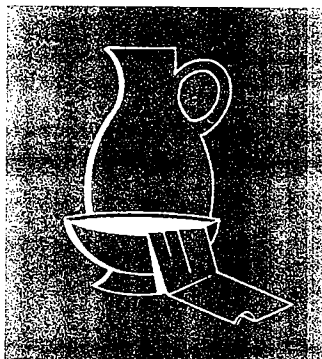
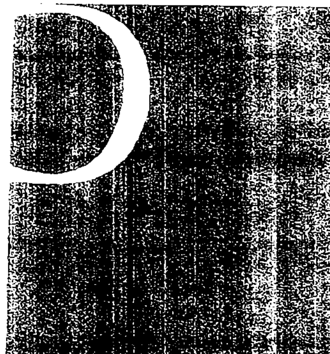
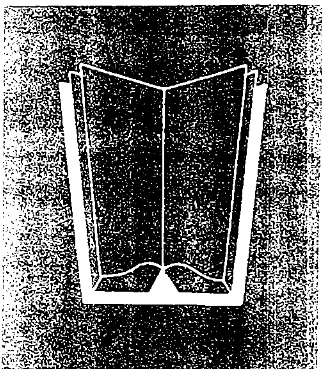
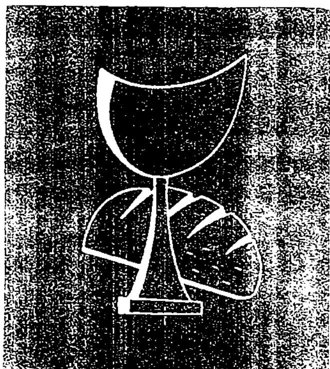
Committed Conversation

Joseph D. Small

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Introduction

In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin warned against speculating on who might be destined for eternal life. God alone knows, wrote Calvin, and in that secret knowledge lies God's work of election. We, on the other hand, are properly occupied not in numbering the elect but in considering the unity of the church, "for no hope of future inheritance remains to us unless we have been united with all other members under Christ, our Head" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960], 4.1.2). John Calvin portrayed the church as an "outward help" for believers in fostering and nurturing a personal faith that is otherwise threatened by our predilections to ignorance, sloth, and fickleness of disposition (*Institutes*, 4.1.1).

Joseph D. Small turns our attention to the unity of the church in an age when institutional Christianity is experienced by many members as more a hindrance than a help. Unity is not easily discerned where polarities first capture the attention, and Dr. Small describes the dangers associated with dualism in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). He characterizes the threat of division in "a heterogeneous denomination composed of relatively homogenous congregations," in which conflicts break out precisely at those structural connecting points intended to assure cohesion.

Dr. Small serves the church well in his analysis of today's widespread fears and suspicions arising from disagreement among believers; once again, particular groups are tempted not to number others among the elect. He provides an even greater service in recalling our attention to the defining vision of the church in the New Testament: a church which is truly Christ's body, empowered by the Spirit, the gift and calling of God. On a practical level, he lists ecumenical and denominational resources providing guidelines for

dialogue among Christians. I am grateful to Joe Small for the irenic role he is playing in ongoing Presbyterian conversations, and for his commitment to the unity of Christ's church.

—Clifton Kirkpatrick, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Church Fears

The number 2 is a very dangerous number. . . . Attempts to divide anything into two ought to be regarded with much suspicion.[1] C. P. Snow's observation rings true in Presbyterian ears. We are painfully aware of the dangers of dividing into two. The divisive issues of the past decade—ordination of gay and lesbian persons, abortion, Re-Imagining, and more—have been made intractable by their reduction to two opposing positions. Even our best-intentioned discussions reinforce polar divisions by guaranteeing a voice to "both sides of the issue" . . . as if any issue worth discussing has only two sides. Our polity presses us toward juridical dualisms as every matter is reduced to a vote: yes or no, up or down. Having divided ourselves into two camps, we should not be surprised by the absence of common ground.

The number *2* is a very dangerous number, and yet there may be advantages to certain ways of devising dualisms. Dividing an issue into two can focus stark alternatives in ways that open up multiple possibilities rather than confine the issue to simple alternatives. When we recognize a dichotomy as an artificial construct, not a description of reality, we can allow it to function as a caricature that reveals certain aspects of our situation through exaggeration. An avowedly artificial framework may provide the space within which we can work to discover the complexities of the actual situation before us.

The number *2* is a very dangerous, but sometimes useful number. So, with all of the appropriate disclaimers in mind, there may be some value in dividing Presbyterians into two based on what we fear in the church: some of us fear *oppressive orthodoxy* while others of us fear

promiscuous pluralism. One persistent Presbyterian dread is the emergence of an oppressive orthodoxy, demanding that beliefs and practices conform to narrow, rigid definitions. Another Presbyterian terror is the spread of promiscuous pluralism, collapsing all standards of belief and practice into a morass of relativism.

A pernicious aspect of these fears is that they are mutually reinforcing. Those who fear the emergence of an oppressive orthodoxy respond by celebrating diversity. Their encouragement of variety and innovation in faith and life leads those who fear the spread of promiscuous pluralism to champion unity in faith and life. Of course, this strikes the first group as an imposition of grinding uniformity, which encourages more openness to even broader diversity. But this only fuels the fear of indiscriminate pluralism, which encourages stronger efforts to establish common convictions. Thus the whole process cycles through the church again and again.

The interplay of fears is most pronounced at the denominational level while it is least apparent in congregations. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is a heterogeneous denomination composed of relatively homogeneous congregations. Most congregations share broad patterns of conviction about faith and life, while diverse patterns of conviction clash in presbyteries and at the denominational level. This does not mean that congregations are conflict free, of course, or that the denomination is bereft of shared convictions and values. Congregations have their share of disagreements, antagonisms, and rivalries. Pastors, sessions, and individual members have to work at repairing broken relationships and sustaining harmony. However, congregational conflict tends to be environmental and personal rather than theological. Theological differences emerge at the presbytery and national level, often leading to conflict and giving rise to contending fears of oppressive orthodoxy and promiscuous pluralism.

It is not surprising, then, that church fears are most apparent among ministers. Pastors, specialized clergy, and governing body officials are particularly attentive to developments in church and culture, alert to signs of oppressive orthodoxy or symptoms of promiscuous pluralism. Evidence of either danger leads to

organizational conflict. This does not mean that ministers battle while members live in harmonious bliss, or that ministers care about the faith while members live in intellectual indifference. However, ministers are the main players in the governing bodies of the church. They tend to lead in the formulation of issues and in the formation of means to deal with issues.

The dynamics of church fears—denominational rather than congregational, ministerial rather than member oriented—may help to explain widespread congregational withdrawal from historic patterns of Presbyterian "connectionalism." Since the very connecting points are conflict riddled, fear driven, and clergy dominated, it is little wonder that congregations are content to limit their interest, energy, time, and money to the life of the local community of faith.

Fear of Oppressive Orthodoxy

Many Presbyterians, including a large segment of the current leadership generation, fear the emergence of an oppressive orthodoxy. They are apprehensive that appeals for unity mask demands for theological conformity to rigid definitions of Christian faith. They suspect that calls for shared values camouflage insistence on ethical conformity to narrow patterns of moral behavior. For this segment of the church, the perceived threat to Christian faith and life is the willful imposition of antiquated theology and obsolescent morality.

This persistent fear of oppressive orthodoxy may grow from early experiences in church or from indirect experiences mediated by preceding generations. Some Presbyterians had to liberate themselves from narrow systems of belief that inhibited honest faith. Others were subjected to theological hostility in presbytery examinations, or denigrated for their "liberal" views. The experiences of seminarians and candidates from the time when Westminster was the sole confessional standard—stories remembered and handed on—reinforce anxiety about the dangers of rigid orthodoxy. Underlying all of this is the enduring legacy of the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy: the continuing fear that theology itself is dangerous. It is often assumed

that theology demands doctrinal uniformity, thus creating destructive controversy that cripples the church's capacity to carry out its mission. The old motto "theology divides, mission unites" lives on in the church's subconscious, feeding fears of oppressive orthodoxy.

The experiences and transmitted memories of many Presbyterians are also connected with a perception of oppressive ortho*praxis*. Many Presbyterians had to liberate themselves from ecclesial patterns of conventional morality and pharisaic pieties. Sabbath restrictions, forced abstinences, bourgeois conformities, and dull devotional rituals formed a pattern of restrictive Christian practices that had to be discarded so that personal spirituality could flourish. Presbyterian prohibitions on issues ranging from drinking and smoking to abortion and divorce were perceived as exalting law at the expense of love, communal restriction at the expense of personal faithfulness.

One result of past restrictions on faith and practice is the widespread fear of a recurrence of theological and moral "orthodoxy" that would limit the capacity of Christians to believe and act freely, unbound by oppressive communal strictures. Thus, Presbyterian support for events such as the Re-Imagining conferences, pro-choice policies on abortion and other moral issues, and full rights for gay and lesbian people in the church are understood as battles against doctrinal uniformity, moral compulsion, and rigid exclusion. Presbyterians who fear "oppressive orthodoxy" are naturally antagonistic to persons and groups that seem to question the value of theological diversity, moral flexibility, and ecclesial inclusivity.

Fear of Promiscuous Pluralism

The inclusive views of a large segment of the church clash with the fears of other Presbyterians. As this group looks at society, and at the church within the society, it fears the spread of promiscuous pluralism, the apparent collapse of any standards of belief and practice. Doctrinal diversity and moral latitude are not viewed as expressions of Christian freedom, but as evidence of the church's captivity to the culture. For this second segment of the church, the greatest threat to

Christian faith and life is the willful abandonment of the church's theological tradition and moral responsibility.

Fear of promiscuous pluralism may grow from the experience of a generation that has witnessed the weakening of communal identity among Presbyterians, among mainline churches generally, perhaps even among large segments of the American Christian community. These Presbyterians perceive that the church has surrendered theological clarity while tolerating the broadest range of religious beliefs. Even the loose restrictions and latitude of the *Book of Confessions* seem to be ignored as seminaries and presbyteries evidence the virtual disappearance of confessional claims. Many in this group despair at the church's unwillingness even to acknowledge the possibility of "essential tenets" that could be shared by a theologically responsible community of faith.

Theological pluralism seems to be accompanied by unprecedented moral personalism, so that shared Christian norms have vanished in a sea of group rights and personal choice. Many Presbyterians believe that the church has become captive to the culture, following the lead of generic liberal morality rather than living out a distinctly Christian witness to a society that has lost its way in a forest of illusory freedoms.

The result is another group of Presbyterians—often outside the leadership circle—that is apprehensive about theological anarchy. These Presbyterians fear that a broad diversity of convictions makes impossible the development of shared beliefs that are essential to the formation of community. They also worry that the celebration of personal choice makes impossible the development of shared practices that shape life in a recognizably Christian community.

Unity and Diversity

It is not surprising that celebrants of diversity and champions of unity play into the worst fears of the other. One group hears every call for theological integrity and communal morality as a new inquisition of the Christian Right, while the other group sees every new

theological possibility and every assertion of personal moral choice as another stage in the loss of authentic Christian identity.

What neither group appreciates sufficiently is that they both are *points* on a continuum of unity and diversity in the church's faith and life. They are points on the continuum, not poles at the extremes. Champions of unity in faith and practice are not seeking to impose uniformity on others or on themselves. Celebrants of diversity are not open to any and every thought or behavior. The two groups are at different points on the unity-diversity continuum, but both are on the same continuum. Moreover, each has insights that are needed by the other.

Although the two groups of Presbyterians are not "pure types" at the extremes, they sometimes speak and act as if they were. The formation of coalitions and networks institutionalizes antagonisms, giving political shape to adversarial relationships. The consequent rhetoric of polar opposition obscures relationships between the two, concealing both similarities and possible points of mutual enrichment. For instance, neither of the two groups is sufficiently aware of ironies at the heart of its own position.

Celebrants of diversity can be rigid in their exclusion of persons and groups that do not share certain pluralist beliefs and practices! Thus, whoever transgresses the norms of inclusive language, proclaims christological exclusivism, or opposes the ordination of gay and lesbian persons is considered to be outside the pale of acceptable diversity. Even pluralists have their orthodoxies; even inclusivists exclude.

Champions of unity can be adamant in their assertion of freedom from common norms of belief and morality whenever these norms appear to restrict congregational or personal-pastoral freedoms. Thus, they ignore forms of common worship, neglect patterns of mutual responsibility and accountability in presbyteries and the General Assembly, and resist the ecumenical impulse toward the unity of the one holy catholic and apostolic church. Even orthodox Presbyterians have their heterodoxies; even dogmatists give some latitude.

Limited self-awareness does more than blind each group to ironies within their positions. Restricted consciousness also closes both of them to ways their own position can be enriched by the other. Because celebrants of diversity do not understand the character of the limits they place on acceptable faith and faithfulness, they are unable to appreciate or to learn from those who cherish faith's center and appreciate boundaries to faithfulness. Similarly, because champions of unity do not understand the quality of space they give to individual conscience and preference, they are unable to learn from those who treasure faith's freedom and respect Christian liberty.

Celebrating Diversity

Diversity in the church's faith and life is a genuine expression of the church's catholicity. Embodied diversity brings strengths to the church that are vital to its apostolicity. A Brief Statement of Faith confesses that the Holy Spirit gives the church courage "to hear the voices of peoples long silenced."[2] Surely the Spirit is giving us all ears to hear the voices of women, racial ethnic communities, and youth. We cannot imagine a church without the theological voices of Elizabeth Johnson and Gustavo Guttierez . . . without the moral insight of Gayraud Wilmore and Letty Russell . . . without the ecclesial leadership of Freda Gardiner and James Costen . . . without the fresh perspectives of Ellen Charry and Stephen Carter. It is no longer imaginable to live in a church that restricts intellectual and ecclesial leadership to white males because the life of the whole church—including the lives of white males—is enriched by the fullness of inclusion.

Furthermore, the practice of "openness" and "tolerance" expresses the reality of grace in Christian life. We are not justified by our accomplishments or by our convictions, but solely by the grace of God. So, too, ecclesial life is shaped by grace rather than worthiness, by openness rather than insularity. Genuine diversity is one manifestation of the gospel's imperative to love as we have been loved, accepting one another as Christ has accepted us. Recognizing the centrality of grace

always leads toward appropriate modesty that recognizes the possibility of faithfulness among those who express different patterns of Christian faith and life.

However, in spite of diversity's genuine catholicity and apostolicity, its celebrants are well aware that their commitment to inclusivity is not an uncontested value throughout the church. Threats to diversity are ever present, not least from forms of unbowed patriarchy. Reaction against different voices may even lead to the resurgent assertion of customary privilege. Thus, certain aspects of Re-Imagining have been used in attempts to discredit and repress all feminist theological thought. Similarly, the use of Marxist social analysis and assertions of "God's preferential option for the poor" have been seized upon as an excuse for the wholesale dismissal of liberation theologies.

Although the danger of an ecclesiastical takeover by the organized "religious right" is remote in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the experience of the Southern Baptist Convention should alert us to the real—if not the present—danger of intolerant suppression of any divergence from narrowly defined orthodoxy. Although organized efforts to influence and control key elements in church structures are not limited to the church's right wing, the visibility and modest success of conservatives and evangelicals raises the issue of "party politics" and the possibility of attempts to wield political power in the church.

Fear of oppressive orthodoxy is not irrational, even though it is often exaggerated. Thus, celebrants of diversity must guard against the imposition of uniformity. But they must also ensure that they do not become indiscriminate in the acceptance of any and every departure from the deep traditions of orthodox Christian doctrine and practice.

Championing Unity

Unity in the church's faith and life is a genuine expression of the church's oneness. Embodied unity is a powerful witness to the holiness of the faithful community. A Brief Statement of Faith confesses faith

in "the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel, whom alone we worship and serve."[3] God is who God is, not a montage of our diverse pictures of God. Christians claim that God has revealed Godself to us in the human life of Jesus the Christ and remains present with us in the Holy Spirit. Thus, the Theological Declaration of Barmen proclaims the one Word of God over against all competing words of our imagining.[4] Our unity is not in agreed-upon opinion, but in the Word made flesh.

We cannot imagine a church without the normative witness of scripture, the guidance of the confessions, and the deep strata of the historic tradition. The church's unity in faith is not a static abstraction, for it provides the present community of faith with a distinctive witness. Shared faith and common life generate a clear voice in a muddle of cultural confusion. The church's unity in faith is central to its unity in mission. If the church is to gain a hearing in a chaotic public square, it must have a distinct voice and a definable message.

However, in spite of unity's genuine oneness and holiness, its champions are well aware that their commitment to theological and moral accord is not an unchallenged value throughout the church. There are dangers to unity, not least from the ever-present reality of ecclesial accommodation to American cultural norms of personalism, privatism, and localism. Christian talk about justice is too easily reduced to the American system's assertion of competing rights. The church's proclamation of "the way, the truth, and the life" slips into postmodernism's "many paths, multiple truths, and lifestyle choices." Through patterns of cultural accommodation, unity in Christ is shattered by the culture's version of petty pluralism.

Moreover, the culture's pluralist impulses may lead to the loss of Christian identity within the church itself. In its desire to be appealing, Christian communities may adopt the culture's values as well as its forms. Embracing indiscriminate options too often leads to vague religiosity characterized by generic spirituality in place of Christian faith characterized by shared conviction and common practice. Similarly, the relativizing of truth claims leads to indifferent proclamation and apathetic mission.

Fear of promiscuous pluralism is not irrational, even though it is often exaggerated. Thus, champions of unity must guard against segmentation. But they must also ensure that they do not define oneness in ways that constrict the broad traditions of Christian doctrine.

Pockets of Privileged Experience

Diversity's celebrants fear the reemergence of oppressive orthodoxy. Champions of unity fear the spread of promiscuous pluralism. These fears are mutually reinforcing in ways that obscure commonalities. Unity and diversity are not polar opposites, but are dependent upon each other for the sustaining of genuine community. Perhaps this can be seen in the danger to both from the emergence in the church of enclaves of privileged experience. The American version of pluralism has tended to transform loose communities of natural affinity into self-contained pockets of experience that are inaccessible to those who do not share the experience.

Spawned by pluralism, clusters of closed experience impose orthodoxies; formed as cohesive communities of experience and conviction, they are mutually exclusive and so lead to fragmentation. Women's experience . . . born-again experience . . . the experience of inherited power . . . black experience . . . the experience of youth . . . new immigrants' experience . . . the experience of the poor . . . gay and lesbian experience . . . the experience of boomers, busters, and other sociologists' fantasies . . . all are presented as normative appropriations of Christian faith and life *for those who share the experience*. To the extent that these pockets of experience are unavailable to "outsiders," and both advocacy and critique are restricted to "insiders," the church becomes balkanized and ideological cleansing becomes the order of the day.

As pockets of privileged experience become acceptable parts of ecclesial existence, both champions of unity and celebrants of diversity find their worst fears realized and their best hopes dashed. Unity shatters as small groups of narrow unity compete with one another in a parody of pluralism. Diversity coagulates in impermeable cells that are internally uniform. All of this is a clear demonstration that unity and

diversity are mutually necessary. Without the other, each is perverted. Taken alone, each will create its own destruction.

Dividing into Two

The number 2 is a dangerous number. Attempts to divide anything into two—including the foregoing attempt—ought to be regarded with suspicion. The neat division of the church into those who fear oppressive orthodoxy and those who fear promiscuous pluralism is a caricature at best. Few Presbyterians would fit comfortably into either group, and most Presbyterians live out their faith with only the vaguest awareness of these "church fears."

And yet the reality of debilitating church conflict cries out for an understanding of the present situation that can move the church beyond repetitive recrimination. Many Presbyterians can see themselves in the *oppressive orthodoxy-promiscuous pluralism* mirror, even though it is a carnival fun-house looking glass. For all of its distortions, the image is sufficiently reliable to provide insight into oneself as well as the other and to suggest ways of comprehending the relationships between the two.

More is required, however. Stark analysis of unity and diversity from the perspective of the fear they each engender is illuminating, but it is not sufficient. A consideration of "church fears" must be accompanied by a distinctively Christian way of understanding the interrelationship of those fears as well as a way of moving beyond them. Celebrants of diversity and champions of unity can turn to the most prominent New Testament appreciation of the unity-diversity dynamic: *body of Christ*.

NOTES

1. C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures and a Second Look*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: The University Press, 1964), 9.
2. A Brief Statement of Faith, *Book of Confessions*, Part I, *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, study edition (Louisville, Ky.: Geneva Press, 1996), 10.4, line 70.

3. Ibid., 10.1, lines 5–6.
4. The Theological Declaration of Barmen, *Book of Confessions*, 8.11–12.

Body Language

Is the church destined to live out the implications of its fears? Or does the church possess resources that recognize the legitimate fears of those who dread oppressive orthodoxy and those who dread promiscuous pluralism? And are there resources that acknowledge the assets and liabilities of those who celebrate diversity and of those who champion unity? Embedded in the New Testament is a way of understanding the community of faith that values the church's unity and its diversity, and acknowledges the relationship between them. This way of understanding the one church discerns both the promise and the peril of its diversity.

The "body of Christ" texts—1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, Ephesians 1 and 4, and Colossians 1—provide insight into the life of the contemporary church. Each text, in ways familiar to most Christians, presents the church as the body of Christ. Our very acquaintance with the New Testament's "body of Christ" language may diminish its capacity to deal with church fears, however. Although familiarity does not breed contempt, it may generate indifference. We have heard it so often, in classes and sermons and even church publicity, that we think we have heard it all. "Body of Christ," the Bible's shocking metaphor, has become a cliché.

"Human organizations are like the human body" is a modern truism. The comparison is embedded in everyday references to "the body politic," "a body of troops," and "legislative bodies," not to mention less obvious allusions to "corporate" life. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) picks all of this up in its terminology for church

sessions, presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly. We call them "governing bodies." Unfortunately, such conventional uses of the organization-body figure of speech shape the way New Testament body of Christ texts are understood in the church.

"Each of us has something to contribute to the whole church (so the story goes) and the church is incomplete without the diverse gifts of its members. The church cannot be whole without all of its members, and none of the members can go it alone." Whether in its congregational form (singers, organizers, educators, kitchen workers, and caregivers are all needed to make the church's life whole) or its denominational form (liberals, conservatives, evangelists, social activists, bureaucrats, and pastors need each other in order to be complete), the comparison of the church to the body is a commonplace. The church-body analogy has scant capacity to inform us, let alone to alter the way we live.

Correlation between an organization and the human body is not only a modern platitude. It was already a cliché in the first century. The human organization as body was a well-known Hellenistic figure of speech, used to describe the *polis*, the family, and other institutions and associations.[1] If Paul had been doing nothing more than noting that diverse persons in the church function together as a unified whole, the readers of his letters might have dismissed it as a truism. Comparing any organization, even the church, to the human body was little more than first-century conventional wisdom. But Paul was not being trite. He had something to say that was—and is—surprising.

The Body Is Christ's

When we look closely at the "body of Christ" passages in 1 Corinthians, Romans, Ephesians, and Colossians, we quickly move beyond conventional understandings. The texts do far more than compare the human organization, church, to the one-yet-differentiated human organism, the body. Neither 1 Corinthians nor Romans nor Ephesians nor Colossians says simply that the church is like the body. Instead, they make the startling claim that the church is the body *of*

Christ. It is as the body *of Christ* that the church is one, and it is as the body *of Christ* that the church's diversity is experienced.

> For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, *so it is with Christ*. . . . Now you are the body of *Christ* and individually members of it.
>
> 1 Cor. 12:12, 27

> For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body *in Christ*, and individually we are members one of another.
>
> Rom. 12:4–5

> [God] has put all things under [Christ's] feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is *his* body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.
>
> Eph. 1:22–23

> There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. . . . We must grow up in every way into *him who is the head*, into *Christ*, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.
>
> Eph. 4:4–6, 15–16

> [Christ] himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. *He is the head* of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. . . . I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I

> am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of *his* body, that is, the church.
>
> Col. 1:17–18, 24

The jarring element in these texts is not "the church can be likened to the body," but rather, "the church-body is the body *of Christ*, the body *in Christ*, the body whose *head is Christ*"! The church-body is not its own body, but *Christ's* body; Christ's body is not exclusively identified with Christ, for the body of Christ is the *church*! Clearly, Paul's language is not mere simile—the church is like a body. Rather, it is a rich metaphor in which two disparate terms—church-body and Christ-body—are brought together in a way that discloses an altogether new reality. Church-body and Christ-body are each intelligible separately, but *Church-body-of-Christ* goes far beyond ordinary usage, stretching language to the breaking point in order to create a new apprehension of truth.

The church is not its own. The church is not self-generated or self-directed. The church is not its own, for the church belongs to another, to Christ, precisely as Christ's body. The church is not master of its own life, able to determine its own nature or purpose. The church belongs to Christ alone, and yet the bond of *church* and *body of Christ* is not a natural one; a distinction remains. Neither is collapsed into the other, as if the church were the continuing form of Christ's earthly presence, or as if the real church dwells in Christ's heavenly presence. Rather, as the body of Christ the church exists as a visible collection of ordinary people that is nothing less than the locus of the real presence of Christ.

It is not coincidental that the other striking New Testament use of "body of Christ" also discloses Christ's real presence. "This [bread] is my body," says Jesus. Bread is Christ's body; church is Christ's body. Bread remains ordinary bread and church remains an ordinary collection of people, yet both bread and church are the locus of Christ's presence. "Jesus Christ gives us in the Supper the real substance of his body and blood," says Calvin, "so that we may possess him fully, and, possessing him, have part in all his blessings."[2] Christ's real presence in Eucharistic bread and wine nourishes the body of Christ, constituting and manifesting the real presence of Christ in the church.

The Body Is Wounded

As if all this were not enough—*we* are the body *of Christ*, *we* are one body *in Christ*, *we* are the body whose *head is Christ*—the texts suggest that we are Christ's *wounded* body, even Christ's *crucified* body. The suffering, executed, dead, and buried Jesus has been raised to new life, of course, but resurrection does not eradicate crucifixion. It is the crucified one who is raised, and the risen one is none other than the crucified. As the body *of Christ* the church is not a glorified body. The church is the body of the crucified-risen Christ, and so the church lives with nail marks in its hands and a gash in its side (John 20:24–29), as a slaughtered lamb (Rev. 5), as the body whose hands and feet remain pierced (Luke 24:36–49).

The church does not live in triumphant glory, although there are times when the church pretends to itself and others that it is a powerful force in the world. The pretense is difficult to maintain in the current era of the church's cultural disestablishment, however, even though nostalgia and wishful thinking are ever present. The New Testament *body of Christ* texts draw us back to the cross as they proclaim the Lord's death until he comes (1 Cor. 11:26). The church is made Christ's body through baptism into Christ's death, "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" (1 Cor. 12:13). The church has been united with Christ in a death like his, and the fullness of resurrection is not yet its possession (Rom. 6:5). Thus the church's bodily existence as *ecclesia crucis* is not an unfortunate necessity, but the God-given shape of its life as the body of Christ.

The church is known as the wounded body of Christ in the letters to Corinth, Rome, Ephesus, and Colossae. Paul's "body of Christ" passages neither celebrate the church's diversity nor applaud its unity. He employs the image in contexts of discord and division, not peace and harmony. "Is Christ divided?" Paul asks the Corinthians. His question is more than rhetorical and the answer remains uncertain. From first-century Corinth through Christian communities spanning twenty centuries, the grotesque reality is that the suffering body of Christ is lacerated and torn by the very disciples of Christ.

Paul draws upon "body of Christ" when disagreement in the church breeds antagonism that leads to separation. Because Christ's body should not be marked by disagreement, antagonism, and separation, Paul urges unity. The opening of 1 Corinthians is typical: "Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose" (1 Cor. 1:10). Yet the unity Paul urges is a unity *of* diverse members, not a unity imposed *over* diverse members: "For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us" (Rom. 12:4–6).

Body of Christ is used throughout at points of conflict and division. First Corinthians is laced with recognition of dissensions, quarreling, factionalism, and strife. This conflict within the community demonstrates dramatically that members of the body of Christ have a common need for diverse gifts. Recognition of this reality leads to "care for one another" in the "more excellent way" that "does not insist on its own way." The split between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians in Rome leads Paul to use "body of Christ" again, bracketed by admonitions that no one should "think of himself more highly than he ought to think" and exhortations to "love one another with brotherly affection. . . . Live peaceably with all." Even the more lofty letter to the Ephesians acknowledges the continuing division of Jews and Gentiles, coupling "one body" with the plea to live "forbearing one another in love . . . maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." In Colossians, the link between Christ's suffering and the church's suffering is explicit: "I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church" (Col. 1:24).

To call the church "body *of Christ*" is to say far more than that the human community of Christ's people is like the human body. The church is not merely a human community with the brand name

"Christian." Christ is so present in this body that the body is no longer its own, but Christ's. This reality is not comfortable, however, for the church is the body of the crucified Christ.

Creation of the Spirit

The church is not *a* body, but *Christ's* body, and so it is the community of Christ's people that derives its *bodily identity* from Christ. As with Christ himself, the church's bodily identity is the creation of the Holy Spirit. The church is not merely a sociological phenomenon, but is, like Christ, a Spirit-conceived, Spirit-anointed, Spirit-sent, Spirit-breathing, Spirit-enlivened body.

The child conceived in Mary was "from the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 1:20), for the messenger of God said to Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God" (Luke 1:35). The child grew to be a man, Jesus of Nazareth, who traveled to the River Jordan to be baptized by John. "And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased'" (Mark 1:10–11, par.). John himself saw the Spirit's descent on Jesus and acknowledged the very word of God, "'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit'" (John 1:33).

Anointed by the Spirit, Jesus was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness of temptation. He then began to proclaim the reign of God, fulfilling in himself the prophecy, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18–19). And so he did, from Galilee to Jerusalem, where he offered himself on the cross "through the eternal Spirit" (Heb. 9:14). Death was not the end, for Jesus Christ was "declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by

resurrection from the dead" (Rom. 1:4). The risen Christ then commissions his new community as he breathes on it, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22).

From beginning to end to new beginning, Jesus Christ "is conceived by the Holy Spirit." "It is impossible to talk about Jesus without talking about the workings of the Spirit in him," says Moltmann. "The historical account of his life is from the very beginning a theological account, for it is determined by his collaboration—his co-instrumentality—with the Spirit and 'the Father.' His life history is at heart a 'trinitarian history of God.'"[3]

Like the embodied Christ whose body we are, the church becomes the body of Christ and lives as the body of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. From Pentecost on, it is the Holy Spirit of God who gives birth and life to the church as the body of Christ.

Gift and Calling

The body of Christ is *called* to live as a unified whole in the harmonious interplay of its indispensable parts precisely because that is *not* the way it lives. "Body of Christ" is not a hackneyed convention to be trotted out in celebration of the church's unity or its complementary multiplicity, but a disturbing rebuke to the church's self-inflicted wounds of division. If the body of Christ texts are to be rescued from banality, we must feel the rebuke before receiving the new possibilities they present.

And yet the *unity* of the church is never our achievement. The church's unity is both gift and calling, but the call proceeds from the gift. The texts are clear that our embodiment in Christ is a given: "We, who are many, *are* one body in Christ" (Rom. 12:5); "now you *are* the body of Christ" (1 Cor. 12:27); "There *is* one body and one Spirit" (Eph. 4:4). We are not called to strive for the achievement of equilibrium or uniformity, for the church's unity is a gift of its Lord. We may squander our inheritance or bury our gift, but the fundamental ecclesial reality is the oneness of the people of God as the body of Christ. Christ's people are one with another whether they like it or not. In all of our differences and disagreements, we *are* one body *in Christ*.

And yet the *diversity* of the church is never our achievement. Neither is it the natural by-product of our innate multiplicity. The church's diversity grows from the generosity of the Spirit's gifts. The texts are clear that our diversity emerges from the variety of gifts given by the Spirit: "We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us" (Rom. 12:6); "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone" (1 Cor. 12:4–6); "But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift" (Eph. 4:7). We are not called to manufacture or to brandish our diversity, for the church's variety is a gift of the Holy Spirit. We may idolize our gifts or isolate our endowments, but the fundamental ecclesial reality is the richly gifted multiplicity of the one people of God.

Unity is not an accomplishment. The church cannot create, legislate, or command unity, for the unity of the body of Christ is Spirit-given. Our oneness is "the unity of the Spirit" (Eph. 4:3), not the unity of the *Book of Confessions*, much less the *Book of Order*. The Spirit's gift is also the church's calling, however. "If then there is any encouragement in Christ," says Paul, "any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind" (Phil. 2:1–2).

Diversity is not a capability. The church is not a mosaic of natural human variety, for the diversity of the body of Christ is Spirit-given. Our diversity grows from "manifestations of the Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:7), not from an assortment of abilities, much less from rights-based constituencies. The Spirit's gifts are also the church's calling, however. "We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us," says Paul, and we are to use them (Rom. 12:6–8).

A striking feature of the Bible's "body of Christ" texts is that unity and diversity are not seen as mutually exclusive alternatives, but as intimately related, mutually indispensable aspects of an organic whole. The unity of the church cannot be conceived apart from the variety of gifts that flourish within the whole. Diversity within the church makes no sense apart from the life-giving unity of the whole.

In fact, the unity of the body of Christ is comprised by the variety of gifts, and the variety of gifts compose the whole.

Apart from diversity, the church's unity would quickly degenerate into uniformity. Apart from unity, the church's diversity would quickly fragment in disarray. So the celebrants of diversity are quite right to fear oppressive orthodoxy, for it is a danger to the liberty that grows from variety. What may be less apparent is that attempts to achieve rigorous uniformity are a clear and present threat to unity as well. Without variety, the church will cease to be a living body, much less the body of Christ. And the champions of unity are quite right to fear promiscuous pluralism, for it is a danger to the harmony that grows from wholeness. Again, what may be less apparent is that indiscriminate variation is destructive of diversity as well. Without unity, the church will cease to be a body at all, surely not the body of Christ.

Body Language

New Testament language may open us to the reality of our Spirit-bestowed unity and diversity as the body of Christ. However, in addition to language about the body of Christ, we need language to use within the body of Christ. How can we talk with one another in ways that acknowledge our Spirit-shaped unity as Christ's body while also acknowledging our Spirit-given diversity (as well as our self-asserted differences)? We can talk because we are one in Christ. We must talk because we have been given a variety of gifts by the Spirit.

NOTES

1. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 7, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 1038–1039, 1041. See also J. A. T. Robinson, *The Body*, Studies in Biblical Theology No. 5 (London: SCM, 1952), 59f.
2. John Calvin, "Short Treatise on the Holy Supper of Our Lord," in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, ed. J. K. S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 148.
3. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 74.

A Grammar of Committed Conversation

Presbyterians display touching confidence in the curative powers of conversation. We seem to believe that the proper response to disagreement, controversy, and conflict is talk. Many in the church are certain that if we simply come together to engage in dialogue, consensus is bound to follow. Others, perhaps more realistically, agree with Winston Churchill that "to jaw-jaw is better than to war-war."[1] When factionalism in the church becomes intense, proposals for structured talk are sure to follow. When conflict endangers the church's unity, study and discussion is the recommended common ground.

Our commitment to conversation can be a bit disingenuous, however. Dialogue may be entered with the expectation that the evident truth of *my* position will surely carry the day. Failing that, protracted talk may wear the other down. Most often, however, the frustration of inconclusive discussion leads some to call for a decisive end to the debate and the establishment of clear, binding positions. General Assembly overtures and votes on amendments to the *Book of Order* are proposed as the way to conclude the issue. But these moves toward decisive decision lead others to renew proposals for churchwide dialogue!

Proposals for legislative resolution can discourage dialogue, changing conversation into debate and transforming common ground into an arena of strategies and tactics. But endless conversation can discourage confidence, recasting conviction as mere opinion and

turning common ground into a maze of indifference. Talk is not a panacea that does away with the need to decide, nor a way to avoid the unpleasantness of voting, nor a petty expedient until the winning votes can be mustered. But if talk is not the definitive answer, neither is voting. Voting rarely resolves difficult issues before the church—even for the winning side.

The church's commitment to dialogue need not be tied to the naive hope that it will lead everyone to agree, or to the apocalyptic expectation that it will lead to a vote in which everything will be decided. Instead, talk in the church can become the committed conversation that is a mark of faithful Christian communities. The task is to find a way of talking together that provides space for the open expression of convictions—especially those that clash—while also providing a reasonable hope that the conversation will lead somewhere.

Guidelines for Presbyterians

The church has done a good job in providing space for the open expression of conflicting opinions. An example of Presbyterian efforts is "Seeking to Be Faithful Together: Guidelines for Presbyterians During Times of Disagreement." Adopted by the 204th General Assembly (1992), "Seeking to Be Faithful Together" sets forth ten guidelines that are intended to help Presbyterians deal with disagreements in a courteous, considerate, open manner.

Developed by the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, the Guidelines urge persons to treat each other respectfully, learn about various positions, and stay in community even when the discussion becomes vigorous and tense. The Guidelines also set forth procedural suggestions, such as sharing concerns directly in a spirit of love and respect, focusing on ideas instead of questioning motives or intelligence, and sharing personal experiences so that others may understand concerns more fully. The spirit of "Seeking to Be Faithful Together" is expressed well in the tenth guideline: "Include our disagreements in our prayers, not praying for the triumph of our

viewpoints, but seeking God's grace to listen attentively, to speak clearly, and to remain open to the vision God holds for us all."[2]

"Seeking to Be Faithful Together" is typical of a wide range of literature dealing with group process and conflict management. The Guidelines set forth proven ways of making disagreement less disagreeable, of helping persons to discern civil ways of discussing diverse convictions. When parties to a disagreement follow the Guidelines, differences of conviction can be prevented from deteriorating into personal acrimony or factional animosity. "Seeking to Be Faithful Together" encourages a process for study and dialogue that helps Presbyterians treat one another with respect, trust, and appreciation.

The value of the Guidelines is evident in their widespread use throughout the church. And yet their value is limited. While they set forth established personal and group processes that cultivate civility, they do little to provide a way toward substantive engagement of conflicting convictions. Ground rules that encourage safety and mutuality are necessary to committed conversation in the church, but they are not sufficient. Mutual dedication to conversation must be accompanied by the means for mutual engagement of conflicting convictions.

Ecumenical Learning

Ecumenism—the search for the visible unity of Christ's church—no longer enjoys universal approval. Congregations of various denominations cooperate enthusiastically in local mission activities, but efforts to achieve ecclesial unity in faith, sacraments, and ministry attract scant grassroots interest or support. Traditional ecumenical dialogue strikes ministers and members alike as the abstract musings of theologians who split doctrinal hairs while discussing outdated controversies far removed from the lives of ordinary Christians.

Even so, ecumenical dialogue is the one place in the church where the resolution to talk about convictions—especially the divisive ones—is coupled with clear and constructive ways to talk about convictions.

The ecumenical resolution to talk, combined with established methods of talking, lead to modest hope that talk will lead toward more visible forms of Christian unity.

Ecumenical engagement combines the conviction that Christians and their churches *are* one with the commitment to fulfill Christ's prayer that we *may be* one. Reality is the ground of hopeful action. Because we are one in Christ we must face our divisions together so that we may discern the way toward faithfully visible unity. The ecumenical movement has learned to do its work with "discontented patience," accepting the slow pace of agreement while never becoming complacent about the slow pace of agreement. Ecumenical conversation understands that quick fixes are unlikely because differences in Christian conviction concern matters of deep importance. But ecumenical conversation also understands that genuine resolutions can occur because differences in conviction concern shared Christian faith.

The broad ecumenical movement has developed some important insights into the grammar of committed conversation. The past century of intensive ecumenical dialogue has yielded important lessons for the way Christians can talk with one another when they disagree. This "grammar" of committed conversation is as useful within churches as it is among them. Presbyterians can learn from our own ecumenical history as we seek to develop more faithful ways of addressing our own disagreements.

Two elements in a grammar of committed conversation may be particularly helpful at this time in the life of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The first is found in the Lutheran-Reformed Dialogues that led to the historic Formula of Agreement for the Full Communion of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Reformed Church in America, and the United Church of Christ. The second is seen in a methodology developed by the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Churches (NCC) during its 1996–1999 Quadrennium.

Mutual Affirmation and Admonition

"Lutheran" and "Reformed" churches diverged from the beginning on a number of key issues. Differing understandings of confessional commitment, the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, "predestination," the relationship between church and state, and other matters led to a sixteenth-century parting of the ways. The Lutheran-Reformed break, sometimes accompanied by the rhetoric of condemnation, hardened into patterns of division marked by constant suspicion and occasional polemics.

The latter half of the twentieth century presented Lutheran and Reformed communions with new possibilities for relationship. In Europe, the "Leuenberg Agreement" among Lutheran and Reformed churches provided the basis for mutual recognition and continuing dialogue. In North America, official conversations between representatives of Reformed and Lutheran churches began in 1962. Four rounds of conversation over a period of three decades culminated in the proposal for the establishment of "full communion" between participating churches of the Lutheran and Reformed traditions. Approval by the churches was celebrated in Chicago in 1998.

Four hundred fifty years of separation and thirty years of official conversation may seem to stretch "discontented patience" to the limit, but the fruits of Lutheran-Reformed dialogue provide important new possibilities for ecumenical dialogue and for committed conversation within churches. The fourth round of Lutheran-Reformed conversations, 1988–1992, resulted in a proposal for full communion. *A Common Calling: The Witness of Our Reformation Churches in North America Today* embodies insights and methodologies that are important for intramural Presbyterian conversation.

The introduction to *A Common Calling* is a refreshing instance of ecumenical honesty. The editors are clear that "the 'Common Calling' of our title is not simply to get about the task of mutual recognition, nor to let bygones be bygones. . . . Our goal is not to homogenize, but to recognize. Our conclusion is that we have enough agreement to share, not that we are or will become theologically identical."[3] "Full communion" is not an expedient institutional arrangement or the

sentimental avoidance of differences; Lutheran and Reformed sought *full* communion, not petty accommodation. Nor is "full communion" uniformity of conviction; Lutheran and Reformed sought full *communion*, not absolute agreement.

The Lutheran-Reformed Agreement begins from "a model of confessional hermeneutics which does not surrender the deep convictions held by our communities of faith but allows for a new relationship that leaves behind the bitterness of the past."[4] Full communion among churches does not require agreement on all matters, nor does it require that some convictions be abandoned for the sake of harmony. Rather, full communion declares that the churches "recognize each other as churches in which the gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered according to the word of God."[5]

From the beginning, Lutheran and Reformed have shared an understanding of the marks of the true church. The Augsburg Confession states that "the church is the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly,"[6] while Calvin notes that "wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists."[7] The gospel expressed in word and sacraments: these marks of the church are so foundational that Calvin says, "We must not reject [a church] so long as it retains them, even if it otherwise swarms with many faults." Moreover, he continues, "some fault may creep into the administration of either doctrine or sacraments, but this ought not to estrange us from full communion with the church."[8] The marks of the church reveal fidelity to the gospel, not the embodiment of immaculate doctrine or impeccable sacramental practice.

Mutual recognition and full communion do not depend on one group of Christians assuring themselves that another group of Christians is theologically or ecclesially flawless. It is enough to agree concerning the core of the gospel in proclamation and sacraments. This agreement is not a precondition for committed conversation, however. It may be an outcome of committed conversation. Even then, mutual

recognition and full communion are not the conclusion of committed conversation, but rather the foundation for deeper dialogue on issues of continuing disagreement.

The Lutheran-Reformed Agreement employed a bold methodology to reach the proposal for full communion and proposed the same methodology for ongoing theological dialogue on matters of continuing difference: "mutual affirmation and admonition." The process of mutual affirmation and admonition does far more than note points of agreement and disagreement, for it embodies a dynamic process of genuine mutuality in the search for fuller appreciation of the truth of the gospel.

"Mutual affirmation and admonition" is directly relevant to internal Presbyterian realities. *A Common Calling* affirms that "the theological diversity within our common confession provides both the complementarity needed for a full and adequate witness to the gospel (mutual affirmation) and the corrective reminder that every theological approach is a partial and incomplete witness to the gospel (mutual admonition)."[9] The practice of mutual affirmation and admonition serves the gospel through a common exploration of convictions rather than serving organizations through the autonomous promotion of particular positions. Each conversation partner acknowledges and affirms shared understandings of Christian faith and life. Each partner acknowledges and affirms insights or emphases of the other that enrich its own understanding of Christian faith and life. But each partner also raises questions and issues cautions about aspects of the other's faith and life that do not appear to serve faithful proclamation of the gospel and celebration of the sacraments.

If Presbyterians who disagree about matters of deep conviction were to join in mutual affirmation and admonition, they would be helped to move beyond rhetorical monologues of accusation and recrimination. Engaging in committed conversation, they could affirm elements in the other's convictions that, while not identical with their own, witness to the gospel. They might then begin to discover important elements in the other's convictions that are lacking in their own witness to the gospel. Disagreements would remain, of course,

and participants would caution each other about elements of conviction that seem to be incomplete, inadequate, or mistaken witnesses to the gospel—or even convictions that appear to be injurious to the integrity of the gospel.

Presbyterian practice of mutual affirmation and admonition would require careful, thorough, extended work in structured settings. This would not be just another form of inconclusive chatter or insincere maneuvering, however. It could be a means for Presbyterians of diverse convictions to participate in a mutual search for the truth of the gospel. Sentimental expressions of mutual affirmation alone and harsh expressions of mutual admonition alone would be replaced by a continual interplay of mutual affirmation and admonition.

Synonyms, Homonyms, and Pseudonyms

Committed conversation that engages in a process of mutual affirmation and admonition can be enriched by a methodology used in the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Churches. Faith and Order is the forum where historic Protestant churches and the Orthodox churches—member churches of the NCC—are joined by churches that are not NCC members—the Roman Catholic Church and a wide range of conservative, evangelical, restorationist, holiness, and Pentecostal churches. Each time the NCC Faith and Order Commission meets, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is in conversation with conservative churches such as the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, evangelical churches such as the Church of the Nazarene, restorationist churches such as the Churches of Christ, holiness churches such as the Church of God, Anderson, Indiana, Pentecostal churches such as the Assemblies of God, and many more . . . all in addition to the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox churches.

Faith and Order discussions center on church-dividing issues and the search for the visible unity of Christ's church in faith, sacraments, ministry, and witness. Thus, diverse churches struggle with issues ranging from the authority of scripture and tradition, to Eucharistic

sharing, to the ordination of women, to racism in the churches. Without a shared methodology, these discussions could become a babel of atomized assertions. John Ford, Professor of Theology at the Catholic University of America, has developed a method for ecumenical dialogue that served the Commission well during its most recent four-year round of meetings.[10]

Representatives of churches were paired in order to engage each other on matters of mutual importance. For example, because "holiness" is central to both the Orthodox Church in America and the Church of God, Anderson, Indiana, representatives of these churches prepared brief papers setting forth their traditions' understandings of "holiness." Similar pairings were established on other issues: Presbyterian and Methodist on "confessions," Lutheran Church Missouri Synod and United Church of Christ on "authority of scripture," Southern Baptist and Roman Catholic on "Christian formation," and so on.

Preparing a paper that elaborates one's own tradition is not new in ecumenical conversation, but what followed was new. Each member of a pairing read carefully the other member's paper. A response was then prepared that articulated several "linguistic" observations. First, the respondent noted the occurrence of *synonyms*, areas of "concrete correspondence" expressing genuine agreement. Second, *homonyms* were identified, instances of "confusing cognates" in which words or concepts that sound the same seem to have different meanings. Third, respondents acknowledged *antonyms*, areas of genuine disagreement. Finally, there was an attempt to reveal *pseudonyms*, enigmatic expressions of "challenging concepts" that require further explanation and present intriguing possibilities for mutual exploration.

Synonyms: An exchange of carefully articulated convictions usually clarifies broad areas of agreement. Conversation partners confirm that many words and concepts are used in the same way to express common faith and life. This "concrete correspondence" is not limited to predictable generalities, however. Participants in the discussion are likely to identify specific agreements that provide a solid

foundation for the exploration of other areas where misunderstanding or disagreement is present. Committed conversation may also reveal unexpected areas of agreement. Participants may realize that distinct vocabulary does not point to contrasting convictions, for different words can be used to communicate the same reality.

Conversation partners may conclude that when they speak of "sin," for example, they are articulating a shared understanding. This may simply confirm what they expected, but it may also come as a welcome surprise. Yet participants may discover that although they use different words—sin and transgression, for example—they intend the same reality. All of this provides abundant substance for further conversation that can enrich both. Mutual affirmation leads to mutual augmentation of common witness to the gospel.

Homonyms: Careful examination of one another's convictions generally indicate some confusing instances in which terminology that sounds the same, that may even be identical, expresses distinctly different beliefs. Failure to recognize homonyms is a frequent cause of conversations gone awry, sometimes resulting in accusations of duplicity. However, when homonyms are identified, participants in the discussion have an opportunity to explore the newfound differences. Do distinctions point to disagreement, or do they present possibilities for complementary enrichment?

Conversation partners may discover that while they both speak about "sin," one means sin as a human condition while the other means sin as wrongful action. Or, one may understand sin as rebellion against God while the other understands sin as wrong done to others. These confusing cognates can be explored to discover if there are complementary relationships between them so that each completes the other, or if different emphases set a path of increasing divergence. Homonyms, once recognized, are fertile ground for cultivating enriched understandings. Both mutual affirmation and mutual admonition come into play in a search for fuller common witness to the gospel.

Antonyms: Not surprisingly, analysis of convictions articulated by conversation partners will sometimes point to areas of clear disagreement. Different language may express different beliefs. "Antonym" is not always the most accurate term, however, because distinctly different beliefs may or may not be antithetical. Disagreements often arise from particular insights or distinctive emphases, and these may point toward creative convergence rather than toward oppositions. If a disagreement is truly antithetical, however, both parties to the conversation can gain from a clear identification of difference and an assessment of the relation between a particular "antonym" and the range of "synonyms" and "homonyms."

One conversation partner may believe that human beings are sinners at the core and that all human actions are fundamentally flawed, while the other conversation partner believes that human beings are basically good, and that human actions can be improved through education and inspiration. Are these positions antonyms, or are there points of contact between them that might provide an opportunity for the exercise of mutual affirmation and admonition?

Pseudonyms: Diverse traditions or positions within a tradition may use language that is difficult for another to comprehend. The words themselves seem clear enough, but the reality behind the words is elusive. For example, "discipline" is a term with a distinct history and meaning within the Reformed tradition that might not be apparent to a Lutheran or a Pentecostal. These "pseudonyms" confront conversation partners with "challenging concepts" that require attentive listening, questioning, and understanding.

Discussions of sin may present conversation partners with puzzling uses of terms such as "depravity," "perfection," "repentance," and "pardon." While dictionary definitions may be plain enough, they may bear depths of meaning that require sympathetic listening and generous clarification. Too often, genuine pseudonyms are mistaken for antonyms, leading to mistaken assumptions of disagreement.

A Grammar of Committed Conversation

Committed conversation is not an optional activity in the church. Presbyterians who disagree about matters of deep conviction must converse with one another because of their common commitment to Christ and the shared necessity of building up the body of Christ. We *are* the body of Christ, and individually members one of another, so our own health depends upon the health of the whole organism. The well-being of the whole body depends on the body's capacity for mutual interaction, its ability to talk.

The rich experience of the ecumenical movement provides the church with proven ways of talking about important matters with those who have different perspectives and convictions. These and other forms of committed conversation are far different from debate, and they rarely lead to easy resolution. However, mutual affirmation and admonition, John Ford's linguistic methodology, and other forms of ecumenical dialogue are valuable means for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to develop an appropriate grammar of committed conversation. Without the means to converse, we will continue to hurl words at one another in dangerous fulfillment of our division into two.

NOTES

1. Winston Churchill, Washington D.C., 1954, in *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 3d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 150.
2. "Seeking to Be Faithful Together" is published in several formats and languages by the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program.
3. Keith F. Nickle and Timothy F. Lull, eds., *A Common Calling: The Witness of Our Reformation Churches in North America Today* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1993), 8.
4. *A Common Calling*, 9.
5. *A Common Calling*, 67.
6. Augsburg Confession, article 7, in *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 32.
7. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill,

trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 4.1.9., p. 1023.

8. *Institutes*, 4.1.12., p. 1025.
9. *A Common Calling*, 66.
10. An "authorized version" of Ford's method does not exist, for the Faith and Order Commission experimented with variations and refinements. However, see John T. Ford, "Learning the Language of Ecumenism" in *Ecumenical Trends*, 26.9 (October 1997): pp.1/139–13/141.

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