

World Council of Churches
COMMISSION ON FAITH AND ORDER

*Faith and Order Plenary Commission
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
28 July - 6 August 2004*

Subtheme II: Ecclesiology

Ecclesiology and the Grammar of Validation

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1. Welcome one another: about the context of Romans 15,7

No rift could be greater within the Church than the one between Jews and Pagans.

After their conversion to Jesus Christ, the Gentiles and Jews in Rome shared meals, in the concrete "koinonia" of everyday life. This sharing represented a revolution. But problems arose about what to eat (meat, or "only vegetables"), and what to drink (wine, or no spirits at all), and whether it was possible to share the table with someone whose diet differed from your own. In chapters 14 and 15, Paul appeals to the Gentiles within the particular community of the Romans to be tolerant towards Jewish sensibilities ("delicacies" or "weaknesses"). Note that in a different context, Paul had pleaded for a similar tolerance on the Jewish side in the church of Antioch: "he considers his gentile brethren free from association with idolatry and as an observant Jew felt no difficulty on eating and saying grace with them".¹ What is at stake? The Apostle invites the believers to follow Christ in building bridges between totally different cultures. He reminds his readers of the gospel: Christ became a servant of the Jews ("the circumcised"), a sign for the non-Jews (the Gentiles, or "nations"), who now praise God for God's mercy (Romans 15,9). So in fact Paul embodies a similar dynamic: he who is by birth and by conviction ("conscience") an observant Jew, "born under the Law" like the Lord himself, has been called to minister to the "goyim". This constitutes the context of the exhortation that serves as a motto for our gathering, "Welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God". The point of my brief reminder is the following:

a) Welcoming one another, in the situation that Paul knew so well, was no empty or facile gesture; rather, it implied a tremendous effort. Since the earliest gatherings at the time of Paul, other polarities have appeared: between the races; between women and men; between Eastern and Western churches; between the rich and the poor; between evangelicals and liberals. However, I believe no polarity could be as divisive as the one which Paul wrestles with in his letter, because of the very real danger of "contamination" by foods offered to the gods and on the other hand the quandary of ritual laws and specifically Jewish commandments. I submit the following, therefore: if these opposing factions in Rome were invited to live in harmony with one another, *a fortiori* the call extends to situations where the urge to separate at table is less founded.

b) Both the means by which the mutual welcome is achieved, and the finality of this movement are larger than the human beings involved, although of course nothing can be done without them. The grace of Godself, in this case through Jesus Christ, precedes any human endeavour in this respect. The divine agency is both the initial impetus of the movement and the mediation (the energy) which enables the transformation. Christians have built and will build improbable communities, against the grain of natural affinities, instinctive loyalties and common-sense compacts. Jews and Greeks eat together, women and men are no longer defined only by their biological functions, the slave and the free are brothers in the one Lord.

¹ Peter Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law. Halakha in the Letters of the Apostle to the Gentiles*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1990, pp 236-258 (here: p.245).

c) If, when and where these small revolutions occur, the focus is clearly eschatological. It is in order that a community may ultimately speak or sing “with one voice, to glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 15,6). Eating arrangements are connected to the sharing of bread and cup in the Lord’s supper. This in turn is to remind the believers that a place is set for them at God’s heavenly “Welcome table”.²

2. Believing and Belonging: the Whole Gamut of Permutations

Believing and belonging have entered the mainstream of society to such an extent that churches now struggle to define their specific calling.

Was there ever a time and place in history when believing and belonging went together? For some, Europe in the Middle Ages constituted such a homogeneous Christian community, in which, supposedly, society and the (Roman Catholic) Church overlapped almost completely. From a historical point of view, this picture begs for finer touches. The “golden age” of the seamless conjunction of believing and belonging, if such an age ever existed, has in any case been replaced by a spectrum of new combinations: many people in the West believe without belonging.³ Or again, they may belong to a confession but believe only part of the traditional teaching pertaining to that confession. Overall, it seems to me that belonging poses the greater challenge. In civil societies of western Europe, citizens “believe” in certain core values like democracy and freedom of expression; yet many do not wish to “belong” by exercising the right to vote, to question politicians directly, to become a member of political parties or associations.⁴ Thus it seems that this reluctance to commit oneself leads simultaneously to the weakening of the visible presence of the churches and to the withdrawal from the political “forum” by the majority of citizens. Could the reason for this disengagement be that the Church has won the battle for the christianizing of the social order? Are we paying the price of success, after having imposed and embodied values like the equality in principle of women and men, the abolition of slavery and the protection of the young? What greater value than “companionship”? Nowadays, it is useful to recall the literal meaning: from the Latin *cum* and *panis*, the word refers to persons who share bread together. The apostolic injunction to welcome one another thus was an early call to form a “company”. To a large extent, due to the widespread acceptance of these principles, Christianity has left the domain of public affairs to retreat into the private realm; politics, after having made sure that the laws of the State protect these values, seem in turn to have become obsolete. Where do we go from here? “Welcome one another” has become a mere requirement of political correctness. Why teach something that is already so widely accepted? The process of secularization results in a post-Christian society, i.e. one which is derived from the previous Christian stage, but in which believing and belonging have been severed from each other. Faced with the challenge of their growing irrelevance-through-benign-acceptance, today’s Christians might be well advised to underline the specific meanings of the good news.

This need was graphically described in the 1940s by the Anglican novelist and scholar Dorothy L. Sayers. In her collection of speeches and pamphlets, she set forth the fundamentals of a faith that is at the same time broadminded, evangelical in the original meaning, and intellectually mature.

“Let us, in Heaven’s name, drag out the Divine Drama from under the dreadful accumulation of slipshod thinking and trashy sentiment, and set it on an open stage to startle the world into some sort of vigorous reaction. [□] We do Him singularly little honour by watering down His personality till it could not offend a fly. Surely it is not the business of the Church to adapt Christ to men, but to adapt men to Christ.

It is the dogma that is the drama – not beautiful phrases, nor comforting sentiments, nor vague aspirations to loving kindness and uplift, nor the promise of something nice after death – but the terrifying assumption that the same God who made the world lived in the world and passed through the grave and gate of death. Show that to the heathen, and they may not

² An expression found in the African American “negro spirituals”.

³ Grace Davie, « Croire sans appartenir, le cas britannique », in Grace Davie & Danièle Hervieu-Léger (eds), *Identités religieuses en Europe*, Paris, éd. La Découverte, 1996, p. 176.

⁴ Marcel Gauchet, *La religion dans la démocratie. Parcours de la laïcité*, Paris, Gallimard, 1998.

believe it; but at least they may realize that here is something that a man might be glad to believe".⁵

3. Classical Metaphors in Ecclesiology: the Kingdom of Heaven; the Mother of all Believers; the Body of Christ.

These three classical images serve to attest to a) the praxis of emancipation and diakonia (the advent of the messianic Kingdom); b) the teaching dimension of the Church (she is called "mater et magistra" in the Roman Catholic tradition); c) the connection between the Body of Christ and the sacraments.

a) One important aspect of the mandate of churches in their "life and work" is to be emissaries of the Kingdom to come. There is and remains an unresolved tension between what is "already" present and what has "yet" to come about. The liberating deeds of Christians have too often not met the standard of the prophetic visions of the First and Second testaments. It is fair to acknowledge that the "children of Mammon" in some instances achieve far more. Yet in "post-Christian" western Europe, the core values of humanism, democracy, freedom of conscience, equality between the genders, mutual healthcare, the protection of minors⁶ have to some extent simply migrated from the Church into society at large (cf. supra part 2, "Believing and Belonging"). But I suggest it is precisely the promissory and proleptic aspects of the Bible that differentiate the life and work of churches from a political programme: the tension between the signs and the reality that is signified by the signs is a call to self-critical appraisal and a reminder that we work in someone else's vineyard. All our efforts are "donec venias": until You come.

b) Unconditional love, similar to a mother's acceptance of all and any children, is what differentiates the Church in her teaching mode from a strictly academic endeavour. That being said, since her origins she represents a strong cultural ambition, namely to create and transmit a Christian "gnosis". There is in her enough loving wisdom to challenge the greatest minds and to nurture the mentally handicapped. Now to cherish the Church as the "Mother of all believers" may seem an unconventional notion for a protestant theologian; yet the expression is borrowed from John Calvin.

Two consequences derive from it, the first being the connection between the magistrate (the authority) and the structures of the visible church, for instance the disputed matter of the primacy of the bishop of Rome; however, this is not the time to explore this contentious issue any further. One might at least suggest, from a Reformed viewpoint, that the connection between the apostolic teaching of our churches and the authority within the visible church may be made manifest in other ways than by considering one pastor ("primus inter pares") as the personal guarantor of the apostolic succession. The responsibility is shared within the priesthood of all believers. But in light of the chosen motto, "Welcome one another...", and given the antagonism within the church of Rome at the time of the Apostle, such differences in styles of leadership within the visible church should be accepted, as were the mutually conflicting views of the "strong" and the "delicate".

The second consequence has to do with authority as the capacity to "augment", to stimulate growth. Calvin believed this to be a function of the Church. Indeed, he has no qualms in promoting a "high" ecclesiology. The prevalence of feminine and maternal images maybe indicates a compensation for the loss of traditional Marial devotion. In any case, he is very daring to describe the Church not only as mother but also as co-parent.⁷ It is not licit to separate those two things that God has joined together: that the Church be the mother of all those whose Father is God".⁸ The metaphor of mothering is freely used by the Reformer.⁹ There is no entry into life everlasting unless we are conceived in the womb of this mother, that she give birth to us, that she suckle us on her breasts, that she keep us and maintain us in her guidance and under her rule until, having shed our mortal bodies, we become like the Angels".¹⁰ Calvin issues a stern warning: "Those who refuse to be nourished [empâtelés] by

⁵ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Creed or Chaos*, New York, Harcourt & Brace, 1949, p. 24.

⁶ Jean Calvin, *Institution de la religion chrétienne*, Genève, Labor et Fides, 1958, livre IV, p.11 (the text is based on the French version of 1560; the English translation is mine). Calvin refers to Cyprianus and to Augustine for this startling remark. Cf the translation by Ford Lewis Battles: "for those to whom he is Father the Church may also be Mother", *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1960, vol.2, p.1012.

⁷ Ibid., p.14 (English edition McNeill: p.1016).

the Church or who spurn the spiritual food that she offers, deserve to starve to death".⁸ In an anti-authoritarian climate, authority is associated with repression and thus comes under close scrutiny. It would be foolish to deny the restraining effect of authority as a collateral. But in ascribing authority to the teachings of the Church, or in accepting them as authoritative, it is useful to underline the pedagogical intent of authority. The word can be traced to the latin verb "augere": to augment. Mothers (parents) are "authors" of their children, in a biological sense naturally but even more importantly in a cultural sense. Education is the process of humanizing and "civilizing" the young. Giving a name to the child is the first step, and in this capacity the biological parents form a covenant with a godmother and a godfather, within the Church. In Spanish, the given or Christian name is literally the name of the font, "nombre de pila." The naming of a child often occurs before her or his birth; when the child is "expected", i. e. desired, it may happen even before conception. Now the Church also welcomes even the "in-fans", the child who does not yet speak. Her teaching and ministering reach out to persons who do not yet or who do no longer speak, with sacraments and sacramental gestures. A logocentric approach of faith leads some Christians in the West to assume that only that which can be understood and verbalized is legitimate. Yet dreams and the unforeseeable surges of creativity in the life of artists, the appeal of liturgical music and of beauty; religious emotions and the non-verbal logic of gestures can all find a place in the search for truth. In the final section of this paper, I shall briefly demonstrate that churches in their teaching capacity use not a single "grammar," but four types, especially the grammar of validation.

But first let us return to the sacraments. The authority of the Church is put to use in the life-long process of "becoming a Christian", as is shown in the following fragment from the Faith and Order document about that theme. "Baptism should be seen as the concrete expression of a full life lived and dying daily in Christ. I mean this symbolically in the deepest sense of the Christian rite of baptism itself as death and burial and rebirth in Christ. But I am also speaking plainly. Baptism encompasses the entire temporal life-span of a person. It is beginning and end. We need to recapitulate and review, revisit and reflect upon our baptisms throughout our lives in order never to forget from whence we came and to whom our lives are finally bound and destined. In this manner, our ethics may become a complete way of life, a way of being in the world in service to the world and yet belonging to God, and to God alone."⁹

c) Living as members of the Body of Christ, we partake of his body. This communion is based on God's having/wanting communion with humankind.

An abridged reading of our text of Romans 15,7 ("welcome one another") levels it into a trivial, non-confrontational admonition. It becomes far less consensual to specify "just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God." Christ has first welcomed us. And the goal is not to cultivate relationships among ourselves: it is to manifest God's doxa. To borrow an analysis by Robert Jenson: "The communion that is the church is not primally the communion of believers among themselves; it is primally God's communion with us in the incarnate Christ; and because the God who thus admits to communion is in himself a *koinonia*, the *perichoresis*, the 'mutual inhabiting' of Father, Son and Spirit, we are drawn also to mutual love of one another." Or, to put it more explicitly, with the same author: "The triune God is not a monad; he is the life of the Father and the Son in and by their Spirit. Thus he is in himself a *communio*, and so has room for others to share his life, if he so chooses. [...] By God's free choice, he does in fact open the communion he is for created persons, for the church."¹⁰

These remarks should suffice to establish that the intention of Paul's exhortation "Welcome one another..." involves far more than today's democratic "values" of acceptance and tolerance, pluralism and openmindedness (although these norms of conduct are commendable, and even though they can be seen as the secularized offspring of early Christian guidelines). As an experiment, I would like to apply a recent philosophical analysis of levels of language to the different levels which are implied in the phrase "welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you."

⁸ Ibid., p. 15 (English edition McNeill: p.1017).

⁹ Vigen Guroian, "On Baptism and the Spirit. The Ethical Significance of the Marks of the Church", in Thomas F. Best and Dagmar Heller (eds), *Becoming a Christian. The Ecumenical Implications of Our Common Baptism*, Faith and Order Paper No. 184, Geneva, WCC Publications, 1999, p.73.

¹⁰ Robert W. Jenson, « The church and the sacraments », in Colin E. Gunton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 215f.

4. Four types of grammar: an experimental application.

The philosopher Jean-Marc Ferry proposes to assign four types of 'grammar' to 1) the realm of nature, 2) to oracles and premonitions; 3) to the common use of language; 4) to the level of validation of truth and justice.

1) The first "grammar" described by Ferry is not usually perceived as such: it is the "iconic" grammar of association. A young woman has killed a chameleon, an act which all the villagers feel is not normal. The sorcerer confronts the prostrate and speechless woman and finally produces the key to the enigma: "the chameleon is your father"; an exorcism is duly performed and order can be restored. This is possible because the villagers share a common "iconic" intelligence, of which the sorcerer is the institutional interpreter.¹¹ The associative or iconic activity is a powerful factor in our subconscious lives. I believe that water plays an important part in the grammar of association (as do the light of candles in the dark, and the restoring force of oil). The repression of the iconic grammar by the by the "official" grammar is a dialectic: it implies a loss, yet it also represents an emancipation. As Adorno wrote: "Myth becomes reason, nature becomes purely objective. Man pays the increase of his power by becoming a stranger to that over which he exercises this power."¹²

2) The *grammaire indiciaire* is unfolded in the reading of traces, of telltale indications. A hunter is an expert in the field: seeing trails, he is able to conjure a "vision" of the animals, of the scene that occurred in his absence, making that scene come alive: here, two leopards were killed by a lioness. This capacity underlies many oracles and premonitions. But it also the specific intuition that enables a historian, reading material "trails", to hunt down the global picture of a person or an event that are no longer present.¹³

Where does the specific "logos" of humanity start? A vocal alarm signal made by a mammal potentially contains the three pragmatic resources of human language: to focus on another individual, to refer to something (e.g., a danger); to commit oneself. This in turn corresponds to the three functions of human discourse: communication, cognition, expression (of emotions). A conversation requires all three.¹⁴

3) The third grammar is the one that is commonly accepted as such. But many speech-actions do more than communicate bare facts. "My glass is already half empty" might elicit the response: "Would you like me to refill it?", whereas the remark "My glass is already half full", while factually identical, is not identical as proposition.¹⁵ Furthermore, Western grammars are structured by verbal modes (past, present, future, conditional) and pronouns (I-you-S/He-It).¹⁶ We might define humans as follows: when we feel, we are able to understand our emotions; understanding what we feel, we are able to express what we understand; by expressing what we understand, we are able to share it. By the interweaving of stories, shared significations appear. Such "common sense" provides resources for understanding both one's own and another's story.

4) These insights are already quite helpful but Ferry does not stop here. To understand an object as well as it can be understood is one thing; we also need to understand an object as it should be (justice) and to understand what we feel regarding things as they are and as they should be (prophecy). "If humanity differs from the animal kingdom, it is *not* through culture and language; it is because of the fact that humanity builds on the principle of truth, which is [...] a normative principle."¹⁷ The fourth grammar is the one that creates room for critical reflection (on justice and the lack of it, on truth and untruth); it serves to express ideals, things as they might be or should be. To become conscious of the grammar of validation is to sharpen our perception of

¹¹ Jean-Marc Ferry, *Les grammaires de l'intelligence*, Paris, Cerf, 2004, p. 33.

¹² M. Horkheimer & Th. W. Adorno, *La dialectique de la raison*, Paris, Gallimard, 1974, p. 27 (quoted by Ferry, op.cit., p.35).

¹³ Ferry, op.cit., pp 43.50.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.99.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 104.

¹⁶ On grammar and theology, I recommend Catherine Pickstock's brilliant essay on simplifying the text of the Nicene Creed. Catherine Pickstock, "Asyndeton: Syntax and Insanity. A Study of the Revision of the Nicene Creed", in Graham Ward (ed), *The Postmodern God. A Theological Reader*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1997, pp 297-317.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 131.

different orders. There is a difference between a sentence that describes a fact, and one that tells us how something should be in truth. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaims that all human beings have from birth equal rights and dignity. As a factual or informative sentence, this might be taken to be a lie or a joke. Yet as a “regulatory” sentence, it is full of truth.¹⁸ The point I wish to make, applying Ferry’s analysis to the discourse of theology, is that we find more “regulatory” than “factual” affirmations in Scriptures. They are witnesses to God’s truth, and as such in contradiction with the way things are in the world. Take baptism. As Daniel Migliore writes: “While acknowledging diversity, our postmodern culture is woefully deficient in affirming and cultivating the solidarity of all people, and indeed of all creatures, in suffering and hope. The responsible practice of baptism, infant and adult, should bear a countercultural witness to the new world of friendship, community, and service promised to us and to the world in Jesus Christ.”¹⁹

As a “regulatory” affirmation, “Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” may motivate our actions and illuminate our minds in the days to come.

What is soiled make thou pure;
What is wounded, work its cure;
What is parched fructify
Fill thy faithful, who confide
In thy power to guard and guide,
With thy sevenfold mystery.²⁰

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Peter Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law. Halakha in the Letters of the Apostle to the Gentiles*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1990, pp 236-258 (here: p.245).
- ² An expression found in the African American “negro spirituals”.
- ³ Grace Davie, « Croire sans appartenir, le cas britannique », in Grace Davie & Danièle Hervieu-Léger (eds), *Identités religieuses en Europe*, Paris, éd. La Découverte, 1996, p. 176.
- ⁴ Marcel Gauchet, *La religion dans la démocratie. Parcours de la laïcité*, Paris, Gallimard, 1998.
- ⁵ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Creed or Chaos*, New York, Harcourt & Brace, 1949, p. 24.
- ⁶ Jean Calvin, *Institution de la religion chrétienne*, Genève, Labor et Fides, 1958, livre IV, p.11 (the text is based on the French version of 1560; the English translation is mine). Calvin refers to Cyprianus and to Augustine for this startling remark. Cf the translation by Ford Lewis Battles: “for those to whom he is Father the Church may also be Mother”, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1960, vol.2, p.1012.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p.14 (English edition McNeill: p.1016).
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15 (English edition McNeill: p.1017).
- ⁹ Vigen Guroian, “On Baptism and the Spirit. The Ethical Significance of the Marks of the Church”, in Thomas F. Best and Dagmar Heller (eds), *Becoming a Christian. The Ecumenical Implications of Our Common Baptism*, Faith and Order Paper No. 184, Geneva, WCC Publications, 1999, p.73.
- ¹⁰ Robert W. Jenson, « The church and the sacraments », in Colin E. Gunton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 215f.
- ¹¹ Jean-Marc Ferry, *Les grammaires de l'intelligence*, Paris, Cerf, 2004, p. 33.
- ¹² M. Horkheimer & Th. W. Adorno, *La dialectique de la raison*, Paris, Gallimard, 1974, p. 27 (quoted by Ferry, op.cit., p.35).
- ¹³ Ferry, op.cit., pp 43.50.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.99.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 104.
- ¹⁶ On grammar and theology, I recommend Catherine Pickstock’s brilliant essay on simplifying the text of the Nicene Creed. Catherine Pickstock, “Asyndeton: Syntax and Insanity. A Study of the Revision of the Nicene Creed”, in Graham Ward (ed), *The Postmodern God. A Theological Reader*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1997, pp 297-317.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 131.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 201.
- ¹⁹ Daniel Migliore, « Reforming the Theology and Practice of Baptism :The Challenge of Karl Barth », in David Willis & Michael Welker (eds), *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology*. Tasks, Topics, Traditions, Grands Rapids/Cambridge, Eerdmans, 1999, p. 511.
- ²⁰ « Come Thou Holy Paraclete (Veni, sancte Spiritus) » The Church Hymnary, Oxford U. Press, 1973.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

¹⁹ Daniel Migliore, « Reforming the Theology and Practice of Baptism :The Challenge of Karl Barth », in David Willis & Michael Welker (eds), *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology*. Tasks, Topics, Traditions, Grands Rapids/Cambridge, Eerdmans, 1999, p. 511.

²⁰ « Come Thou Holy Paraclete (Veni, sancte Spiritus) » The Church Hymnary, Oxford U. Press, 1973.