

The Background to the Dialogue

David M. Thompson,
Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge

Introduction

This is the first meeting of the fourth phase of an international dialogue, which began in 1977. I have been involved since 1980, particularly in the drafting of the three Agreed Statements, *Apostolicity and Catholicity* (1982), *The Church as Communion in Christ* (1992), and *Receiving and Handing on the Faith: the Mission and Responsibility of the Church* (2002).¹ As we enter upon a fourth phase, with some significant changes of membership, it was felt desirable to sketch the background to the Dialogue and the way in which it has developed. Obviously I write out of a Disciples background and perspective, but I am also a church historian and hope therefore to have reached a reasonable degree of objectivity in making such analyses.

One of the points which has been regularly emphasised in our conversations is that Disciples and Roman Catholics do not start their discussions from a specific historical break in communion in the background (see *A&C* §6). The point was developed in *CCC* §8 as follows:

The Disciples movement emerged out of nineteenth-century Protestantism but it had nothing to do with a deliberate break from the Roman Catholic Church and lacked the memories of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century controversies. Moreover some of its most specific concerns were criticisms of the way in which contemporary Protestantism understood and lived out fidelity to the apostolic witness. It came from the desire to lead the Church towards a unity rooted in the weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper. Alexander Campbell was convinced that 'the union of Christians is essential to the conversion of the world,' an insight which has lost none of its force in the twentieth century. The Roman Catholic Church too proclaims that it has a specific mission for the unity of the world, and affirms that this unity is signified and given by the eucharistic communion. It too teaches that the restoration of unity among all Christians is linked with the salvation of the world. Indeed Disciples and Roman Catholics pursue these goals in ways deeply marked by their different histories. But they have to discern whether all these affirmations and convictions are not in fact the expression of a very profound communion in some of the most fundamental gifts of the grace of God.

Disciples came into existence as a separate communion of churches in the nineteenth century, initially from a presbyterian background but embracing members from the range of Christian Churches affected by the Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It should probably be emphasised that, although the numerical strength of the churches has historically been in North America, Disciples have never been an exclusively American movement. The Churches of Christ in the British Isles began at roughly the same time, and indeed their regular Annual Conferences began earlier than in the U.S.A. They spread to New Zealand, Australia and South Africa in the 1840s, and from the second half of the nineteenth

¹ These texts will be referred to hereafter as *A&C*, *CCC*, and *RHF* respectively.

century Disciples were involved in missionary work in Asia and then in Latin America and Africa from the 1890s, spreading world-wide in the twentieth century. There are seventeen member churches of the Disciples Ecumenical Consultative Council, which is the international sponsoring body for this dialogue. These are churches which are involved formally, to a greater or lesser extent, in the ecumenical movement, some of whom are not eligible for membership of the World Council of Churches because of their size. There is also an even larger number of places in the world where the inheritors of the Stone-Campbell² tradition exist without any formal ecclesiastical organisation beyond the level of the local congregation.

One consequence of this different starting point is that our conversations have covered some topics which have not been discussed to the same extent in other international dialogues. In particular there has been a persistent engagement with the relationship between the faith of the individual and the faith of the Christian community as a whole. In part, this is because of the Disciples' practice of believers' baptism. But perhaps to an even greater extent it is because of the Disciples' formal rejection of creeds as tests of faith and fellowship. Traditionally among Disciples the confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour made at baptism has been regarded as a sufficient expression of faith - sometimes epitomised in the slogan, 'No creed but Christ'. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Disciples do not believe anything else, and this has led us into a discussion of the significance of the Church and its continuity (particularly in *The Church as Communion in Christ*) and then into a careful discussion of the process of receiving and handing on the faith, which was the theme of the third phase. In view of the significance of the Disciples' emphasis on New Testament Christianity, the last phase also paid careful attention to the process whereby the canon of scripture was accepted and the relationship between that process and the conciliar definitions of the faith in the first millennium.

Apostolicity and Catholicity

Our first Agreed Statement began with a clear affirmation of the significance of spiritual ecumenism, as defined in the *Decree on Ecumenism* §8. Notwithstanding the fact that Disciples and Roman Catholics are not in communion with each other, we have sought to take advantage of the 'evangelical space', available to those who repent of the attempt to justify our divisions and seek reconciliation, in order to discover 'new possibilities for genuine exchange and sharing' (A&C, §19). This has certainly been the experience of the International Commission as it has worked together over the last twenty-five years.

The first phase affirmed several underlying agreements about baptism (A&C, §24) as well as elucidating differences over the relation of personal faith to baptism and the mode of baptism. But the conclusion was that 'we affirm the mutual recognition of baptism administered by Roman Catholics and Disciples, convinced that the oneness we received by the grace of God in baptism must find its completion in visible ecclesial unity, so that the world may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, as we together confess him to be' (A&C, §35). There were also several affirmations about the unity we seek, notably 'that there can only be one Church of God (*unica Ecclesia*) and that this Church already exists' (A&C, §52) and that 'divisions among Christians cannot destroy the one Church of God' (A&C, §56). The first phase also began a discussion about faith and tradition, that has been developed subsequently. A key affirmation was that 'Each Christian's faith is inseparable from the faith of the community. Personal faith is an appropriation of the Church's faith and depends on it for authenticity as well

² Barton Stone (1772-1844), Thomas Campbell (1763-1854) and his son Alexander Campbell (1788-1866) are regarded as the 'fathers' of the movement in the U.S.A. Stone and Thomas Campbell were originally presbyterian ministers; Alexander never was.

as for nurture. At the same time, bearing witness to personal faith builds up the life of the Church and quickens and strengthens the faith of all' (A&C, §41). The balance between receiving and handing on the faith was even then indicated in the statement, 'Each generation must come to faith anew through the power of the Holy Spirit and hand on this faith to succeeding generations. At the same time, the Church in every age inherits the successes and failures of the past' (A&C, §47).

The transmission of the faith

This issue of receiving and handing on the faith has been prominent in both the second and third phases. Although the trigger for the discussion has been the Disciple commitment to believers' baptism on the one hand and the rejection of creeds as tests of fellowship on the other, it has had the useful and probably unexpected consequence of teasing out what is really believed about the relationship between the faith of the Church and the faith of the individual Christian on both sides. The result has been a much more careful account of this than is conventionally conveyed by the simple affirmations that what the Church teaches is expressed in the creeds and believers are expected to confess their faith in those terms.

The first step was the affirmation that

Both Disciples and Roman Catholics share an intention to live and teach in such a way that, when the Lord comes again, the Church may be found witnessing to the faith of the apostles. By preserving the memory of what the apostles taught, and by proclaiming and living it anew for the present day, both Disciples and Roman Catholics believe that they maintain continuity with the apostolic witness, forming a living tradition that is 'built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone' (Eph. 2:20) (CCC, §27).

Furthermore memory was affirmed to be 'more than a recalling to mind of the past'. It was 'the work of the Holy Spirit linking the past with the present and maintaining the memory of that on which everything depends - the faith itself and the Church which embodies that faith....The Spirit keeps alive the sense of the faith in the whole community, and lavishes a variety of *charisms* that enable it to live in the memory of Jesus Christ' (CCC, §28). Thus memory was affirmed to be more than an intellectual quality; indeed it became a central ecclesiological category.

Since Christians receive the gift of faith 'within and for the communion (*koinonia*) which is the Church', the sense of faith in individual Christians reflects the extent to which they share in the life of the Church. 'The inner dynamism of the gift of faith - the power of the Holy Spirit which draws believers into spiritual unity - sustains the interaction of the faith of the individual and the faith of the community' (CCC, §40). Hence 'the Spirit gives a variety of gifts or *charisms* which enable the Church as a whole to receive and hand on the Apostolic Tradition' (CCC, §41).

Whilst there is a particular charism for the ordained ministry in this respect, we have noted that the faithful as a whole share different gifts which recall the community to the Gospel imperative of love. Again in the third phase we noted the variety of different gifts exercised within the Church which witness to the Gospel (RHF, §§5.8-10). Two points should be emphasised here. The first is that we agree that the whole range of charisms in the Church is vital for its life and witness. There is nothing particularly remarkable in this agreement, but there is a tendency to move straight to speaking of the ordained ministry as the vital lifeline in the continuity of the Church and we have put that in context. The second is that we do both agree that the ordained ministry has a unique role, even though we expound that role differently (see CCC, §45, RHF, §§4.10-13).

The third phase of our Dialogue also did important work on the canon and the councils of the Church, which has not occupied the attention of other international dialogues. The reasons for this are again to be found in the Disciple emphasis on the New Testament in particular and scripture more generally, and in the need to address questions raised by Disciples about the significance of credal formulations. There were no significant problems in reaching agreement on the significance of the development of the canon; and it was affirmed that the differences between Roman Catholics and Disciples on the number of books in the Old Testament canon need not be church-dividing (*RHF*, §§3.2-9). However the conclusion is worth quoting:

There is a close relationship between the canon of the Scriptures and the unity of the Church. Because it is held in common by Christians, the Bible holds Christians together with one another as they read and proclaim the same Word of God received from the Church of the apostles. The diversity of the Bible also helps to explain why the same Word of God has led to different emphases among different Christian communities. The canon of the Scriptures determines and supports the faith of both of our communions, so Roman Catholics and Disciples again and again recognize each other as brothers and sisters in Christ (*RHF*, §3.10).

The work on the councils of the Church was necessary to elucidate the significance of doctrinal definition, particularly in the early centuries. One important point here was the recognition that the distrust for confessions of faith felt by the first generation of Disciples leaders was not intended to exclude the use of creeds for the purpose of teaching the faith, but was primarily a rejection of the way in which they were used as tests of fellowship, particularly at the Communion Table. Indeed their criticism originally was more directed at Reformation and post-Reformation confessions than the Apostles' or Nicene Creeds (*RHF*, §3.16). Although it was recognized that most Disciples theologians turn less readily to the patristic writers than Roman Catholics, the Commission was able to affirm that 'Roman Catholics and Disciples agree in recognizing the theological definitions of the first seven ecumenical councils as part of the common history of the Church' (*RHF*, §3.12) and that we shared more agreement about these councils than previously recognized.

This discussion led immediately to consideration of the process of reception of the faith, and a nuanced statement on this:

Disciples and Roman Catholics both recognize the importance of the way in which the Gospel has been received and handed on from generation to generation for an authentic understanding of Scripture. They recognize a process of development in the understanding of doctrine in the Church which can be traced through history. Reception plays a crucial part in this ongoing process. Disciples and Roman Catholics are not unanimous on the ways in which reception is achieved, but they agree on its necessity (*RHF*, §3.26).

That could be regarded as a rather banal statement, but part of its significance lies in the fact that it recognizes that one cannot simply read answers out of Scripture to contemporary problems without taking account of the way in which the Church's understanding of the faith has developed over the centuries. Section 4 of this Statement develops this at greater length, starting from an important paragraph in the report of the previous phase: 'Roman Catholics are convinced that, although they must decide for themselves, they cannot decide by themselves. Disciples, on the other hand, are convinced that, although they cannot decide by themselves, they must decide for themselves' (*CCC*, §16). This led to a discussion of 'Conscience, Freedom and Being in Christ' and 'Teaching with Authority'. In both respects differences between our two communions became more apparent. One issue concerns what happens when Christians disagree

with the prevailing teaching or practice because of their discernment of the Word of God; the other concerns the location of the responsibility for teaching the faith.

The Commission's conclusion was as follows:

For both Roman Catholics and Disciples the authority of the Church's teaching derives from a combination of elements; the truths of revelation, the theological arguments based upon them to guide human thought and behaviour, the position and experience of those responsible for teaching, and reception by the whole Church. However, the relative weight attached to the elements differs between Roman Catholics and Disciples. Thus the claims made for the authority of the Church in matters of conscience differ in our two communities. In the Roman Catholic Church those with episcopal or primatial oversight, who hold the apostolic teaching office conferred by ordination, can at times make decisions binding upon the conscience of Roman Catholics. For Disciples ultimate oversight rests with a General Assembly or Conference (comprising both ministers and other church members), but their decisions do not bind the conscience of individual members. The Commission needs to reflect further on whether these different emphases can be held together within the one Body of Christ (*RHF*, §4.16)

In conclusion, however, the Commission returned to a discussion of the way in which the whole Church is involved in handing on the faith, emphasising again that this is a matter of faithful lives as much as teaching: 'Teaching the faith is more than communicating the contents of a catechism or a book on Bible history and doctrine. It is inseparable from the witness of a faithful life and authentic devotion to God and the Church' (*RHF*, §5.6).

The sacraments

The other theme running through the first three Agreed Statements is the sacraments. Reference has already been made to the agreements on baptism noted in the first phase as well as the differences (*A&C*, §§24-34), culminating in an affirmation of mutual recognition of baptism. In the second phase reflection on the biblical usage of the concept of memory led to a series of affirmations about the way in which the Spirit makes Christ present to the members of the community in the Eucharist. Both Disciples and Roman Catholics celebrate the Eucharist regularly and frequently - at least every Sunday. Hence the Eucharist has a specific role in each communion of making real and deepening visible fellowship with God, and empowering members of the Church to be made a part of the work of reconciliation in the world. 'The Eucharist both symbolizes and makes present, together with the gift of Christ himself, the salvation offered through him' (*CCC*, §30). Furthermore the essentially communal nature of the Eucharist most fully expresses the fellowship that is the Church and impels all who share in it 'to extend themselves in care for all those in God's creation, especially those who suffer' (*CCC*, §31). Finally, 'God in Christ invites to the Eucharist, and through the Holy Spirit binds together into one body, all who break the one loaf and share the one cup. At the Lord's table the unity of the Church is accomplished, for believers are joined to Christ and to one another' (*CCC*, §32). These are all significant agreements, even if we are well aware that there is further work to be done.

Furthermore we agreed on the significance of the celebration of the Eucharist as a realization of the visibility of the Church:

There, gathered together and after having confessed their faith, the baptized people receive the body and blood of Christ, the Son of God who reconciled humanity to God in one body through the cross. There they enter into communion with the

saints and members of the whole household of God. Moreover, what is celebrated at the Eucharist has to be actualized in a life of common prayer and faith, of faithfulness to the Gospel, of sharing the spiritual and even material goods of the community, and of commitment to the will of God that the saving work of Christ be extended as offer to all (*CCC*, §48).

There is a shared sacramental emphasis among Disciples and Roman Catholics which made it possible for us to agree ‘that the Church is the company of all the baptized, the community through which they are constantly kept in the memory of the apostolic witness and nourished by the Eucharist. The Eucharist is never celebrated and received by a member isolated from an ecclesial community gathered around its ministers. The Church is therefore at the same time the sign of salvation (to be saved is to be in communion) and the community through which this salvation is offered’ (*CCC*, §49).

We probably said less on the sacraments in the last phase than in the two previous ones. Nevertheless there was an important statement at the end of the section on the Word of God:

Disciples of Christ and Roman Catholics agree on the necessary link between the Word and the sacraments. The Word of God has its own efficacy: and its saving power is experienced most fully when the Word is received together with the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. The fullness of the Good News is received in the gift of communion with God and with each other, a communion beginning through baptism and incorporation into the Body of Christ and extending throughout one’s life, In both the Roman Catholic Church and the Disciples of Christ the sacraments make real the communion the Gospel announces. The sacraments are by their nature integral to the life and being of the Church. They bring a new believer into the community, creating a link between the believer and all other Christians in every time and place. Thus each believer receives the living Tradition, becomes part of it, and participates in passing it on (*RHF*, §2.5).

The Commission proposed that the next phase of the dialogue should focus on ‘the presence of Christ in the Church, with special reference to the eucharist’, and this proposal has been adopted.

Hermeneutics

Tom Best in his comments on the Agreed Statement of the Third Phase has drawn attention to a statement in the section on Future Work:

As we have grown to understand each other better, we have also become aware that we often do and say the same things but for different reasons. There is a need to investigate whether there is mutual recognition of the legitimacy of different ways of arriving at the same practices or the same conclusions. We also sometimes do different things to achieve the same purpose, and there is a corresponding need to reflect upon the legitimacy of that (*RHF*, §6.1).

He goes on to ask, ‘When working towards mutual recognition, when seeking to discern the church in other churches, how do we know when a form of words or practice which differs from ours expresses, in fact, the same understanding of faith? More troublingly, is it possible that the same form of words or practice in fact expresses, within another confessional or cultural context, a different understanding of the faith?’ (*Call to Unity*, 1, 2003, p. 39). These are important questions, and it would be good to bear them in mind as we approach our new Phase of work.

Two reflections occur to me. One is that certain words actually carry a range of meanings, and the key thing is to be sure that the same meaning is intended on each occasion. Take, for

example, the word 'Church'. This may refer to the Church in general or to particular Churches. For the most part references to 'Church' in our Statements refer to the Church in general rather than to particular Churches. Historically there has been a tendency on the part of the Roman Catholic Church to equate the Church in general with the Roman Catholic Church; but this was clearly dispelled by the Second Vatican Council, and indeed this was a development which made possible their ecumenical initiatives from 1965 onwards. The fact that international theological dialogues are understood as taking part within the Church, rather than between those inside the Church and those outside it, has made a tremendous difference to the kind of ecumenical development that has been possible. Of course, those of us who are not Roman Catholics understand the limits of the development that has taken place; the question asked by Avery Dulles about whether the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church and its pastors has diminished in the second millennium illustrates the way in which even a very experienced theologian still instinctively equates 'Church' with 'Roman Catholic Church', if the distinction is not specifically made, in more recent times (*Call to Unity*, 1, 2003, p. 33). The question of whom the Holy Spirit was guiding to do what in the period since the Church became visibly divided cannot be answered with reference to one part of the Church alone.

The second reflection is that much of the work in our Dialogue has been historical. The hermeneutical implication of this is that we have tended to use words as they were used in particular historical contexts, and we have also been sensitive to the way in which the context has varied over time. We have also paid particular attention to the way in which the Church has handled particular issues at different periods, recognizing that the whole history of the Church needs to be understood in the way in which we approach the problems caused by division.

Conclusion

Although the Dialogue recorded some early agreements on the significance of the sacraments, and although there have been continued references to them in the subsequent phases of our work, we have not addressed sacramental issues directly since the first phase. It is the intention of the forthcoming phase to remedy that neglect, but in a particular way. Instead of taking either baptism or holy communion as a specific topic in itself, it has been decided to make the primary emphasis the presence of Christ in the Church. Although there will be special reference to the Eucharist, the reason for addressing the topic in this way is to sustain the attempt which has characterized the whole of the Dialogue thus far in holding issues of ecclesiology and sacramentality together. There is a regular tendency to separate them, but it is our conviction that holding them together will provide important insights for each. Moreover such an approach is congenial to both our traditions.

The Planning Group has proposed that in 2005 we should consider the presence of Christ in the Church under two main headings: the Church as the visible form of God's grace, and the Church's visible shape in history. Both of these pick up points in *Apostolicity and Catholicity*, and will enable us to discuss sacramentality in general and baptism and the eucharist in particular, as well as the community of faith, the ministers of the eucharist, and the unity of the Church in time and space. In 2006 we hope to take the discussion of ecclesiology further with reference to the Church as the community of the baptized, the role of ministers in re-presenting Christ to the Church, *episkope* and episcopacy, and the primacy of the Bishop of Rome. Then in 2007 we shall return to sacramentality with reference of the Church as sacrament, the ideas of sacrifice and thanksgiving/propitiation, real presence and transubstantiation, and the reception of communion and *koinonia*. In 2008 we shall hope to identify new agreements which can be expressed in a fourth Agreed Statement, which will be drafted in 2008-9 and presented for

discussion and approval in 2009. Experience suggests that it may be necessary to modify the programme in detail as we proceed, but at least that gives a sense of the main objectives. As in previous sessions it will be important to link the way in which we talk of the visibility of the presence of Christ in the eucharist with the way in which Christ is visible in the Church more broadly, not only as a theological principle but as a lived experience of the faithful. Thus the other part of our discussion at this first meeting of a new phase will be concerned with how we understand the presence of Christ in history and among us today.