larger church. May it bear rich fruit!

Existential: A Wesleyan Parallel?" *Evangelical Journal* 5 (1987): 3–14.

[29]Wainwright, *Ecumenical Moment*, 218. Note also his references to other such characterizations of Wesley.

[30]Cf. Randy L. Maddox, "Wesleyan Theology and the Christian Feminist Critique," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 22 (1987): 101–11.