Canadian Council of Churches

Introduction to the Working Papers on Doctrine

In the spring of 2007, the Faith and Witness Commission of the Canadian Council of Churches began a three-year dialogue on the nature and role of doctrine in the life of member Churches. Over the course of these three years, representatives of member Churches presented working papers of the position of their Church on the nature and role of doctrine or dogma in their respective Church. The presentations to the Commission were initially guided by four broad questions:

1. What is dogma or doctrine in your tradition?
2. What are considered to be doctrinal statements?
3. Who can make doctrinal statements?
4. What is the relation between doctrine and revelation?

As the experience of the dialogue deepened, three new questions began to take shape:

5. How does your tradition view the first seven ecumenical councils?
6. How does your tradition understand the reliability of Scripture?
7. What are those shared convictions without which the Church's mission would be seriously impaired, or even become impossible?

The papers gathered in this volume are the personal presentations made by members of the Commission, which served as the basis of the very rich discussions during the study period. The styles and methods of each presenter reflect the nature of his or her tradition, the point at which the Commission was engaged in the ongoing conversation, and the way in which the dialogue itself tends to enrich the self-understanding of the participants. Some papers deal with only the original questions, while others, later in the dialogue, also address some or all of the three new questions. Some presenters, coming from traditions that consider themselves "non-creedal", were surprised to discover they nevertheless had important contributions to make from the implicit "doctrines" of their own communities. Members from traditions with a strong commitment to doctrinal statements learned that a number of committed Christian communities function without formal creeds.

For a certain approach to dialogue, the fact that not everyone answered all the same questions could represent a limitation, but far from being a limitation this variety of styles, content and methods gave us a renewed understanding of the rich "ecology" of the Christian churches in Canada.

We must recognize that the Commission did not, on the basis of this dialogue, arrive at agreed positions on doctrine. Nevertheless, there emerged some interesting and fruitful convergences which merit further exploration. If we define doctrine broadly and functionally as "that which a Church must teach today to be authentic," then all the presenters agree that "doctrines" are the fruit of our attempt to put into human words the experience of the divine wisdom and will; doctrine is, in this sense, a response to God, reaching out to humanity through Jesus Christ. Though there may be little explicit commonality to be found on the specifics of the contents of doctrine of the member Churches, or the relation of doctrine to Scripture, to authority, and to the Christian experience over the centuries, the presentations capture a number of remarkable similarities in the process and struggle of formulating doctrine.

Every member Church holds to the necessity of some doctrine, explicit or

implicit, as a reference point. In all cases, one or more documents exist which lay out this doctrine, though the authority and form of these documents varies greatly. In all cases, Scripture, tradition, reason and religious experience interact in some way in the emergence of doctrine. Similarly, the role of some form of reception by the community of the faithful is a strong component of all of the traditions represented. Finally, the presenters of the papers agree that the fullness of truth resides in God alone, and that the truth of doctrines is eschatological, that is, oriented to a future complete fulfillment or plenitude.

There were, not surprisingly, wide divergences on how doctrine is appropriately formulated, on where authority to teach authentically resides, on whether there is a hierarchy of truths within doctrine, on the specific relationship between doctrine and revelation, on the nature of authority which doctrine carries in the life of individual Christians and communities, and on the range of persons and situations to which doctrine applies.

The one doctrine held by all the Churches represented is that faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour **is the** root of all other doctrine, though the manner in which each conceives how doctrine derives from faith in Christ **as** fundamental to Christianity is different. This basic convergence gives rise to an important point about the process of the dialogue over the last three years: though there are certain similarities and wide divergences on the level of ideas and definitions, a survey of all the papers together reveals a significant aesthetic-dramatic or existential-experiential *gestalt* that holds all the presentations together: all of the interventions highlight the living and dynamic reality of God labouring in history, through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, as foundational to doctrine. Doctrine happens; it is to be done; it is truth practiced by and embodied in persons and communities. Even traditions that have minimal or even no formal doctrinal statements express a living link to Christ, an experience of the Holy Spirit giving shape to Christian living and Christian community, and the significance for worship and service of the Gospel narrative in all its richness. It involves a living discovery of the Holy Spirit in the present time, pointing to Christ, the Word made flesh. This is a striking instance of the adage *lex orandi, lex credendi*. Within this *gestalt*, this concrete-existential form of doctrine as *praxis* in worship and service, there are some important themes and relations that return as a kind of refrain: doctrine as exegesis of Scripture; doctrine as the expression of revelation; the "sacramental" or "iconic" proportion and disproportion between human words and divine truth; doctrine as confession of faith and worship.

These themes and relations might serve as a starting point for further bilateral dialogues. We have discovered areas where potential agreement can be sought, explored, and tested, "proofed" by the fire of a more focused exchange between two ecumenical partners. In this sense, we offer our efforts as a kind of ground clearing, in the style of the medieval encyclopaedias or the anthologies of patristic sayings that collected the data out of which the great theological developments of the East and West were born.

The Faith and Witness Commission established an editorial sub-committee to prepare the working papers presented during the consideration of the issue of doctrine. The members of the sub-committee offer these introductory remarks as an orientation to the collection of working papers.

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