
Groupe Des Dombes, 1993 — For the conversion of the churches

Geneva: W C C Publishers

Reviewer: Dr D J Smith

This document is the fruit of discussions and studies by an independent group of French Roman Catholic and Protestant ministers. The group has existed for more than fifty years and was founded in 1937, meeting annually. In this publication the group puts forth some challenging ideas about the movement towards ecumenical unity built on the key motive of the conversion of the churches.

The book is structured along the following lines: firstly there is an introductory part giving an outline of the argument used in the book. Secondly the book is divided into four parts. The first part deals with the two words on which the whole issue hinges: identity and conversion and gives a clarification of the terminology used. The second chapter takes a look at examples from church history and seeks historical clarification for their main theses concerning the pivotal role of conversion. The third chapter deals with the witness of scripture and goes into the biblical vocabulary bearing on the subject. The fourth chapter gives practical suggestions for conversions that pave the way towards ecumenical unity. It also gives suggestions of how this unity can be expressed in a common confession. The heart of this suggested confession is the church's confession of itself as 'one holy catholic and apostolic'.

The main question to be answered for the divergent churches on their converging way towards ecumenical unity is: what gives a specific church its identity — is it its confession or what? The answer given by the group is: Christian identity is given by conversion to God.

The group concedes that we are so accustomed to live on the basis of a specific confession that to interfere with it causes disorientation and poses a threat to identity. The question arises whether a specific expression of faith that identifies one as, say, Roman

Catholic or Protestant must be abandoned or maintained in the process of converging to unity? The answer they give to this question is firstly: the confessional identities must be converted to be faithful to themselves. From this flows their second argument which they formulate as follows: 'This is why conversion of Christian confessions can only emerge from themselves. It is in experiencing their Christian identity in these confessions, and at the same time in dialogue with the other ... that disunited Christians will see where they differ, sometimes converging and sometimes diverging. This very divergence may then seem legitimate and not injurious to communion in Christ' (p 3).

The group differentiate three kinds of identities and corresponding conversions. The first is Christian identity by which they mean one's belonging to Christ founded on the gift of Baptism. The corresponding Christian conversion means the response of faith to the call that comes to us from God through Christ.

Secondly there is ecclesial identity and ecclesial conversion. Ecclesial identity means the belonging of an individual or of a confessional church to the one holy, 'Catholic' Church. Ecclesial conversion means the effort required from the whole church and from all churches to be renewed and become more capable of fulfilling their mission in accordance with the motto *ecclesia semper reformanda*.

Thirdly there is confessional identity and confessional conversion. Confessional identity means belonging to a confessional church with its specific cultural and historical context and its own spiritual and doctrinal profile.

By confessional conversion the group understands the ecumenical effort by which a Christian confession cleanses and enriches its own inheritance with the aim of re-discovering full communion with other confessions (vide p 29).

Confessions can be a divisive factor. The vision of the group is that in the process of confessional conversion the divisive factor in confessions must become a complementary difference without which the fullness and universality of the church are seriously compromised.

Confessional conversion is of the uttermost importance for the group, though they are well aware that conversion on this level is most arduous and realise 'confessional conversion will be achieved only when reconciliation has led to full communion with the others and full mutual ecclesial recognition through purification and deepening in each confession in line with the gospel. The group is totally convinced that conversion is the pivot around which the ecumenical movement should hinge and in this regard state: 'conversion is not simply at the source of the ecumenical movement. It represents its constant underlying motivation. When conversion flags, the ecumenical movement stagnates or even goes in reverse' (p 58).

This book gives a fresh and challenging approach to the question of movement towards ecumenical unity. Various 'modes of unity' have been proposed in the past like 'organic unity', conciliar fellowship, 'ecclesial communion', 'reconciled diversity' and so on. The group is convinced that at the heart of all these reflections on unity, we find the whole

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dialectic of identity and diversity and they see the ecumenical movement as a great process of conversion and reconciliation of our diversities in the quest for communion among confessional identities (64).

Although one sometimes get the impression that some of their arguments are built too much on figures of speech and comparisons that may be labelled deceptive, something they themselves concede (p 3), this book is well written and well reasoned and worthwhile reading if only for its stimulating and challenging approach. We can recommend it to all interested.