PORVOO AND THE LEUENBERG CONCORD - ARE THEY COMPATIBLE?

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The Nordic Background

During the 1970s the Nordic European Lutheran churches discussed intensively whether they should join the Leuenberg Concord, a continental European theological agreement which declares a church fellowship among various churches coming from Lutheran, United and Reformed traditions. After long considerations the Nordic churches did not sign the concord, although they continued to participate in the so-called Leuenberg doctrinal discussions. Reasons for this decision have largely remained unexplored. It is sometimes claimed that while the negative answer in Denmark and Norway was based on the assumption that the national church order does not easily allow for binding ecumenical agreements, the Finnish and Swedish churches had serious doubts in regard to the theology applied in the Leuenberg Concord.1)

At least in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland this was clearly the case. In May 1977 the Finnish Synod decided not to sign the Concord, although many prominent Finnish theologians, e.g. the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) President Mikko Juva, were among its supporters. The majority of the synod found that the theological method of the Concord was not acceptable; they also pointed out that the eucharistic articles of the Concord were not in agreement with Lutheran theology.2)

The Finnish doubts concerning Leuenberg found an elaborate theological expression in Tuomo Mannermaa’s monograph study which appeared in Finnish 1978 and in German 1981. This book had a profound and long-lasting effect to Finnish ecumenism. Mannermaa argues that the Leuenberg Concord grows out from a Barthian actualistic theology which was made compatible with an existential interpretation of Protestantism. As a result the Concord often replaces doctrinal issues and quantitative unity statements with experiential and qualitative expressions. Thus the unity statements of the Concord relate rather to the individual prerequisites of doctrine than to its factual content.3)

The new millennium has, however, changed the Nordic Lutheran ecumenical scene. A year ago (1999/2000) the Church of Norway decided to join the Leuenberg Church Fellowship, and now, in June 2001, the Church of Denmark has also signed the Leuenberg Concord. Although we are not yet in the position to evaluate what changes in church history brought about this new development, I am convinced that the Porvoo Common Statement has given some impetus to the churches also in this respect.

In Finnish church newspaper Kotimaa the editorial of June 1, 2001 claims that after the decisions in Norway and Denmark Leuenberg should be re-examined in Finland also. Two weeks later Juhani Forsberg writes in Kotimaa that the Finnish Lutherans should not rush to Leuenberg. If any re-examination occurs, it should be based on two considerations: 1. whether the teaching of the Finnish church has changed in some way after the 1970s, and 2. whether the work of Leuenberg Church Fellowship has undergone such developments that would speak for the signing of the concord today.

These two considerations of Juhani Forsberg are highly relevant not only for the Finnish church situation today but also for our general topic. In the following I will
address these two issues in order to highlight the compatibility between Porvoo and Leuenberg. I will use the situation of the Finnish church as an example which, I hope, sheds light on the difficult but important issue of the compatibility of various ecumenical agreements.

Is There a New Situation after Porvoo?

In view of Juhani Forsberg’s first consideration I think that we must answer positively: yes, the teaching of Finnish church has changed as a result of various synodal decisions and binding ecumenical agreements between 1977 and 2001. In 1984 and 1990 the LWF decided that all member churches, including Finland, are in a pulpit and altar fellowship and that they belong to one Lutheran communion. In November 1995 the Finnish synod adopted the Porvoo Common Statement. Domestic doctrinal decisions include e.g. the decision to ordain women in 1986.

Of course there is a deeper sense in which the doctrine of the church does not and should not change. But at the concrete level of agreements things have clearly changed and some anomalous situations have emerged as a result. For instance, the LWF communion implies that the Finnish church is in communion with the Lutheran territorial churches of the German Evangelical Church (EKD), but not with the United territorial churches in Germany. When the Finnish church sends pastors to Germany, special arrangements are needed - and some theological matters must be ignored - in order that they can work in the United territories also. A common European Protestant church fellowship would regularize this anomaly.

More interesting and more difficult is the issue whether the Porvoo Common Statement has changed the teaching of Finnish church. One can argue e.g. that the ability to tolerate existing differences within one communion has clearly grown as a result of Porvoo communion. The Church of England embraces doctrines and practices which derive from many traditions, including the Roman Catholic and the Reformed ones. A communion with this pluriformity necessarily brings about an awareness of existing differences and a certain tolerance of them.

In view of the compatibility of Porvoo and Leuenberg, the Reformed wing of Anglicanism is particularly interesting but much neglected in today’s ecumenical evaluation of Porvoo. Since Nordic Lutheran churches have a long tradition of dealing with the Reformed features of Anglicanism, an awareness of this history can be helpful. The Finnish historian Tuija Laine, for instance, has identified over one hundred English devotional books that were translated and read in Finland already before 1809. Concerning the theology of this literature Tuija Laine writes:

“From an orthodox Lutheran point of view, the original English books were heretical. Therefore, the translations had to be revised and moulded according to Lutheran doctrine before the censorship officials were satisfied. Without exception, the Calvinist teachings on Communion and predestination were rejected. ... Puritan books were considered especially harmful. However, not even the clergy could always distinguish between the books of the Puritans and the High Church Anglicans, so both were equally rejected.”

Tuija Laine shows that Anglicanism was in Finland considered as a type of Calvinism. In spite of active censorship English devotional books were translated and read intensively. Many English books had a significant and lasting impact on Finnish Pietist and revivalist leaders. For instance, a choice drop of honey from the rock Christ by the Puritan preacher Thomas Wilcox (1690) has been read in Finnish Pietism from
the 18th century until today. Finns have thus been well aware of the Reformed elements of English and Anglican theology.

In keeping with this history one may argue that the Porvoo communion means not only a reception of peculiar episcopal succession or other High Church elements, but also an appreciation of those Reformed elements of Anglicanism which have fertilized the Scandinavian Pietism since 300 years and continue to do so today in the form of various evangelical movements. This side of Porvoo has, however, not been much discussed in Finland nor elsewhere.

On the contrary, Porvoo has been regarded by many as quasi-Catholic and anti-Presbyterian because of its emphasis on episcopacy. I have some fears that even the present book may strengthen this prejudice if the continental Protestantism remains neglected. We know that in Germany many theologians have found Porvoo to be theologically problematic. Likewise the Church of Denmark could not sign the Porvoo Common Statement because Danish theologians criticized it heavily.

But if the comprehensive nature of Anglicanism can be grasped and received, the Porvoo communion might open us doors for a positive reception of Reformed theology and church life. A comprehensive reception of Porvoo could then bring about a reconsideration which may lead to the signing of Leuenberg. In this context the English-German Meissen Agreement and the English-French Reuilly Agreement can provide the Nordic churches with an example. If the Church of England is ready to enter an altar and pulpit fellowship with the EKD and with the French Protestants, why should another member church of Porvoo communion limit its contacts to the Lutheran territorial churches only?

But can Porvoo be a real resource in Lutheran-Reformed relations? Isn’t it rather the case that Porvoo is and should remain an Episcopalian counterweight to the Presbyterian-minded Leuenberg Church Fellowship? This counterweight view is in my view both historically and ecumenically problematic. It is historically false since it ignores the pluriformity of Anglicanism, and ecumenically problematic since it ignores the strong presence of episcopal churches within Leuenberg church fellowship. We have today two churches which are members in both Porvoo and Leuenberg. These churches, Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Church of Norway, are quite typical Nordic churches.

The counterweight view is further untenable when we study the Leuenberg, Meissen and Porvoo texts together. This was done by a comprehensive theological group in a trilateral consultation in Liebfrauenberg 1995. In his Liebfrauenberg presentation the French Lutheran theologian André Birmelé draws the conclusion that in the three documents a basic consensus can be found in regard to following topics:

- the authority of Scripture
- the authority of the Creeds of the Early Church
- the understanding of the Gospel as the message of the justifying action of God
- baptism and the Eucharist
- the understanding of the Church as the community of the faithful which lives from word and sacrament
- the eschatological completion.

Birmelé further argues that most items of this basic consensus have been dealt with in the international dialogues and other doctrinal discussions of the ecumenical movement, such as the “Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry” (BEM, 1982) process. The ecumenical contributions which have emerged after 1970s thus contribute greatly to the new openness of which Porvoo Communion is one prominent witness.
In this sense the teaching of the Finnish church, as well as of many other churches, has changed or developed since the 1970s as a result of various ecumenical processes. This development, of which Porvoo is an especially rich resource and milestone, enables a re-evaluation of our earlier decisions. One may note that since Porvoo draws many items immediately from BEM and since the Reformed and the United churches have embraced BEM, a member church of Porvoo can employ the BEM text as a resource in approaching the Leuenberg Church Fellowship today. As a common metatext of many different ecumenical agreements BEM is especially helpful in defining the compatibility issues.

What Is Leuenberg Like Today?

Concerning the second question put forward by Juhani Forsberg, the Leuenberg Church Fellowship has also changed since the 1970s. One of the problems attacked by Mannermaa and other Nordic theologians during the 1970s was that the Leuenberg Concord states a “proleptic” consensus, i.e. a view that we already now agree in faith, although many doctrinal issues, e.g. in regard to ecclesiology and ministry, remain unsolved. A critic can easily argue that this simply shows a lack of consensus in the quantitative content of the doctrine.9)

The Leuenberg Church Fellowship has, however, continued its doctrinal talks for thirty years and produced many new documents which explain the achieved consensus. In view of Porvoo communion the most important document is the ecclesiological text “The Church of Jesus Christ” (1995) which extensively spells out the understanding of the church and ministry in the Leuenberg group. This text also includes the so-called “Tampere theses” which aim at explaining the nature of ministry and episkopé within the Leuenberg church fellowship. They state e.g. that

“The Lutheran as well as the Reformed and the United churches recognize pastoral care and episkopé as belonging to the ordained ministry both in the individual congregation and also at a level ... going beyond the congregation. ... The Lutheran churches, especially in Scandinavia, put more stress on continuity with the historical office of the bishop whereas the Reformed churches are committed in principle to a presbyterial-synodical order. Nonetheless, the churches participating in the Leuenberg Agreement concur in regarding the service of episkopé as a service of the Word for the unity of the church and that in all churches the non-ordained members of the church also participate in the leadership of the church.”10)

The subsequent developments of Leuenberg doctrinal talks have been reviewed e.g. in the Liebfrauenberg 1995 consultation. In his Liebfrauenberg contribution the Swedish Lutheran theologian Ragnar Persenius finds that “The Church of Jesus Christ” is “a real progress”, but doubts still whether the original Leuenberg Concord remains only a minimal consensus document which leaves the ecclesiological issues unsolved. 11) Since the churches have only signed the original Leuenberg Concord text of 1973, this doubt is well founded. It remains an issue of trust whether the subsequent doctrinal talks really have achieved something or whether they only present opinions prevailing in some parts of the Leuenberg fellowship.

On the other hand, if there is trust and willingness to say that “The Church of Jesus Christ” and other documents are genuine expressions of Leuenberg theology, one can find them very helpful in the evaluation of the Concord itself. In its common report the Liebfrauenberg 1995 consultation explicitly states:
“The Nordic Lutheran churches should examine whether, especially in view of the recent Leuenberg document “The Church of Jesus Christ”, their existing participation in the Leuenberg Church Fellowship could not be extended and deepened.”

In the light of this recommendation I made already 1996 a proposal that the Finnish church should seriously consider negotiating a “Leuenberg variata” agreement, i.e. a document in which a preamble or an annex to the Leuenberg Concord of 1973 would state the achieved convergence in ecclesiology, ministry and perhaps sacramental theology. As a technical model the churches could employ the “Joint Declaration of Church Fellowship” agreement between Leuenberg Church Fellowship and the European methodists. This agreement declares a church fellowship between the Leuenberg churches and the Methodist churches in Europe; it employs the Leuenberg concord as its basis.

In Finland my proposal passed more or less unnoticed, but I still think that this kind of “Leuenberg variata” would be a useful model for the Finnish and Swedish churches in defining their relationship to the United and Reformed churches in the European continent. Such agreement would also give more weight to “The Church of Jesus Christ” text within Leuenberg Church Fellowship. Meissen and Reuilly agreements and the recent agreement between American Lutheran and Reformed churches should also be consulted in this process.

In my 1996 proposal I also discussed the big stumbling block of the 1970s, i.e. the methodology of Leuenberg concord. It is true that the idea of a “proleptic” consensus is not unproblematic. The achievements of subsequent doctrinal talks have, however, given more credibility to the concord. Moreover, other texts such as BEM and many bilaterals, have been able to show that important doctrinal convergences really exist.

My main criticism to Mannermaa’s book was that he overemphasizes the genesis of the Leuenberg Concord. He succeeds in showing that some earlier versions of the Concord gravely neglect the quantitative consensus in doctrine. But I argue that the final Concord to a great extent corrects this problem through employing important quantitative statements which give the final document credibility and theological weight. Moreover, other texts such as BEM and many bilaterals, have been able to show that important doctrinal convergences really exist.

A Caution: Leuenberg and Porvoo as Instruments of Church Politics

Thus far I have argued that a) I agree with André Birmelé that there is a basic doctrinal consensus among Leuenberg, Meissen and Porvoo agreements and that they are in that
sense mutually compatible, and b) that for historical and theological reasons the Porvoo communion can help the Nordic Lutheran churches to define their relationship to Reformed and United churches. I am of course aware that the issues of ecclesiology and ordained ministry are not yet solved between the churches. The ministry of the bishop still causes problems between the Episcopal and Presbyterian branches of Protestantism.

One reason why I have not dealt with the disputes between episcopal and presbyterial church order is that they have not been a stumbling block among Nordic Lutherans. In Finland we are critical of Reformed theology for quite other reasons than church order and the nature of ordained ministry. We tolerate and even embrace presbyterial features in our congregations and revivalist movements. It is hard to explain to Continental European or American Lutherans why Finnish theologians and pastors generally find Porvoo a good agreement but Leuenberg very problematic. We know that e.g. in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America the situation is a different one: whereas the altar and pulpit fellowship with the Reformed churches was passed 1997 without much controversy, the agreement with the Episcopal Church continues to be hardly debated.

Theological factors play here an important role which should not be neglected. In addition, some non-theological factors need to be mentioned. Leuenberg Church Fellowship is at least in Finland often regarded as an instrument of the EKD and related to the idea of building a European Protestant Forum which could and should become a counterweight to Roman Catholicism. Nordic Lutherans are very suspicious of splitting Christianity into two competing confessions. Our folk church tradition presupposes that the majority church represents the whole of Christianity, not a special confession.

These non-theological or semi-theological factors became visible in the context of the recent “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” (JD, 1999), a global Lutheran - Roman Catholic agreement in which the mutual condemnations concerning the doctrine of justification were declared to be non-applicable to today’s churches. JD was much debated in Germany, where only the Lutheran territorial churches participated in the JD process. Some of the United territorial churches felt that they were neglected. Thus the EKD, the Leuenberg Church Fellowship and in particular many German university theologians became active in debating the JD.17) In Nordic countries many theologians felt that the German United churches and the Leuenberg Church Fellowship were acting around JD as an external pressure group in an inadequate manner. Leuenberg Concord was highlighted by some as the ecumenical agreement par excellence to which loyalty must be shown before any other agreements can be made.18) Such voices caused a lot of indignation in Northern Europe since they were often interpreted as expressions of arrogance and hegemony.

One must add that in the final rounds of the JD process the churches of the Leuenberg Church Fellowship acted rather fairly. But my experience is that at least in Finland today most theologians who support Porvoo and JD are very consciously against joining the Leuenberg Church Fellowship. This attitude got stronger during the German debates around the JD. The JD process is thus an instructive example of how a third party can influence the behaviour of ecumenical partners and how theological voices are interpreted in terms of non-theological factors. Much remains to be learned and we cannot predict how churches and individual theologians will behave in complex ecumenical situations.

We must also learn to study whether the Porvoo communion is a product of abstract theological wisdom alone. Perhaps future church historians will evaluate it
rather as one aspect of English cultural orientation. Non-theological factors, such as the predominance of English language and cultural orientation in all Nordic countries certainly contribute to the popularity of Porvoo today. Church historians in Finland are beginning to point out that the traditional low church and lay-centered Finnish Pietism is currently being replaced by a more episcopal view of the church. The ministry of the bishop has also been strengthened by the mass media which has lifted some bishops to act as the spokesmen and the public “face” of their communities. Caution and skill to distinguish between theological and contextual matters is needed when Porvoo is being applied to the concrete life of the churches. Ecumenical texts are useful tools for guiding the church, but they can become instrumentalized in a manner which is not adequate.

Notes:

1) See e.g. the various Nordic contributions in the volume Leuenberg, Meissen and Porvoo (Leuenberger Texte 4), ed. Wilhem Hüffmeier and Colin Podmore, Frankfurt: Lembeck 1996. (in the following: LMP) and materials available in Leuenberg internet site www.leuenberg.net. A note on language: Leuenberg Concord (or agreement) is the text, Leuenberg Church Fellowship is the organisation or communion which the signatory churches form together.


5) Laine, op.cit. 221-229. First Finnish translation was printed 1779, until 1852 there were six printings, and the book is still today available in Finnish! For a different evaluation of Reformed influence in Finland, see Eero Huovinen, Safeguarding Classical Christianity: Ecumenical Relations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, The Ecumenical Review 1996, 69-78, esp. 75.

6) Reinhard Frieling, Kritische Anfragen an Porvoo aus der Sicht der Leuenberger Konkordie, LMP 163-172. Danish criticisms are collected in the 2/1995 issue of the journal Fönimx.


8) Birmelé, op.cit. 57-65.
9) Mannermaa, op.cit.


12) LMP 13. 


14) The American document “A Formula of Agreement” is available e.g. in www.elca.org. For Meissen, Reuilly and various compatibility issues see the excellent book of André Birmelé, La communion ecclesiale, Paris: Cerf 2000. 


18) E.g. in a position paper of 141 theology professors (epd-Dokumentation 7/98, 1) it was said that with the JD “ist zugleich die Gemeinschaft mit den nicht zum Lutherischen Weltbund gehörenden evangelischen Kirchen Deutschlands in Frage gestellt. Das gilt auch für die Leuenberger Gemeinschaft”. 