
The Form and Function of Ecumenical Statements: Orthodox Reflections on the Way to Porto Alegre

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The period proceeding a General Assembly of the World Council of Churches is a natural time for self-review and self-evaluation within the ecumenical world. It is a moment when past achievements and aspirations of the movement can be weighed and measured, and future goals and hopes articulated. It is a time when basic assumptions, methods, and trends in inter-church relations can be revisited, problems identified, and new formulations proposed.

The Faith and Order Commission at the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. has provided a very timely focus for this self-review with its four-year study of the "full communion" proposals of the document "The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling."¹ This document, adopted at the General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Canberra, Australia, 1991, is among the more significant and ambitious attempts of the last fifteen years to address directly the problem of the disunity of the churches, and its reception by the churches is a useful gauge for analyzing the state of our ecumenical conversation as it stands at the beginning of the twenty first century.

The commission's work, summarized in O.C. Edwards' article "Meanings of Full Communion: The Essence of Life in the Body,"² was built around a series of papers submitted by a broad and representative group of Christian scholars on aspects of the document's reception. Opinions and views were sought from over fifteen diverse traditions, including mainline Protestants, Anglicans, Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Evangelicals, Baptists, and Quakers. Responses varied, but the commission's findings were generally disappointing. Edwards writes:

The main result of this provisional study, however, has been to see that many of the churches that use the Canberra model find their own sense of the essence of being in the Body of Christ to lie in a *sine qua non* that the *koinonia* categories really do not touch. Other traditions find the entire Canberra mode of stating things to be foreign to their way of thinking.³

1. In Michael Kinnamon, ed., *Signs of the Spirit: Official Report, Seventh Assembly, Canberra, Australia, 7-20 February 1991* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1991), 172-174.

2. O.C. Edwards, Jr., "Meanings of Full Communion: The Essence of Life in the Body," *Speaking of Unity* 1, no.1/2/3 (2005): 9-35.

3. *Ibid.*, 33.

Apparently the Canberra document has not only failed to capture specific and essential complexities of how churches understand the communion and reconciliation process, but in many cases it has not even embraced the basic "mode" of how certain churches approach communion and church unity in the first place. Although Edwards' conclusions are nuanced, it is clear that the document has not succeeded in addressing the theological problems of the disunity of the church in a substantial way, and, in fourteen years, its *koinonia* theology has failed to gain widespread support among the churches as a viable theology of communion. Indeed, the study seems to indicate that the document has not only failed to embody progress in theological convergence *per se*, but has not even succeeded in identifying and addressing real points of divergence. It has not embraced many of the essential concerns of the churches, and most of the churches have not - and cannot - "receive" the document in a substantial way.

Edwards himself remains hopeful that the Canberra text contains seeds of an approach that will still bear fruit, but the overwhelmingly negative nature of the commission's findings raises serious questions about the state of contemporary ecumenical dialogue. Edwards' conclusions do not suggest that one isolated text is slightly defective, and that a few quick editorial changes could resolve any and all problems. His findings indicate that, even after eighty years of dialogue, major ecumenical documents can be produced that have almost no effect on leading the churches closer to unity. His results point to deep, structural problems in ecumenical processes and, in particular, to problems in the methods and processes surrounding the formation and implementation of ecumenical texts. Very different ideas of the nature of ecumenical documents, how these documents should be constructed, what they should contain, and how they should function are clearly operating alongside each other and "talking past each other" on a regular basis.

To resolve this dissonance, it is perhaps equally clear that churches and ecumenical bodies must now engage in a new, sustained dialogue on all aspects of ecumenical text production, including questions of text formation, intent, language, structure, and reception. Not only individual texts, but ecumenical text production as a whole, must be brought to the center of ecumenical conversation. The vehicles of the dialogue must be as much a topic of discussion among the churches as the content of the dialogue.

This new conversation, however, if it is to be effective, must be as comprehensive as it is constant. It must include a careful examination of not only the formal theological characteristics of documents, but also of their entire textual life, from their conception to adoption, and the range of factors, both theological and practical, that go into their production in councils and their reception by the churches. There are many layers of meaning embedded in ecumenical texts, and many ways of embedding this meaning. All of these must be carefully explored to understand not only the formal responses of churches

to the documents, but what “really happens” - or does not happen - to texts as they are created and move through the infrastructures of the various churches and ecumenical councils. It is to this discussion that this essay seeks to make a small contribution.

A CASE STUDY: THE ORTHODOX

The initiative in this conversation can only lie with the churches themselves. Only confessional reflections can offer accurate and frank assessments of the intra-church status of adopted texts of WCC assemblies and other ecumenical bodies, and express why it is that these texts are acceptable or not, or helpful or not, and what might improve the *status quo*. The Orthodox Church, as something of a dissenting voice in mainstream ecumenical engagement, is a useful - if sobering - place to start this conversation.

Sadly, it is probably fair to suggest that the Commission’s conclusions would not come as a surprise to many Orthodox observers. Indeed, many Orthodox would doubtless *expect* such results. The Orthodox have largely become inured to the fact that the vast majority of documents produced by the ecumenical movement are “no go” as theological documents. They have simply encountered too many documents that are theologically impossible. As a result, in practice, a negative assessment tends to be the starting point for consideration of such texts, and it is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that value in these texts is not even sought in the theological viability of the documents *per se* - which is not expected to be great - but simply in their value as instruments in promoting further and deeper conversation with other Christians. Documents are thus rarely “received” on their own terms, as true common theological statements that churches can make “their own.” They are received rather as specialized, technical documents that have significance almost exclusively as tools for furthering inter-Christian dialogue and conversation.⁴ As a result, the theology of ecumenical documents enjoys very little internal circulation in the Orthodox world, and remains largely the domain of a small, specialized cadre of church officials. The Orthodox thus participate in ecumenical dialogue but almost never truly receive *any* document. Indeed, it is rare for any to even come close.

This state of affairs represents something of ecumenical stalemate. The drafters of the documents expect the documents to have real theological impact and value. The Orthodox expect that the documents will not. The drafters understand the acceptance of the documents to mean one thing; the Orthodox another. While the conversation is never brought to an end - which is positive

4. This can lead to the common - and for outsiders, deeply aggravating - situation in which Orthodox participate in the formation of such documents, and even “accept” them, but do not later fully support the theology expressed in them. The *conversation* is valued, and “accepted,” but not necessarily the full theological implications of the documents.

- it is often difficult to see that it ever makes any progress either. The drafters systematically fail to make an impact on the Orthodox world, and the Orthodox fail to communicate their deep, systematic reservations about the documents that keep them from deeper commitment. A diplomatic *detente* seems to exist in place of real theological dialogue.

There are, however, reasons why the Orthodox have developed almost a systematic rejection of most contemporary ecumenical documents, and, likewise, there are ways of addressing these problems, which are by no means inevitable nor irreparable. We can identify three general areas of characteristics and presuppositions of contemporary ecumenical texts that are the foci of divergence: 1) the nature of ecumenical dialogue; 2) questions of style, ethos, and appearances; 3) general theological method.

I. THE NATURE OF ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE

It is increasingly recognized that the Orthodox perception of the nature and bases of ecumenical engagement is different from that of the Reformation-era churches who form the majority of most multilateral councils of churches. What is not often articulated, however, is how these differences play out in how statements are produced and received.

For the Orthodox, ecumenical gatherings are above all gatherings or forums of *churches*. The primary agents or subjects of dialogue (as well as the objects of the dialogue) are always the churches themselves. Unity is to be sought through the mutual action of these churches, and the council is essentially a facilitating body that is transparent to the will and desires of the churches assembled. The councils do not in themselves have any ecclesial reality, and are not viewed as in any way "proto unified churches"; they are not the object of the dialogue themselves, and they do not have "positions" or any real corporate existence in the dialogue. They are neutral coordinating bodies that serve the agendas for unity of the member churches. Agenda items arises from the churches themselves, actions are moved forward on a consensus basis, and nothing substantial is produced that does not reflect all voices present at the table. Most importantly, churches are entirely self-determining, and membership *per se* in a council in no way makes claims on a church's self-conception or positions (although it will expose churches to dialogue with other churches that may challenge these positions). Indeed, the *sine qua non* of formal ecumenical gathering is that all churches are able to come to the table with their full and authentic self-perceptions in no way mitigated by participation in the dialogue.

In the majority view, however, the councils are very much the focus of the dialogue. They exist almost as subjective entities in and of themselves outside of and almost above the churches, able to "speak" to the churches and "challenge"

and urge the churches towards certain positions and ideas. The emphasis, with various levels of nuance, is on getting “past” one’s own traditional self-perceptions, and accepting a broader common identity. Unity is developed in and through the institutions of the councils, as opposed to the institutions of the churches. At least two tacit claims are made on churches’ self-understandings:

1) That member churches are fundamentally *parts* of a broader, greater church of Christ, which finds its greatest expression in ecumenical gatherings. Churches are all “denominations,” or “types,” of the church, and joining a council confirms this understanding. Membership implies, at least *de facto*, that all churches have a uniform and common perception of each other’s ecclesial status.

2) That the church finds a natural and valid expression in a popular assembly. In this conception, the very gathering of Christians in a ruled, moderated forum, and taking decisions by majority vote, constitutes a valid ecclesial reality with the ability to produce binding, authoritative decisions for its members, at least in moral implication. If a body comes to a majority opinion on some topic, this decision should have ecclesial force for all members concerned. Ecumenical gatherings, since they have the form of such a popular *ekklesiai*, and are extremely broad and representative bodies, are naturally invested with considerable ecclesial reality and authority, more so than any individual church. As a result, doctrines and positions of particular churches can be challenged and “negotiated” in a theologically legitimate way, as the authority of the whole council exceeds that of the teaching authority of its “parts.” Indeed, positions can be adopted that can contradict positions brought to the table by individual churches.

Contemporary ecumenical councils exist somewhere between these two models, although it is probably fair to suggest that most councils operate *de facto*, if not *de jure*, according to the latter, more Protestant model. As such, documents tend to be produced that embody the latter model’s presuppositions. Two tendencies, in particular, can be noted.

First, as a rule, the texts are heavily denominationalist in tone and implication. It is usually clear, for example, that a document, developed from the most broad majority possible, speaks for “the Church” in a way that is beyond the member “churches,” which are thus assumed to share an ecclesial perception of each other as equal parts of a greater whole.⁵

In the more church-based model, by contrast, documents tend to be in report-form, and great pains are taken to ensure complete ecclesiological neutrality by speaking only out of the voice of the plurality of the specific

5. This denominationalism is so ingrained in ecumenical texts as to be almost undetectable to non-Orthodox ears. But it must be recalled that simply the ambiguous use of “church” and “churches” without reference to particular churches (as throughout the Canberra text), and without reference to the historical relations among them, sounds denominationalist to Orthodox ears. “Church” must always have a historical, traditional, institutional referent in Orthodox ecclesiology.

churches gathered in the dialogue.

Second, and more importantly, texts tend to be produced in the latter model that are not reflective of all the positions of the churches. An ecumenical text garners authority by virtue of its being adopted on a majority vote, and, on this basis, can validly represent third party positions outside of and different from those of the churches.⁶ Documents thus tend to present synthetic and novel doctrinal solutions to problems, and these can be directed to the churches in a confident, almost didactic manner. In this model, key elements of church's self-understandings (Edwards' "*sine qua non*") can and almost should be ignored, because it is precisely these conceptions that need to be challenged.⁷

This approach is in stark distinction to the more church-based model, where statements must be as accurate reflections as possible of the positions of the churches and their relationships with each other, agreements and disagreements.

It is not difficult to see why the Orthodox - and others - find documents produced with these two tendencies quite perplexing. A very foreign and, indeed, impossible, conception of ecumenical engagement becomes *embedded in the fundamental structures of the texts themselves*. Documents acquire a built-in denominationalism and an ecclesial popularism which are not Orthodox doctrines and have never been accepted by the Orthodox church.

More importantly, they combine to produce the impression that ecumenical councils operate as "super-churches," that is, as novel, synthetic, and autonomous bodies that have an ecclesial existence beyond and outside the member churches themselves - an impossibility for Orthodox doctrine and their understanding of how the churches may one day be reconciled.⁸ Essential elements of Orthodox identity are thus pushed from the table by the conventions of the expressions of the dialogue itself, almost independently of the specific content of any document.

A very problematic - and often unrecognized - phenomenon can thus be

6. And indeed, even contradicting teachings of churches, as the Canberra text does. For example, Canberra promotes the idea of "eucharistic hospitality" (para. 3.2), a notion that is widely condemned, even formally, in Orthodox circles, and is rejected again, if softly, in the Orthodox statement at Canberra itself (II. 6). Texts in Kinnamon, *Signs of the Spirit*, pp. 172-174, 279-282.

7. It is worth noting that, in this model, the commission's complaint that the Canberra text has neglected to address critical elements of churches' self-understanding is simply beside the point. Churches are not *supposed* to find themselves or their "key" issues in ecumenical texts; they are to find something different, which they are to consider adopting.

8. It is worth noting that the idea of ecumenical bodies as super-churches was formally condemned in the WCC in the famous 1950 Toronto Statement (www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/who/morges-o1-e.html). The notion's extirpation from the constitutional framework of the WCC has not, however, necessarily meant its removal from the processes and procedures of the councils' operations and text production.

identified as operative in documents of the Canberra type: specific *positions* of certain churches (for example, denominationalism and ecclesial popularism) have become inherent in the structures and tools of the dialogue itself. These positions are not simply positions around a neutral table; they have become the table. Thus, dissenters from these positions end up automatically rejecting the entire production of such dialogue - i.e. the dialogue itself - since rejection of the dialogue is, ironically, the only way of genuinely dialoguing with opposing positions inherent in the method of that dialogue! Not surprisingly, the result of this situation is that the nature of the dialogue itself becomes the sole topic of real conversation among the churches - and not anything produced by the dialogue. Obviously this is very confusing, and not a terribly productive form for ecumenical dialogue.

II. STYLE, ETHOS, AND APPEARANCES

Over the last ten years or so, it has been much more common in ecumenical circles to hear concerns raised over not simply the content of ecumenical dialogue and its tangible elements, constitutions, bases, bylaws, procedures, etc., but also over the less tangible factors of ethos, style, language, form of texts, art, and self-presentation.⁹ In effect, there has developed much greater sensitivity to not only *what* we are doing, but *how* we are doing it. Indeed, this is part of a broader intellectual trend that recognizes the degree to which "the medium is the message." The forms of discourse, the conventions of language and style, are themselves as important vehicles of meaning as the explicit propositional content of a text.

Such factors are another major source of difficulty for the Orthodox in the reception of contemporary ecumenical texts. Rightly or wrongly, Orthodox Christians tend to feel that the dominant discourse of ecumenical discussion is overwhelmingly liberal Protestant. We have already noted the ways in which they feel ecumenical texts carry a built-in denominationalism and ecclesial populism. In a similar vein, they are often uncomfortable with the preponderance of vocabulary, phrases, and stylistic devices in ecumenical texts drawn from particular Protestant theologies, especially liberation and social justice theologies, as well as certain streams of biblical criticism and even psychological and sociological theory. Each phrase and choice of word can inadvertently draft an entire set of assumptions into a text that can affect the meaning considerably and alienate

9. One can note, for example, the mandate of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the World Council of Churches: "to study and analyze the whole spectrum of issues related to Orthodox participation in the WCC. . . and to make proposals [to the WCC Central Committee] concerning the necessary changes in structure, *style and ethos* of the Council" [emphasis mine], Final Report of the Special Commission, Section A.1.5, <http://www2.wcc-coe.org/ccdocuments.nsf/index/gen-5-en.html>.

portions of the readership for whom these assumptions are not givens. Many types of liberation theology, for example, are held in considerable suspicion by Orthodox theologians, and if documents are framed in such terms,¹⁰ even only stylistically, they can be very difficult to accept. The tendency to mix different theological stylizations and vocabularies, and create new linguistic syntheses (the *koinonia* theology of the Canberra document is perhaps one example), is also disconcerting for Orthodox, as it is again redolent of the synthetic or super church model of ecumenical engagement and the creation of a new "super tradition." In any case, the form and texture of the documents is often perceived to be biased, and it becomes extremely difficult to accept texts in a substantial way with so many semantic loose-ends and half-allusions, whatever their exact content.

The external environment surrounding the formation of ecumenical texts can likewise affect the production and reception of texts. It is undeniable, for example, that most ecumenical meetings look and operate rather like the assemblies of main-line Protestant churches. The aesthetics, the "manners," the assumptions about worship, the protocols - even the humor! - all conspire to create a very pan-Protestant atmosphere. The artwork has a tendency in the same direction. While such matters of appearance can seem superficial, they contribute to an overall sense of alienation for some churches that does affect how texts are read, or simply not read. Certainly they do not discourage the notion that simply being part of ecumenical dialogue somehow requires something of a "Protestantification" of method and thought. At times, such factors can almost derail the dialogue altogether. A dramatic example was afforded at the Canberra Assembly itself. One of the initial speakers gave a speech that was full of references and overtones that seemed syncretistic and pagan to most Orthodox observers. While the speech in no way reflected WCC policy nor had an impact on the actual content of the Assembly's work, the set of images and associations that the speaker was able to attach to the Assembly and the WCC had a devastating impact on the Assembly's, and the WCC's, credibility in the Orthodox world. To this day it remains very difficult in Orthodoxy to raise anything seriously in connection with Canberra - including the Assembly's text - because of this one event.

III. THEOLOGICAL METHOD

The final area of divergence, "theological method," encompasses a number of issues that, although closely related to the preceding areas, concerns more

10. Such as "empowerment," "liberation," "tools of oppression," "solidarity," "struggle," "class" - even "justice" if not cited in a clear biblical context. It must be noted that it is not the use of any of these words per se that is problematic; it is the aggregate effect of their habitual and frequent use in documents.

closely the content of ecumenical documents, and how theological content is conceived.

The theological method evident in most ecumenical texts, with some exceptions, adheres closely to models and forms of classical western systematic and confessional theology. That is, theological content is conveyed in tightly written documents of a confessional form, with numbered paragraphs, systematic categorization of themes, a declarative style, and a general orientation towards the development of formulas and propositions.

This method has much to commend it, especially in the areas of clarity and ease of distribution and communication. Nevertheless, there are many churches for whom this theological method is quite foreign, or at least secondary. The Orthodox, for example, have not until very recently been much given to writing dogmatic theologies at all.¹¹ Many other traditions locate their core identity in precisely not utilizing confessions or creeds of any sort. Even those churches, such as the Orthodox, that do utilize some form of formal propositional theological method often view it as only one part of a much greater whole, without which it cannot be properly understood. In any case, when the textual vehicles of the dialogue assume only one theological method, it can be very difficult for some churches to make accurate and coherent contributions. Churches' native "modes" of thinking theologically are excluded, and documents produced in these circumstances will always feel foreign and somehow inadequate.

In one unfortunate respect, however, ecumenical documents differ from classical systematic and confessional texts: ecumenical documents tend to lack *complexity*. It is to this problem that many of the difficulties that Edwards identifies can be traced. Ecumenical documents are usually short, pithy, and simple. As a result, they rarely are able to address the enormous spectrum of Christian opinion that must be brought to bear on even the most focused topics. More seriously, they lack the necessary semantic controls by which churches can accurately assess their meaning. In particular, such texts very rarely evince any type of substantial referencing outside of themselves, either historically or to other contemporary documents. Without clear relationships established with historical trajectories of thought, and modern theologies, the texts lack the complexity and sophistication necessary for substantial theological engagement of any type, much less reception.¹² Certainly for the Orthodox, this lack of historical referencing, the location of the text in reference to traditional texts, makes ecumenical documents almost *inherently* ambiguous and extremely difficult to receive in

11. Exegetical works, patristic *florilegia*, sermons, and monastic spiritual writings have tended to dominate theological teaching on the lower levels; literary oratorical expositions at the advanced.

12. For example, a bare statement about the "symbolic" nature of sacraments, without any further clarification, could be subscribed to by both Orthodox and Calvinists; but the Orthodox would understand something very different than the Calvinists, and their "common" subscription, without further reference to the Orthodox and Calvinist traditions, would be meaningless.

any substantial way.¹³ Most churches, in their native theological methodologies, have very defined, if not always explicit, networks of texts and assumptions by which all theological statements must be read. Theological assertions and ideas - especially from bodies outside of oneself - cannot be considered, much less accepted, without some explicit reference to these networks. Without such referencing, one is left with texts that, in their very ambiguity, seem to assume a break with the past, suggesting, it seems, that for ecumenical progress to continue a new Christian synthesis is needed altogether - another incarnation of the super church method of ecumenical engagement.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

It is much easier to critique existing structures and practices than to propose constructive changes and new patterns. Happily, however, many of the problems identified in this essay have been increasingly recognized in the years since Canberra and steps have been taken to address them. The "Special Commission on Orthodox Participation" in the WCC, for example, has made a number of recommendations that will undoubtedly contribute to addressing many of the concerns of sections I and II above. The WCC has now clearly accepted that very different ecclesiological presuppositions are brought to the dialogue by the churches, and it has committed to providing a table where all are truly welcome. It has also recognized that issues of ethos and style play a real role in ecumenical dialogue. Most importantly, it has introduced a form of consensus decision making that is already fostering broader and more diverse discussion, and producing more measured and representative documents.¹⁴

Nevertheless, many problems continue to demand creative thought. The issues in section III, for example, raise a number of serious questions relating to whether ecumenical statements of the Canberra type should continue to be at the center of ecumenical dialogue at all. It may be time to consider whether other texts, such as more descriptive study statements, or traditional texts from the churches themselves, classical theological works, historical confessional documents etc., may be better center-pieces for ecumenical conversation. Or it may be time to stop focusing on textual production altogether, and re-direct our

13. This complaint has often emerged in pleas for greater attention to not only "ecumenism in space," but also "ecumenism in time"; see for example the Orthodox statement at the WCC General Assembly at New Dehli, most conveniently in Constantin G. Patelos, ed., *The Orthodox Church in the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: WCC Press, 1978), 97-98. See also my much more substantial treatment of this problem in "An Orthodox Critique of the Common Statement," *Ecclesiology* 2.1 (2005): 53-70.

14. See for example the February 10-22, 2005 releases surrounding the conversations of the February meeting of the WCC Central Committee, www.wcc-coe.org.

attention to the processes of dialogue or more project-oriented results.¹⁵

In any case, ecumenical dialogue is a long-term project, which, taken in the perspective of the breadth of church history - to say nothing of salvation history - is just beginning. There are an extraordinary number of factors that come into play when churches enter into conversation with each other, and in many ways the essence of our dialogue with each other is the process of self-review and self-analysis in this dialogue. But there are many, many possibilities and as we move together towards Porto Alegre prospects are bright.

15. It would be an interesting exercise for the U.S. Faith and Order Commission as it continues to meet to develop a proposal for a new dialogue process or statement that would take into account their findings and concerns. One hopes the NCCCUSA Faith and Order Commission has not ended its work where it should begin!