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Mark Buetow

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, buetowmt@gmail.com

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**THE STUDY OF INTERCOMMUNION 1951-1971:
EVIDENCE OF A HERMENEUTICAL SHIFT IN FAITH AND ORDER**

by
Mark Buetow

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INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM

Since the earliest days of the Ecumenical Movement, the problem of intercommunion¹ has existed. Indeed, at the First World Conference on Faith and Order, in Lausanne, 1927, Section Seven, dealing with "The Unity of Christendom" made this challenging statement: "Complete fellowship in the Church will be realized only when the way is opened for all God's children to join in communion at the Lord's table. Through prayer and thoughtful deliberation the steps must be found which will most effectively lead to this goal."² As the Third Millennium begins and the curtain closes on the Ecumenical Century, many churches which have been a part of the Ecumenical Movement and its struggle to achieve the visible unity of the church have come together in altar and pulpit fellowship. But many have not yet made this move.³ For reasons which have constantly been explored and explained in the work of the Commission on Faith and Order full eucharistic fellowship has not happened and still does not seem possible even after decades of closer convergence in the understanding of the Lord's Supper. In short, the Ecumenical Movement's goal of visible unity has not been achieved and least of all has one of its most important marks, the common eucharistic sharing of all the churches.

The goal of a common Eucharist shared by all churches—both by members and in clergy celebration—has always been a goal to which the churches have looked. The subject of *intercommunion* became a high priority beginning with the Third World Conference on Faith and

¹ The term *intercommunion* has been a much-contested term and the issue of terminology is one which I shall cover later in the paper. For now I use it with two meanings: (1) the communion of members of churches at the altars of other churches, thus, altar fellowship regardless of full unity in polity or doctrine; and (2) as a specific term describing an area of study by the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches.

² H.N. Bate, Canon of Carlisle, ed., *Faith and Order: Proceedings of the World Conference, Lausanne, August 3-21, 1927*. (New York: Doubleday, 1928), 540. The Official Reports of Faith and Order Conferences, after their full citation will thereafter be referenced by City and Date.

³ Chiefly the Orthodox churches have resisted such eucharistic practice.

Order in Lund, 1952. The last great study was completed and formed the basis of the intercommunion report at the Commission's 1971 Louvain meeting. Since then the subject of intercommunion *per se* has not been addressed officially by Faith and Order.⁴ Most churches involved in the Ecumenical Movement agree that the Eucharist is the ultimate expression of the unity of the church. The differences they recognize come in essentially two areas: faith and order. In terms of faith, or doctrine, there is the view that the Eucharist is the sign which expresses the unity of the churches *after* they have reconciled their theological differences. In other words, the Eucharist is the final expression of the unity which is being worked toward. On the other hand are those churches which take the Eucharist as itself a means toward achieving that unity. Within these two approaches can be found the more detailed discussions of such topics as Real Presence, anamnesis, and sacrifice. In terms of order, the difference is primarily that of who may properly—and validly—celebrate the Eucharist. The differences in order seem, according to the documents, the most difficult to overcome, though the differences in doctrine still present a significant challenge. Thus the problem with respect to *Intercommunion* is this: how can the churches achieve agreement on the issues of doctrine and order that divide them so that intercommunion can take place and the full visible unity of the church is ultimately manifested? This was the question with which was originally driving the Faith and Order study of intercommunion, but it would not always be the question. At some point, there was a fairly large change of perspective which seems to have eliminated Faith and Order's self-imposed obligation to find agreement in truth with respect to the doctrinal differences concerning the Lord's Supper.

⁴ Günther Gassman, ed., *Documentary History of Faith and Order 1963-1993*, Faith and Order Paper, no. 159 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1993), 23.

The thesis of this paper is that the approach to the problem of intercommunion taken by the Commission on Faith and Order demonstrates a foundational change in the hermeneutical approach taken by the Commission in doing theology. This conclusion is suggested as an answer to the question: What caused the shift in Faith and Order's study and discussion of intercommunion from one that seeks agreement among doctrinal differences and difficulties to a pluralistic approach which embraces all perspectives as complimentary and mutually affirming? The significance of the hermeneutical shift is this: the seeming theological convergence on intercommunion has come at the expense of churches seeking agreement in truth. Differences in doctrine regarding the Lord's Supper were once thought to be divisive and the challenge was seen to be how they may be corrected and overcome by churches together seeking that truth. Now, however, the differences in doctrine and practice, though they still exist between churches, are no longer held to be church dividing, at least from the perspective of the Commission on Faith and Order as it has developed its position on intercommunion.

A broad outline of this historical survey is as follows. The first portion of the paper will examine the position of Faith and Order on intercommunion through the relevant texts, both before and after the shift has occurred. A brief examination of the topic of intercommunion in Faith and Order Work prior to Lund will be followed by a detailed look at the 1951 document entitled *Intercommunion* and the subsequent work and documents through the Louvain Report in 1971. Discussion of intercommunion since Louvain will also be noted, though by this time it really has lost its place as an independent topic of study and is merely acknowledged as the goal of Faith and Order convergence theology and the ultimate expression of the visible unity of the churches which is yet to be achieved. The later portion of the paper will examine the shift in further detail, offering evidence from some texts on the actual topic of hermeneutics,

demonstrating that the shift is visible even there. This will underscore the fact that while Faith and Order did study hermeneutics, it was not until very recently that this study was applied to *all* of the work of ecumenism.

INTERCOMMUNION PRIOR TO LUND

First World Conference on Faith and Order, Lausanne, 1927

The First World Conference on Faith and Order opened its Report with these words: “We, representatives of many Christian Communions... are assembled to consider the things wherein we agree and the things wherein we differ.”⁵ Indeed, the section reports received and adopted by the World Conference participants are quite a catalog of the agreements and differences on various doctrines and practices of the churches. The section on the Sacraments, for instance, lists very clearly the common confession concerning Sacraments, while at the same time noting the important differences. One difference, for example, is the Orthodox position that sacraments are not valid unless they are administered with a proper form, matter and ministry.⁶ As noted above the topic of full altar fellowship as the ultimate goal and expression of the unity of the church was given voice.⁷ Nevertheless, the Conference ended with no deliberate program of altar fellowship in place and there was no plan of unity attempted by the Faith and Order Conference. Indeed, such a plan or program was never the aim of the First World Conference.⁸

Second World Conference on Faith and Order, Edinburgh, 1937

⁵ *Lausanne 1927*, 459.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 473.

⁷ See Introduction n.1

⁸ Ruth Rouse, Stephen C. Neill, and Harold E. Fey ed., *A History of the Ecumenical 1517-1968* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1993) Volume I, 423. This work is a combination of the two volumes of the “official” history of the movement. Hereafter cited as *HEM*, Volume Number and Page number.

At Edinburgh, three models of church union were described. These were, in increasing order of completeness, *cooperative action*, *intercommunion*, and *organic unity*. Each is progressively more involved than the one before and each would include the one(s) before it. Cooperative action seems fairly self-explanatory. Such an understanding of union allows churches to do some minimal amount of work together without violating conscience.⁹ It is noted, without judgement, that some churches think this is the deepest level that should be desired and the most that can be achieved.

The second model is that of intercommunion. The essence of this model is mutual exchange of membership and ministries.¹⁰ Especially sacramental intercommunion is necessary because such a practice recognizes the validity of each church as a true branch of the church or at least true churches in themselves. The term *intercommunion* is already admitted to being somewhat ambiguous. The fullest sense is full open communion between different churches and this is distinguished from situations in which one church allows other church members to come but the invitation is not reciprocal. The Conference report includes, as components of meaning in its understanding of intercommunion, the concepts of *mutuality* and *regularity*. In other words, it is a two-way street and does not take place merely in exceptional circumstances or occasional instances.

The final model is that of full organic union. This certainly includes mutual service and intercommunion. Most importantly, and this is the ultimate vision to which Faith and Order is calling the churches, the

ultimate loyalty of every member would be given to the whole body and not to any part of it. Its members would move freely from one part to another and find every privilege of membership

⁹ *Edinburgh 1937*, 250. The following discussion is taken from that section of the report.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 251.

open to them. The sacraments would be the sacraments of the whole body. The ministry would be accepted by all as a ministry of the whole body.¹¹

In addition is a vision of some form of united church government, at least for churches that are geographically close. Also needed would be some form of conciliar body for common decision. (This element at Edinburgh hints at the forthcoming formation of the World Council of Churches which was approved at the Conference.)

In a certain sense, these three levels have remained the ways in which unity has actually taken place between the churches, even up to the present time. Many churches have done work together in service to the world, a growing number of churches have come into agreements in which intercommunion is carried out, but there has not yet been reached any sort of master plan of union for all the churches nor will there likely be in the future, despite the best efforts of the World Council of Churches. Clearly intercommunion is seen as possible before actual organic church union. Always it has been the individual churches which have entered into such agreements and these have happened, even some in which full organic union has occurred.¹² At any rate, by 1937 Faith and Order is calling the churches to a grand vision that embraced the visible unity of all the separated churches. The individual churches were actually carrying this out to some extent. Through all of it, intercommunion was recognized as being important, not just as a final expression of unity, but as a step along the way and a means to achieving unity and growing together.

Before leaving Edinburgh the doctrinal consensus and division must be noted. Faith and Order, at its Second World Conference, is still in the process of cataloguing agreements and differences. At this point, one may detect what is historically a Reformed inclination to see as

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 252.

¹² For a detailed list of plans of union prior to 1952, see *HEM*, 1.496.

somewhat less problematic the differences in understanding of how Christ is present in the Eucharist, a perspective which tends to push Faith and Order toward preferring the position which sees the Eucharist as the *means* to unity.

We all believe that Christ is truly present in the Eucharist, though as to how that presence is manifested and realised we may differ. Every precise definition of the presence is bound to be a limiting thing, and the *attempt to formulate such definitions and to impose them on the Church has itself been the cause of disunity in the past.*

The important thing is that we should celebrate the Eucharist with the unfailing use of bread and wine, and of prayer, and of the words of institution, and with agreement as to its essential and *spiritual* meaning.¹³

The italicized portions indicate specific phrases with which, historically, Lutherans might be uncomfortable, not in the sense of trying to *explain* Christ's presence, but because it does not clearly confess the body and blood with the bread and wine, the manducatio impiorum, and other historically important doctrines.¹⁴ At this point in time, however, the doctrinal divisions are still taken very seriously and they are recognized as legitimate and difficult barriers in the road to intercommunion between the churches.

In an explication of the elements of likeness in the church's unity, the two basic practices regarding intercommunion are stated without commentary. The first is that some churches practice it; the second is that some churches would not unless there is agreement upon the validity of one another's ministries. After Edinburgh, *intercommunion* still remains to be treated as its own issue needing study and advance toward resolution by Faith and Order.¹⁵ It is so

¹³ *Edinburgh 1937*, 244. Emphasis added.

¹⁴ For a good summary of these issues, defended by Luther against Zwingli at Marburg, see Hermann Sasse, *This Is My Body* (Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 1959).

¹⁵ For a brief summary of the topic of intercommunion prior to Lund, see Appendix II of *HEM*, I.741.

important, in fact, that prior to the Third World Conference on Faith and Order an entire document will be devoted to the issue of intercommunion.

LUND TO LOUVAIN: THE STRUGGLE FOR INTERCOMMUNION

*The Document on Intercommunion*¹⁶

The resolution for an in depth study on intercommunion was given by Faith and Order's Continuation Committee in 1939. The report was ultimately a combination of the European and the American sections working on the project. The work had been delayed some time due to the Second World War but was resumed again in earnest in 1948. The American and European commissions were united as the Theological Commission on Intercommunion, a sub-commission of Faith and Order after the latter had become a part of the World Council of Churches in 1948. The main task that presented itself to the Commission was more than the mere cataloging of the rules and customs of churches with respect to intercommunion. Rather, there was the more difficult task of "penetrating beneath the rules and customs to the *fundamental theological issues* that are involved" (17, emphasis added). That the Commission saw theological issues as the object of its inquiry is encouraging and it is good to hear that the Commission has no intention of seeking "easy and shallow ways of reunion through a flabby grasp of doctrine and a glossing over of our differences of belief"(22). The document thus sets a tone of deliberate and conscientious attention to the great number of legitimate differences which prevent the churches from engaging in intercommunion with one another.

¹⁶ Donald Baillie and John Marsh, ed., *Intercommunion: The Report of the Theological Commission Appointed by the Continuation Committee of the World Conference on Faith and Order Together with a Selection from the Material Presented to the Commission* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1952). The Report was first published separately in 1951 by SCM press. The citation refers to the larger book with the supplementary material. The text of the report is the same in both printings. Page number citations will appear in parentheses in the text and refer to the larger edition cited. The longer edition includes (1) The Report; (2) A brief history of intercommunion; (3) Theological essays on the principles for intercommunion; and (4) Summary and classification of some of the rules and practices current in the different churches.

The first item tackled by the report is the terminology. The problem of *intercommunion* arises from the fact that the church is divided into churches. The word *intercommunion* thus presupposes churches which may or may not be in communion with other churches (18). One difficulty relating to the terminology already exists simply in the Orthodox Churches' conception of themselves as the undivided church, having within it the fullness of Christian truth and not considering themselves one church among many. *Intercommunion* is taken to mean the result of an agreement between churches whereby communicant members of each may participate at the altars of each. *Open communion* implies a unilateral action by a church whereby it welcomes members of other churches to share in its Communion Services. *Intercelebration* denotes an interchange of ministers between churches. Intercelebration is not automatically the rule with open communion. *Full communion* describes full and open exchange of members and ministries (18-19). Finally, given the many circumstances under which different churches would be in any of the above situations—agreement in doctrine, or order, or open invitation to all baptized, etc.—the report concedes that the best that can be done is to clarify the terms that are used as well as possible (20).

The basic problem of intercommunion is the existence of many churches which recognize in one another a portion of the true church (21). The fact of denominations in competition and unable to work together or join one another at the Lord's Table is a state of affairs which seems more and more difficult to justify. It seems especially absurd to the many who have, in their ecumenical experience, come to share a common life and study with the members of other churches. Despite this the Report cautions against any solution which glosses over the differences in belief (22). The pain of the problem is heightened by the increased desire for intercommunion at the same time as the ecumenical movement has generated an increased

confessional awareness by many churches. Add to that an impatience toward the historical divisions not readily shared by the younger participants in the ecumenical gatherings and even less by the eastern churches which see many of the problems as distinctively western, and the problem has grown acute and urgent (23).

The next section of the report asks the question which sets the stage for the intercommunion discussion that will follow for two decades. Can intercommunion precede reunion? The authors of the report agree that intercommunion is an essential component of the visible unity of the church (23). The reunion the Report speaks of, nonspecifically, at least means the visible unity of the church. Two answers are given to the question of intercommunion and reunion. They are best expressed in the words of the Report themselves.

- (a) On the one hand, and especially in Anglo-Catholic, Orthodox and some Lutheran circles (not to speak of the Roman Catholic Church, which is not represented on the Commission on Faith and Order) it is held that any extensive practice of intercommunion between separated Churches which differ in order or doctrine would, however well-intentioned, imply a disrespect for truth and indeed for the sacrament itself, and would even be a betrayal of the ultimate hope of reunion which ought to dominate our thinking and our practice... (23).
- (b) On the other hand there is the view, especially characteristic of 'Reformed' Churches (including Presbyterians, Congregationalists and most Baptists), but also held by many Methodists and by Lutherans and Anglican Evangelicals, that intercommunion, understood as open communion, need not and should not wait for reunion, but is a step towards it, and a preparation for it... (25).

In short, there is the view that there can be no altar fellowship before agreement in doctrine and practice and church order and there is the view that altar fellowship will be a means toward full visible church fellowship and unity. Note these two different approaches carefully because they will be the center of the intercommunion debate until the Louvain report, in which they are seemingly resolved.

The Report next enumerates in two sections the different sacramental doctrines (faith) and the differences in church order underlying the disunity of the churches. The first major difference enumerated is that between Continental Lutheran and Reformed churches (28). The difference lies in that the Lutherans ascribe to doctrine rather than order a greater importance as the basis for intercommunion. The Lutheran emphasis on the Body and Blood of Christ, really present “in, with and under” the bread and wine is noted. Perhaps as a means of offering possible solutions, it is recorded that some Lutherans do not lay the same amount of stress on the doctrine and are much closer to the Reformed and Calvinist churches who teach that Christ is present by faith (28). Another difficult issue to be discussed is the division between those who see the Eucharist as a sacrifice of the Body and Blood of Christ and those who do not. Again, the attempt to come closer is registered in the claim that many Protestant churches do not deny the sacrificial aspect of the Eucharist or relate it in some way to Christ’s sacrifice, such as saying that the Eucharist unites us to Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice (30). While differences are not minimized, the Anglican Communion and the churches that belong to it are chosen as an example of a church in which there is unity of communion even though there may be wide latitude in doctrinal acceptance. Having said this, the Report draws this conclusion regarding the difficulty of doctrinal differences:

All this suggests that in this matter of intercommunion between separated Churches there is a greater difficulty than that of divergent eucharistic doctrine. In some quarters at least, the fundamental obstacle is not difference of doctrine, but difference of order (30).

In the section which follows on the matters of order, it is noted forthwith that even Lutherans who hold an apostolic succession (Church of Sweden) are more adamant on the doctrinal agreement than that of order. Anglo-Catholics and Orthodox Churches, on the other hand, deny that matters of order can be seen as something separate from those of doctrine (31).

Be that as it may, Faith and Order has deliberately separated matters of doctrine and order and it will remain so in the work and texts which Faith and Order continues to produce after Lund. The big sticking point in terms of order is that for churches to have intercommunion they must recognize one another's ministries as valid. Because the Orthodox and especially the Anglican churches take order itself as so firmly a matter of doctrine, the differences are perceived as most disturbing at these very points. Since the question of validly ordained ministers is so important to many of the member churches, the Report suggests that the situation is extremely difficult, perhaps even impossible to resolve. Even so, it holds out hope, because the Orthodox and Anglican churches both have provision in their orders for recognition of exceptional circumstances. Not only so, but the Report reminds those reading it that any church which is a part of the World Council of Churches does, by virtue of its membership in that body, recognize the true reality of the church of Christ in some measure in all the other members (33). The lack of uniformity within the Anglican church regarding the relation of the episcopacy to the *esse* of the church is, in the Report's opinion, a hopeful sign that leeway could exist. Also the existence of 'comity' in the missionary field whereby churches do not compete with one another but recognize the other's work is helpful. Adding force, however to the conclusion of the section on doctrine, the concluding paragraph on order pulls no punches in regard to the difficulties involved:

When all is said and done, however, it remains true that the difference of order between the Churches which claim the episcopal succession and other Churches appears to be at the present time the most formidable obstacle in the way of intercommunion (35).

Though it appears from the outset that Faith and Order marks the differences in order as the more difficult to overcome, it must be admitted at this point, that the differences have at least been aired with clarity and honesty. While hopeful comments have been made which might urge

the churches to stretch beyond their divisions, the differences are nevertheless taken very seriously. To summarize our reading of the document thus far: there are two approaches to intercommunion and two groups of differences. There are those who see intercommunion as the possible *result* when differences of doctrine and order have been overcome and those who see intercommunion as a *means* toward the overcoming of those differences. In terms of those actual differences, there are those of doctrine—at this point the Real Presence and sacrifice—and those of order, that is, of the validity of the ministry in a given church.

Lest it be assumed that the Report is merely academic, the Commission that authored it applied itself to the very thorny and practical problem of how to handle the Eucharist at ecumenical gatherings. To have or not to have the Eucharist was the question which was addressed and three possibilities were suggested (36ff.): (1) Simultaneous communion for different denominations. The drawback is that such an approach only highlights the painful divisions that exist. (2) Non-simultaneous services according to different traditions. The disadvantages here are mainly those of worshipping without taking the Sacrament, which defeats its purpose in the minds of some, or matters of conscience stemming from being unable to attend, though it is Christ's invitation. (3) A eucharistic "fast" in which no Eucharist is celebrated. The problem with this approach is that it may be more difficult for those who normally celebrate the Eucharist daily while at the same time being of little significance to those for whom the Eucharist is generally infrequent. It was indicated that there is no simple solution. The last proposal had never even been tried and seemed least likely to work. Several principles were stated to help assist the planning of future ecumenical events.

The Report is careful not to propose any mandates for intercommunion between churches. It rather acknowledges seven areas of agreement and two areas of disagreement. Of

the agreements, three stand out as particularly important. The first is that the churches are agreed that the most painful point of expression of their divisions is at the Lord's Table where they cannot all partake together (41, a4). This is the constant problem which makes the study of intercommunion so urgent and the solutions so important to find. Second is the agreement on the *conception* by all, namely, that, whatever else the Lord's Supper is, it is controlled by the Lord's words of mandate and gives the church the gift of himself in some way (41, a5). Finally is the recognition that every possibility for wider intercommunion should be explored unless a sacrifice of principle is involved (42, a7). One detects the urgency with which intercommunion is urged but not at the expense of the truth being ascertained through careful recognition and discussion of doctrinal disagreements. In the Report, at least, the differences are openly acknowledged. In fact, the two major differences are listed in the concluding section as well, namely, the Eucharist as a result of or means to unity and the question of whether matters of doctrine or order are more important. As for the last question, the Report reiterates its pick for which of the two will be most difficult: "This... difficulty [of valid orders and apostolic succession] is in fact the greatest obstacle that has to be overcome in the movement towards intercommunion" (45). Such a statement does not mean that the doctrinal differences are not important, but one wonders if they will be more easily solved than those of order. When we arrive at Louvain, we will see that this may be the case!

As for the *Report on Intercommunion* as a whole, it is a frank look at what the problems are. It cites the major differences and the major problems toward achieving altar fellowship between churches. The text approaches the problem with the optimism characteristic of the ecumenical vision, but it does not offer solutions at the expense of the doctrine and practice of the churches. The question we have in mind as we read the major Faith and Order documents on

intercommunion is whether there is yet perceptible any made away from an approach which seeks agreement in the truth of doctrine to one which may actually be sacrificing the doctrinal differences for the goal of actual intercommunion? Perhaps part of the shift toward the later type of convergence theology is already implicit in the *Report on Intercommunion* in this way: The Report sets about its task by cataloging the agreements and differences which legitimately prevent intercommunion between churches. This comparative approach to Faith and Order work will be eschewed at Lund, the Conference for which the Report was intended. The next item to examine, therefore, is the Lund Conference itself to see what has been affirmed or rejected from the Report as the official statement of Faith and Order on the subject of intercommunion.

The Third World Conference on Faith and Order, Lund, 1952

At the Third World Conference on Faith and Order in 1952 the challenge appeared for a new way of working together toward theological unity:

We have seen clearly that we can make no real advance toward unity if we only compare our several conceptions of the nature of the Church and the traditions in which they are embodied.¹⁷

This statement calls for a change away from simply learning about one another to actively pursuing the unity of the church. One of Lund's contributions was to emphasize that this unity must be *visible*.¹⁸ Having said so, the push toward increased intercommunion became all the more important. In fact, the overriding task of Faith and Order to help the churches move along this direction may be the cause of some of the tensions evident in the Conference Report's section on intercommunion.

¹⁷ "Final Report of the Third World Conference on Faith and Order" in Lukas Vischer, ed., *A Documentary History of the Faith and Order Movement 1927-1963* (St. Louis: The Bethany Press, 1963), 85. Citations of Lund in this section will be in parentheses.

¹⁸ *HEM*, II.148.

Despite the Orthodox lack of concern for the issue of intercommunion (116.131)¹⁹ there is increasing interest by churches which *can* envisage eucharistic sharing between themselves and the issues behind their lack of progress in this area are at the forefront of the consideration of the Lund Conference. In these very issues, however, are two seemingly disparate viewpoints, which seems to manifest a tension not found in the *Report on Intercommunion*. Factors are claimed to be present which demand barriers be removed if they are not fundamental divergences of faith and order (116.134) Probably this is a reference to the “non-theological factors” discussed earlier in the report (104.69). At the same time the importance is underscored that

all unions find their basis in the teaching of Scripture and be tested by conformity to the Word of God. There should be no move toward intercommunion which would treat our differences superficially or would use intercommunion as a means of by-passing difficulties (116.136)

Admittedly the two factors are slightly different. The former seeks to address historical or cultural factors which may have been a barrier in the past. The latter warning reminds us that Faith and Order still takes seriously the divisions and the differences that cause them. One wonders, however, if the first will eclipse the second or if there is at least the danger to do so.

A new set of terminology is offered at Lund. It is described here for the sake of comparison (118.143-9). *Full Communion* is where churches in doctrinal agreement or in the same confessional family freely communicate at the altars of the others and there is freedom for ministers to officiate at the others’ services. *Intercommunion and Intercelebration* refer to churches not of the same confessional family which have members and ministers freely communicating and celebrating in the others’ churches. *Intercommunion* describes the free communication by members of the churches at one another’s altars. *Open Communion* is the

¹⁹ Recall that the Orthodox do not consider there to be a great number of churches but only one Church, most faithfully embodied in their communion. See p.9 above.

invitation by a church to members of other churches to receive when they are present. *Mutual Open Communion* describes two or more churches inviting each other's members and the members are free to accept. *Limited Open Communion* means the admission, under special circumstances, of members not in full communion with the church. *Closed Communion* means a church limits participation to its own members. There are more terms in the Conference Report than were in the *Report on Intercommunion*. The main thing to note about the terms is that Faith and Order is struggling to find vocabulary that adequately covers the many different situations of eucharistic fellowship—or lack thereof—in the many churches which take part in the WCC.

Lund marks the confession of a growing agreement in the “theological interpretation” of the Lord’s Supper (120.53). The great majority of the churches, after studying the *Intercommunion* document state agreement on three doctrinal points: The Lord’s Supper is (1) a memorial of Christ’s incarnation and earthly ministry, his death and resurrection; (2) sacrament of his true presence in which he gives himself to unite the church to himself and his eternal sacrifice; (3) an eschatological anticipation of fellowship with Christ in his kingdom. The use of the term “theological interpretation” sounds like an attempt to distance the reality and actual factness of the Lord’s Supper from whatever doctrinal formulations a church would make about it. This reflects the way in which consensus about the thing itself may be obtained though the *interpretations* disagree.

Interestingly, when it arrives at the distinction between those who see the Eucharist as a means to unity and those who see it only as a result, when unity is achieved, the order of the report’s presentation is reversed. The position of those who hold that intercommunion is a positive step on the road to reunion do so—and this is stressed in the first sentence—because they feel it appropriate to the unity that already exists without losing sight of the goal of visible

unity in the future (120.155ff). This is the majority view and so the churches that see it as the fruit of unity not yet achieved are called the “others.” The majority opinion is stated this way: “[W]e affirm that intercommunion, when thus agreed without the sacrifice of principle, may properly and beneficially precede reunion” (121.156). Even when describing the alternate position, the hopeful plug is made that all the churches—excepting the Orthodox—admit to intercommunion at least in cases of “urgent need,” a phrase which receives no elaboration (122.160).

It is fair to say that the Lund Report goes beyond the Report on intercommunion in betraying a preference by Faith and Order for one perspective over another, that is, of intercommunion preceding reunion. Are the difficulties now simply overlooked at Lund. The perspective of Faith and Order has hardly swung that way at the Lund Conference. Yet the conscious shift of Faith and Order away from a solely comparative approach and the seeming majority of churches carrying a Reformed or Calvinistic theology of the Lord’s Supper are factors which are causing the shift to something other than a comparative approach. The impatience of the younger churches, and younger members, as noted in the *Intercommunion* report, is likely another catalyst.²⁰

The World Conference Report discusses also the problem of Communion Services at ecumenical gatherings and leaves the issue, with principles and suggestions, essentially unresolved. The suggestions made as far as intercommunion between the churches are ones which challenge them to relate Eucharist to baptism: Why cannot all participate who have been baptized? (122ff.) Can churches that demand strict doctrinal agreement perhaps see where their conditions for emergency situations might be broadened to regular practice? Though these

²⁰ *Intercommunion*, 22.

suggestions are made, Lund's discussion of intercommunion closes with an expression of the desire for further study and penitence for sinfulness in contributing to divisions (123.165) The Commission on Faith and Order had worked hard, both in preparation for Lund and on the *Intercommunion* text. As the Conference ended, there was still much to study in the way of intercommunion. Always pushing toward the goal of the visible unity of all the churches, Faith and Order could not abandon its mandate to see what role the Lord's Supper must play in this quest.

The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order, Montreal, 1963

Intercommunion as a subject is discussed briefly within the broader context of Montreal's resolution regarding communion services at ecumenical gatherings. Very simply, the two basic positions are given: intercommunion as a step along the way and means to unity versus the stand that intercommunion cannot occur until there is agreement in doctrine and ministry.²¹ As far as the ecumenical gatherings are concerned, it is advised that every effort be made so that all participants have opportunity to receive the Eucharist at some type of service. Also, there needs to be explicit recognition, both published and in a service of Preparation, of the differences which still remain to divide the churches and prevent them from full eucharistic sharing.²² Aside from keeping the topic alive, the Montreal Conference does not really add anything to the development of Faith and Order thinking on intercommunion. Following the increased convergence in such areas as the epicletic character of the Eucharist and its universal and eschatological dimensions at the Montreal Conference²³, a study of the Eucharist was undertaken

²¹ *Montreal*, 78.138-9.

²² *Ibid.*, 79ff.

²³ Gassman, *Documentary History*, 22.

at Aarhus in 1964. Through reaction and revision it became finalized in the form presented to the Commission on Faith and Order at its meeting in Bristol in 1967.

The Holy Eucharist (the Bristol Text), 1967

What is most germane to this study is the Appendix to the report, *The Holy Eucharist* in the report from Faith and Order's work in 1967 at Bristol. This Appendix deals expressly with the subject of intercommunion. Referring to the thesis of this essay, that a hermeneutical shift causes a change in the Faith and Order approach to intercommunion, that shift is first evident here. Four changes have occurred since Montreal which impact the discussion on intercommunion.²⁴ These are, briefly, (1) widening of ecumenical contacts which heighten the sense of division, especially at the Lord's Table; (2) liturgical and eucharistic renewal;²⁵ (3) decisions and plans of union making intercommunion possible between churches; (4) sociological pressures such as marriage, education and work which influence people living closer together. After listing these factors, this statement is made:

There is no fundamental change in the positions as they were formulated at Montreal, and this Theological Commission has not been able to bring them decisively nearer to one another. As they are discussed in this changed situation they appear, however, in a new light. Above all the foregoing considerations make clear the urgent need of a solution.²⁶

Nothing has changed as far as the conclusions regarding doctrine or order or the place of the Eucharist in the manifestation of visible unity. What *has* changed are the circumstances in which the churches find themselves, the world in which they live in and the way in which they live their lives. At its most basic this is an interpretive move. If the data has not changed, then something

²⁴ "Appendix to 'The Holy Eucharist'" in Gassman, *Documentary History*, 87.

²⁵ This is partly credited to the Second Vatican Council, *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

else has if different or new conclusions can be drawn from the same data. The comments in the Bristol document are evidence of a shift in the hermeneutics of Faith and Order work from a more modernist approach, which attempts to catalog and assess the data against an objective standard, to the more postmodern approach in which interpretation is consciously taking place from the perspective of the community and its experience and world.²⁷ (This shift in hermeneutics neatly coincides with a report on the very topic of hermeneutics and scripture in the same Bristol report, to be discussed further below.)²⁸ Without attempting to read too much into the Bristol statement, its literal interpretation suggests that there exists a new way to view the differences which can perhaps accommodate them. Part of the difficulty, recognized at Lund, is that to simply compare the belief systems of the different churches will no longer suffice to advance the cause of visible unity. If that is true, then the Faith and Order's work should have ended in an impasse. The fact that it did not means perhaps that a postmodern, perspectival, even pluralistic way of looking at the data was emerging, even if it was not explicitly acknowledged.²⁹ The last document devoted solely to intercommunion is the Louvain text; it provides evidence to bear out the above assertions.

The Bristol text suggests that as churches move toward the fullness of Christ in their experience of the Eucharist, the problem of intercommunion will move toward its solution.³⁰

²⁷ Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996). A comparison of the Faith and Order approach thus far and the shifts we observe may be analogous to that of the science described by Grenz on pages 54-55.

²⁸ "The Significance of the Hermeneutical Problem for the Ecumenical Movement," in *New Directions in Faith and Order*. Faith and Order Paper No. 50, (Geneva: WCC, 1968): 32-41, and the discussion below, p. 28ff.

²⁹ Though "postmodern" is not stated, the investigation of hermeneutical issues related to the ecumenical movement as a whole may have been long overdue. Faith and Order in fact recommends that a study on *ecumenical* hermeneutics be undertaken. This recommendation is first made at the Fifth World Conference; see *Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order, Santiago de Compostela, 1993, Message, Section Reports, Discussion Paper*, 29.31; 30.7.

³⁰ Gassman, 87.

Three considerations are offered for further study. The first suggestion is for a theological and sociological study of *disunity*. The points made under this heading include the importance of tradition over against mere confession of belief, formal recognition of intercommunion as sufficient to secure unity, the extent to which divisions are in the church or separate from it, and the limits and boundaries of the church. In short, the call is for a reassessment of the nature of the Christian *community*, especially as it gathers together in the ecumenical movement.³¹ The second mandate concerns the need for a study of the necessity and nature of the Ministry in general and the Episcopacy in particular. Again, the matters of order, real as they are, cannot be dodged. This suggestion entails the churches of differing ministry and polity to examine their practice and to see where the church exists and the valid ministry is carried out in the other churches. The final suggestion is to relate the readiness of the churches to recognize the Baptism of other churches but not the Eucharist.³² The Uppsala Assembly of the WCC in 1968 asked Faith and Order to study intercommunion again. The report was drafted with the help this time of Roman Catholics who were now participants in Faith and Order. The report was taken up by the Louvain Commission meeting in 1971 and is the last major text dealing exclusively with intercommunion. Since then, intercommunion is still the goal, but without being considered independently from the work of Faith and Order altogether.³³

*Beyond Intercommunion: On the Way to Communion in the Eucharist (Louvain) 1971*³⁴

³¹ *Ibid.*, 88.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ For the preceding, Gassman, 22-23.

³⁴ In this section the page numbers in parentheses refer to the pages of Gassman, *Documentary History*. This is a more readily accessible volume than the Louvain Report itself.

As at Bristol, new situations at the time the study is picked up again cause new fruit to be born, at least in the eyes of the Commission (89). The Eucharist is affirmed, as always, as being at the center of the life of the church. The opening paragraphs detail the two basic positions: those who see the Eucharist as sign and reality of the church's unity and those churches which consider it as the means to that unity. Then the following sentence stands out as quite a contrast to what was expressed at the time of Lund:

This study starts from the recognition that *both of these are largely right*, paradoxical as that may sound, and seek to discover how this can be understood and practiced (89; emphasis added).

It can be said here that the shift is complete. As in the Bristol text, but much more detailed here, the world situation in which the churches find themselves is enumerated. The entrance of the Roman Catholic Church has provided the impetus for Faith and Order to finally consider the whole problem in all its fullness (89). To list briefly, such items as the Second Vatican Council, the Arnoldshain Theses, West African union plans, local ecumenical expression, the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity's increasing celebration by common worship services, increased Christian cooperation against hunger, ignorance and a host of other social ills—all these and more are examples of the changing world in which the church finds itself (90-91).

The Louvain text seeks to spell out some of the theological perspectives which will make advancement in intercommunion possible. The first is the idea of *communion* itself as a theological concept (92ff.). Communion is eschatological: it brings the Kingdom of God, inspiring conversion and reconciliation. It is kerygmatic, realizing among Christians their faith. Communion is sacramental, bringing to the world the Holy Spirit's work through Christ's chosen means. Communion is ministerial, holding up both the royal priesthood and the apostolic ministry for both are involved in it. It is missionary because it calls each person in every place to be a minister of Christ in the world. Finally, communion is cosmic, that is, in it Christ

transforms all things as he acts as high priest. This is mainly a summary of the many ways in which Communion affects the church and the world through the people who gather around the altar.

In the next section theological issues are put forth for further consideration. In making many of these statements, Faith and Order has definitely departed from its earlier method of candid acknowledgement of agreements and differences and the search to arbitrate between them, seeking the truth. At least three of these points raised are explained with statements that demonstrate convergence, paradox or, as noted before, a new way of doing interpretation on the data. For example there is a perceived progress within the Faith and Order texts regarding differences on eucharistic doctrine such as the epiclesis, real presence of Christ and eucharistic sacrifice. The challenge to the churches in the wake of such progress is this:

Those engaged in the teaching processes of the Churches, from Sunday schools to the training of the clergy, will want to look over their materials and ensure that these teach no longer *one partial view against another but the fulness of truth that is now available* (93; emphasis added).

What were once seen as differences are no longer seen as such but are now perceived as different portions of one truth. Hermeneutically speaking, churches are asked to contribute interpretation and understanding borne from their particular perspectives, as a contribution to the whole.

Another example is the eschatological character of the Eucharist. Because it calls our attention to the final judgement it calls into question those “lesser acts of judgement” that separated fellowships would dare to undertake (94). Aside from calling into question what some churches would regard as pastoral responsibility in administering the Lord’s Supper, this view dissolves barriers not by coming to agreement but because they are simply removed by the power of the Eucharist. We have indicated before how the Faith and Order documents gently affirm the view

that the Eucharist is the means to unity over the view that it is the expression of unity given.

Here it comes out clearer than ever:

The distinction has often been drawn between those Churches which see the eucharist as the sign of unity once given and those who see it as a means of restoring that unity. Now it is increasingly known to be both; rather than holding out for their particular and polemic standpoint the faithful Christians are those who try to hold both in balance, taking from each what is true and appropriate for the particular moment on the ecumenical way (94).

It sounds as if there is a pool of truth from which the churches may all draw and receive what they need for their particular place in time. It is as if the language used in the document is intended to bring about the change in perspective, the actual change in the reality of the divided churches.³⁵ The situation has certainly changed since *Intercommunion* was presented to the Lund Conference. Yet only 20 years had elapsed. It seems that there is a definite behind-the-scenes shift in the hermeneutics of Faith and Order's work. Again, the fact that this paradigm shift exists is either not recognized or not acknowledged by those involved in the studies.

In the section on eucharistic practice, the terminology is changed once again.

Communion is the term used to describe the full unconditional communion that is the goal of the ecumenical movement. *Admission* means by one church of another church's members. *Limited admission* is for exceptional cases in a narrow sense and in a broad sense because all baptized should participate. *General admission* means any open invitation to members of other churches. *Reciprocal admission* is either intercommunion practiced by geographically distant churches or the relationship between churches on their way to full organic union. *Intercelebration* is the mutual exchange of ministers able to celebrate the sacraments. Having come to the end of the road as far as the intercommunion terminology goes, it seems that *intercommunion* as a term can

³⁵ See Grenz, 42 and James Voelz, *What Does This Mean?* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1995), Chapter 12.

best be equated with what Lutherans have called “altar fellowship”, that is, unity and sharing in the administration and reception of the Means of Grace, specifically the Lord’s Supper. Such fellowship recognizes that what is taking place comes from the Lord’s hand and first belongs to him. We are made a part of it but can damage that fellowship by false doctrine.³⁶

The Louvain text on intercommunion marks the end of a chronologically brief, but theologically challenging era of study on the subject. Indeed a shift in interpretation has occurred over time with regard to approaching doctrinal differences regarding the Eucharist. There is no one particular moment in which the hermeneutical shift occurs. Mainly the texts themselves show the beginnings of the shift in the Bristol document. The changeover is complete at Louvain. We have seen also that this shift, if not specifically theological—the data remained the same—has been a hermeneutical one which allows a different *interpretation* of the differences. In effect, the changes in the world view and situation have led to a convergence of theology which attempts to embrace all the views as correct in their own way. A similar function has been given to the word *koinonia* as a term used to describe the unity of the church and its ecclesiology.³⁷ Where has this taken the churches in the WCC? What have been the results of this intercommunion emphasis and study? How may we evaluate what has happened? These are questions addressed as we conclude this study.

INTERCOMMUNION AFTER LUND

Faith and Order Documents

³⁶ Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship*, 182.

³⁷ A representative selection of the large amount of literature on “koinonia” is available in the study document from the 1993 Faith and Order Conference: Thomas F. Best and Günther Gassman, ed., *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia: Official Report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order*, Faith and Order Paper no. 166 (Geneva: WCC, 1994).

At the 7th Assembly of the WCC in Canberra, 1991, the World Council adopted the statement *The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling*. The statement on church unity was authored by the Commission on Faith and Order as a new way of expressing the unity of the church. It describes six marks which identify the koinonia that is the goal of the WCC:

The unity of the church to which we are called is a koinonia given and expressed in the common confession of the apostolic faith; a common sacramental life entered by the one baptism and celebrated together in one eucharistic fellowship; a common life in which members and ministries are mutually recognized and reconciled; and a common mission witnessing to the gospel of God's grace to all people and serving the whole of creation.³⁸

This is a complete description of the visible unity of the church as the WCC understands it heading into the Third Millennium. The goal of intercommunion is still a part of that vision. The use of the word *koinonia* ("fellowship" or "communion") is an attempt to broaden the understanding to include all of the life of the church and the life of the world as well. The statement certainly brings with it the assumptions laid out in the convergence theology of the *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM)* text of 1982. This document, the most widely circulated³⁹ and received in Faith and Order's history has the goal of intercommunion lying underneath some of its statements, but there is little explicit in the document. Mostly related to intercommunion are two statements. One, in the text proper says that the sharing in the one bread and common cup "demonstrates and effects the oneness of the sharers with Christ and their fellow sharers in all times and places."⁴⁰ Another statement in the commentary on that paragraph calls into question the catholic integrity of the eucharist when it is denied to baptized members or

³⁸ "The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling," in Michael Kinnamon and Brian Cope, *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), 124.2.1

³⁹ Kinnamon and Cope, 129.

⁴⁰ *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper, no.111 (Geneva: WCC, 1982), 14.19.

their ministers by the same in another church.⁴¹ *BEM* outlines the convergence achieved up to its writing by the churches on the three doctrines in its title. Six volumes of responses from the churches are evidence of its wide reception but also an indicator that not everything as it is said in *BEM* is confessed by every church. The divisions between matters of faith and matters of order still exist but the movement by churches toward one another has been significant and is registered in the content of *BEM*.

Such convergence texts in Faith and Order, without the hoped-for reception by all the churches, has been the story of Faith and Order throughout its history. At Santiago, for the Fifth World Conference in 1993, the *growing* convergence is acknowledged. At the same time it is noted that the convergence to that time has still not reached a point in which eucharistic sharing (the most recent term meaning intercommunion) is allowed.⁴² (It is interesting that Section Three, which deals with the “Common Life in Christ,” that is, Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry and Ecclesiology is the section that recommends a study of ecumenical hermeneutics.)⁴³ This admission is a sign that the Commission on Faith and Order has finally recognized the underlying hermeneutical challenge in its work. And just recently, at long last it seems, Faith and Order has begun to address the issue of interpretation which has plagued it since its earliest days.⁴⁴

THE HERMENEUTICAL SHIFT IN FURTHER DETAIL

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 15, Comm.

⁴² *Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order, Report*, Faith and Order Paper, no. 164 (Geneva: WCC, 1993), 25.17.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 30.7

⁴⁴ *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels: Hermeneutical Reflections for a Growing Koinonia*, Faith and Order Paper, no. 182 (Geneva: WCC, 1998).

The purpose of the following section is to show that while hermeneutics *was* a topic of study and discussion, it was not understood in an overarching way as it is being applied today to the whole work of ecumenism and the search for unity in Faith and Order and the World Council of Churches. While the topic of hermeneutics itself has not been absent from the work of Faith and Order prior to the *Treasures in Earthen Vessels* text, the its discussion was limited by its relation only to biblical studies, exegesis and biblical authority issues in the movement.

The hermeneutical shift identified in the unfolding discussion of intercommunion is one which affected all of Faith and Order's work. The same shift can also be identified in corresponding documents on biblical interpretation both at Bristol, where the intercommunion study begins its shift, and at Louvain where the changeover is complete.⁴⁵ While that same move made in matters of biblical interpretation is instructive for illustrating the hermeneutical change that Faith and Order experienced in the late 1960s, it does not explain the reasons for that change any better than the intercommunion studies. This brief survey of the hermeneutics and scripture topics in Faith and Order from roughly the same times as the intercommunion material is offered as evidence of the same hermeneutical shift demonstrated by the intercommunion materials.

This survey of material begins with the Ecumenical Study Conference held at Wadham College (Oxford) in 1949, with a document entitled, *Guiding Principles for the Interpretation of the Bible*. This report is quite favorable to the claim that there *can* be a common understanding of Scripture. It sets forth the theological presuppositions necessary to properly interpret scripture. These include such items as the priority of beginning study with Scripture, of seeing

⁴⁵ Flesseman-van Leer, E. *The Bible, It's Authority and Interpretation in the Ecumenical Movement*. Faith and Order Paper, no. 99 (Geneva: WCC, 1980). This book contains the texts of several key Faith and Order Reports on Scripture as well as a good summary essay which analyzes the material.

the Bible as God's Word which confronts man, the center of all Scripture being Jesus Christ and the unity between the Old and New Testaments.⁴⁶ The Bible is seen as the beginning of interpretation for understanding current social and political issues.⁴⁷ The report concludes with a statement that acknowledges the causes of diverging interpretations:

It is agreed that in applying the biblical message to our day, interpreters diverge because of differing doctrinal and ecclesiastical traditions, differing ethical, political, and cultural outlooks, differing geographical and sociological situations, differing temperaments and gifts. It is, however, an actual experience within the ecumenical movement, that when we meet together, with presuppositions of which we may largely be unconscious, and bring these presuppositions to the judgement of Scripture, some of the very difficulties are removed which prevent the Gospel from being heard.⁴⁸

In short, the Bible itself is capable of overcoming the diversity of presuppositions because it is the Word of God which transcends such divisions. Such a text as the Wadham report can be evaluated in our Missouri Synod circles quite favorably, just as the 1951 intercommunion report was.

The Montreal Conference of Faith and Order in 1963 proposed a new way of thinking about Scripture and Tradition. Capital "T" Tradition was defined as "God's revelation and self-giving in Christ, present in the life of the Church."⁴⁹ Scripture is understood to be the written form of the Tradition. Little "t" tradition means the diversity of forms of expressions and the separate communions which search out the Tradition from Scripture. This is done in various ways, each of which involves a hermeneutical key to find Tradition within the tradition. What is

⁴⁶ "Guiding Principles for the Interpretation of the Bible (1949)," in Flesseman-van Leer, 13-14.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁹ "Scripture, Tradition and Traditions (1963)," in Flesseman-van Leer, 20-21.

particularly sought in the Montreal text is the way in which modern biblical scholarship can aid in discerning the Tradition within the Scriptures. Further thinking about this hermeneutical problem is called for.⁵⁰ Further studies from Faith and Order which deal with the issue of hermeneutics will, following Montreal's urging, focus on hermeneutics as it is applied in biblical exegesis and interpretation. Specific guidelines are given in the Bristol text on hermeneutics and the authority of Scripture is examined at Louvain. It is especially in these latter two texts that we have evidence of the hermeneutical shift in Faith and Order's work.

The main theological movement in the Bristol document, "The Significance of the Hermeneutical Problem for the Ecumenical Movement," is one away from discussing theological presuppositions to examine actual exegetical method. In terms of exegetical procedure, historical and literary criticism are offered as the normal and proper way of interpreting Scripture. The establishment of a common exegetical procedure is suggested as a way of advancing Christian unity.⁵¹ More far-reaching than simply support for the application of higher-critical biblical scholarship, however, was the affirmation of the diversity extant in Scripture. It is this acknowledgement of diversity which demonstrates the hermeneutical move witnessed with the intercommunion material. Witness how the Bristol text on hermeneutics speaks of prior approaches to scripture within the ecumenical movement:

When the World Council of Churches was founded, there was a strong hope, confirmed by facts, that in the different churches and theological schools the Bible would be read more and more along the same lines...In its main trend this conceived of the Bible as a unity, whose centre was the divine acts of salvation interpreted by a more or less harmonious community of witnesses. It found in the

⁵⁰ Ibid., 23.

⁵¹ "Introduction," in Flesseman-van Leer, 5.

Bible a common message which seemed to throw light upon all kinds of problems with which modern man had to wrestle.⁵²

This paragraph, when considered in the context of the ecumenical movement's success or progress by 1967, begs the question of whether or not such an understanding of scripture has worked. Indeed it has not, and the reason is found in a recognition of the diversity in the Bible, not any unity.

Now, two decades later, attention is increasingly drawn to the diversity amongst or even contradiction between biblical writers...As a consequence the hope that the churches would find themselves to have in the near future the basis of a common understanding of the one biblical message has been fading...However, these developments may also contribute to a deeper understanding of unity...[I]nsofar as our confessional divisions are related to different reading of the scriptures the hermeneutical debate helps us to see that similar differences are already present within the canonical books themselves. The awareness of the differences within the Bible will lead us towards a deeper understanding of our divisions and will help us to interpret them more readily as possible and legitimate interpretations of the one and the same Gospel.⁵³

This is an important passage, for it cuts to the heart of the matter of why a common understanding of Scripture is neither possible nor helpful for establishing the unity of the church. Also apparent is the move away from the search for mere unity, to a recognition that a certain amount of diversity is both real and helpful. This move away from confessing the unity of Holy Scripture is, under the heading of hermeneutics, an echo of the position taken with regard to intercommunion in the same Bristol report.⁵⁴ Just as the data and arguments had not changed regarding intercommunion, but were reinterpreted, so the data from scripture is reinterpreted, with the added assertion that the unity that was previously seen is not really solid, that it is in fact

⁵² "The Significance of the Hermeneutical Problem in the Ecumenical Movement (1967)," in Flesseman-van Leer, 40.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ See above, pp. 20-22.

diversity and contradiction which prevail in the Bible. There is a new way of looking at the issues involved in intercommunion; there is a new way of understanding the nature of scriptural diversity in relation to the unity of the church. With regard to the Bristol text, it is evident that Faith and Order has moved away from a position that might be received favorably in the LCMS (the Wadham report) to one in which diversity and plurality are looming. Again, in a parallel fashion to the intercommunion texts, this move is confirmed by what is said at Louvain.

The report issued at Louvain is entitled "The Authority of the Bible." Urged by the WCC's Assembly at Uppsala in 1968 and drawing upon the work of previous documents, especially strands from Bristol, the Louvain look at scripture deals with the nature of authority which the Bible has in the church. The authority of the Bible as expressed at Louvain is chiefly one which is relational and exists as it is experienced by human beings interacting with scripture. Put negatively, the Bible has no intrinsic or static authority within itself.⁵⁵

Even more directly related to hermeneutical issues is the way in which the Louvain report touches upon interpretation of scripture and relates it to current issues and situations. The following words are from the Wadham report, which the reader will recall was a report affirming the unity and of scripture and the theological presuppositions for correct interpretation:

It is agreed that one must begin with a direct study of the biblical text in relation to a given problem; otherwise the general principles which we establish will reflect more the presuppositions of our own time than the message of the Bible. Only then may we safely deduce applications for our own situation.⁵⁶

In the Louvain text, the interpretations which occur in the biblical text themselves are recognized as not able to be adopted in contemporary times, though the challenges faced by interpreters in

⁵⁵ Flesseman-van Leer, 6.

⁵⁶ "Guiding Principles (1949)," in Flesseman-van Leer, 15.

our different time frames are similar. In fact, Louvain reverses the order in which interpretation and situation effect each other.

If the process of contemporary interpretation is seen as the prolongation of the interpretive process which is recognizable in the Bible, then considerable importance must be attached to the situation at any give time in our own interpretation of the scriptures. Just as the biblical writers responded to a particular situation, so contemporary interpretation is also determined by our own situation...Of course the text has its own weight...But the situation with its given elements and open problems determines the perspective within which the biblical witness must be read and interpreted. The reports of the groups make it quite clear that such situation-conditioned hermeneutic perspectives are inescapable.⁵⁷

From these words it is clear that the text no longer drives interpretation, as it was once reported, but now the situation drives the interpretation. Such perspectivalism is a mark of a postmodern move in interpretation but is not incorrect in and of itself.⁵⁸ What seems to be lacking in the texts on intercommunion and scripture is any way of judging between the diversity of interpretations that will inevitably present themselves. No longer is Holy Scripture understood as the objective basis for truth. Rather, truth is established from the diverse situations and perspectives which the churches bring to their interaction with one another.

The transition to a postmodern understanding of hermeneutics is not in and of itself bad, if controls are put into place to assure that it does not mean the switch to an "anything goes" or "everybody is right" approach. It is these negative results, however, which are characteristic in the work of Faith and Order and it is only recently that the topic of hermeneutics has been proposed as an overarching perspective from which to view all of the work of ecumenism. This is what the *Treasure in Earthen Vessels* text attempts. But this overarching awareness was lacking in the twenty years when the shift really occurred, even though "hermeneutics" was

⁵⁷ "The Bible, Its Authority and Interpretation (1971)," in Flesseman-van Leer, 52.

⁵⁸ Cf. Voelz, 208-9.

discussed in connection with scripture. The shift to a postmodern hermeneutics that was unrecognized in Faith and Order meant that many negative aspects of the same would show themselves in the work of Faith and Order and go unchecked. The greatest of these is an unchecked and unqualified pluralism, both among Christian confessions and even among Christian and non-Christian religions.

The above discussion of scripture and hermeneutics is brief because the intent in this paper is not to study this topic per se. These texts dealing with scripture and hermeneutics are nevertheless genuine evidence of the same hermeneutical shift seen through the intercommunion study. They provide additional and direct data because they do actually speak of hermeneutics. But it is not a hermeneutics applied to the entire work of Faith and Order, or even more broadly the ecumenical quest for visible unity. That application of hermeneutics is suggested in the 1998 document on ecumenical hermeneutics mentioned before.⁵⁹ The brevity of this essay precludes a detailed look at the specifics of the shift in Faith and Order, the particulars of its effects or even the causes. One might generally observe that the shift, coming as it does in the late 1960s, reflects not only developments in the church but many non-theological factors contributed by the great social changes of that decade.

One avenue of exploration—certainly not the only one—might be briefly mentioned as worthy of pursuit. Konrad Raiser, in his important book on the paradigm shift in the ecumenical movement, identifies as valuable the increasingly trinitarian framework of ecumenical action over against the Christocentric-universalist model which tended to prevail until the later 1960s.⁶⁰ The place of other religions in relation to Christianity began to be explored at the WCC Uppsala

⁵⁹ *Treasures in Earthen Vessels*

⁶⁰ Konrad Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition*, (Geneva: WCC, 1991).

Assembly in 1968. Raiser tends toward pluralism by seeking to place dialogue not as a means to an end, but as the way of life itself. (He even later goes so far as to suggest an ecumenical hermeneutic which can accommodate what is traditionally known as syncretism.)⁶¹ This trend toward pluralism is one fruit of a postmodern hermeneutic which has grown in the ecumenical movement. It is a development which must be watched with interest.⁶² A pointed response to such thinking comes from Leslie Newbigin. Speaking specifically with reference to Raiser's view on dialogue as the "sharing of life" he says:

This is uncomfortably reminiscent of a great deal of contemporary talk about the 'richness of diversity' which is proper in respect of some aspects of human life, but not proper when it is merely an expression of indifference to truth. In the contemporary breakdown of the self-confidence of 'modernity' and the widespread acceptance of a total fragmentation in human perception (a reaction against the Enlightenment project for the universal rule of human 'reason') this kind of language must be challenged. From the beginning, I believe, there has been at the heart of the life of the WCC the challenge to accept mutual correction in the light of God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ as witnessed in the Scriptures. *If this mutual correction gives way to the relativism of post-modern culture and dialogue is seen simply as the 'sharing of life,' something has gone badly wrong.*⁶³

This statement serves as a powerful reminder that the ecumenical movement, especially in Faith and Order, once set out to seek agreement in the truth, an effort carried out by those in the many participating churches dedicated to doing so. Newbigin's remark also helps to identify and clarify what has been seen in the study of intercommunion which has been undertaken, namely,

⁶¹ Konrad Raiser, "Beyond Tradition and Context: In Search of an Ecumenical Framework of Hermeneutics," *International Review of Mission* 80 (Jul-Oct 1991): 347-354.

⁶² As an illustration of the strain of this pluralism on the World Council of Churches, see the reaction to the plenary presentation by Prof. Chung Hyun Kyung at the Canberra Assembly, in Michael Kinnamon, ed., *Signs of the Spirit: Official Report, Seventh Assembly, World Council of Churches*, (Geneva: WCC, 1991), esp. 280-83.

⁶³ Leslie Newbigin, "(Book Review) Ecumenism in Transition: A Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement," in *one in Christ* 29.3 (1993): 269-275. Emphasis added.

that it began with an honest appraisal of differences with a view toward seeking agreement in the truth. From that point, it is clear, the movement has been away from that project to a goal which seeks merely to unite the churches in perpetual dialogue without resolution regarding the truth, but in which all participants offer their perspective to make up the whole truth. This is the sad result of the hermeneutical shift which has been identified here.

CONCLUSION

The thesis of this paper is that a hermeneutical shift occurred in the Faith and Order movement which caused it to leave behind the task of assessing agreements and differences with the goal of seeking agreement in doctrinal truth among the churches, specifically, those differences related to the eucharist and intercommunion. Instead of this agreement in the truth of doctrine, an approach to differences emerged which embraces them as mutual portions of the truth represented in different perspectives. The conclusion of the pre-Lund Report was that the problem of intercommunion was a difficult one and could not be forced by overlooking the serious and legitimate differences in doctrine and practice which divide the churches with regard to the eucharist. The Report *Intercommunion*, while being frank and open was also openly hopeful that the positions could be reconciled somehow. That reconciliation of doctrinal and practical positions would happen but it was to wait until the ecumenical hermeneutic—as yet unidentified—shifted to one which is postmodern (pluralistic and perspectival) in character. This change is evident at first in the Bristol document's appendix on intercommunion. The final conclusion to the study and the final evidence of the shift was the Louvain text *Beyond Intercommunion*. Here the once mutually exclusive claims are seen as complimentary, each expressing some portion of the truth and open to acceptance by all churches in their particular circumstance. This approach has been modeled over and over again at the bilateral level where

churches historically divided by matters of doctrine have, without denying the truth of their position, newly understood each other as possessing some aspect of truth which compliments and enhances their own.⁶⁴ As has been shown, this move is a hermeneutical one and it is only now being recognized by the Faith and Order theologians who continue to work on the task of visible unity.

It is encouraging that ecumenical work and study are finally being seen in the context of the interpretation that goes on, not only in the churches but also in the ecumenical movement itself. Thus Faith and Order says in its recent study of hermeneutics,

The ecumenical movement provides particular opportunities for the churches to reflect together on issues of interpretation and communication for the sake of ecclesial unity and the renewal of human community. But immediately it becomes clear that many Christian divisions are themselves based on conflicting interpretations of the texts, symbols and practices of the Christian faith. If we reflect together and agree on how traditions are to be interpreted, then the divisions of the churches – both those of longstanding character and new ones – might be better understood and even overcome.⁶⁵

It is Faith and Order's task now to examine the hermeneutical method not only of the individual churches or only in relation to biblical exegesis, but their own as well, as a unique body made up of the many churches. What conclusions this will bring about only time will tell. It is good to see that Faith and Order is now deliberately examining the interpretive task and studying carefully presuppositions and hermeneutical issues how those may be addressed, understood, tested and applied in the ongoing search for unity among the churches. How this will affect intercommunion remains to be seen. If through such hermeneutical study a move is made toward

⁶⁴ For example, such language is seen in the Lutheran-Reformed agreement entitled "A Common Calling," in *Ecumenical Proposals: Documents for Action by the 1997 Churchwide Assembly* (Minneapolis: Augsburg-Fortress, 1997).

⁶⁵ *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, 10.9.

seeking criterion by which to judge truth, and evaluating perspectives accordingly, that will be a good thing. If, however, such exploration of hermeneutical issues leads to increased pluralism, that will have a negative result. That is because the task is not merely to say that the problems Faith and Order faces are hermeneutical, but to also ask whether there is a proper hermeneutic or criterion by which differing interpretations may be ruled. Answering that question may yet determine how far afield Faith and Order will roam from its original, laudable goal of pursuing intercommunion between churches without compromising the truth.

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