The Lutheran-Orthodox joint commission: our work 1994-2003

Saarinen, Risto

Peter Lang
2005


http://hdl.handle.net/10138/41940

Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.

This is an electronic reprint of the original article.
This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.
Please cite the original version.
The Lutheran - Orthodox Joint Commission: Our Work 1994-2003

Risto Saarinen

The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) conducts a global bilateral theological dialogue with Eastern Orthodoxy since 1981. The historical background of these conversations is found in diverse regional dialogues and in the contacts between the LWF and the Ecumenical Patriarchate, both of which started in the late 1950s. In comparison with many regional dialogues, the global Lutheran-Orthodox Joint Commission has proceeded slowly in its work and the production of common statements has been difficult. I have described the twelve first years of this dialogue elsewhere; in the present brief and documentary article I will review the work of the Lutheran-Orthodox Joint Commission from 1994 to 2003. Anna Marie Aagaard was member of this commission until 2000. It was not least due to her active commitment that the dialogue finally began, as will be shown below, to achieve some theological results during the years 1998-2000.

From 1981 to 1993, the first phase of the dialogue dealt with introductory topics like revelation, Scripture and tradition and the significance of the ecumenical councils. Since 1994 the Joint Commission has been occupied with soteriology and the sacraments. Thus it has moved to a second phase of its work, namely discussions regarding the dogmatic content of faith.

In a somewhat unclear manner, the soteriological texts of this second phase, Limassol 1995 and Sigtuna 1998, appear as parts B. and C. under the general rubric "Authority in and of the Church in the Light of the Ecumenical Councils." The part A. of this rubric was already employed in the Joint Commission's Sandbjerg 1993 text which discusses the ecumenical councils and thus belongs to the first phase of the dialogue. This state of affairs reflects the complicated procedure of a dialogue walking along unknown ecumenical paths while at the same time trying to keep its original discussion mandate in mind.

While the Lutheran participants are nominated from among the

---

2 Saarinen 1997, 179-209.
member churches of the LWF, the Orthodox delegates represent all churches that are in communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate as well as with the Patriarchate of Moscow. Lutherans thus lack the participation of Missouri-related churches, whereas the Orthodox delegation does not include some branches of American Orthodoxy. Greek theologians have been especially active in the Joint Commission; the Lutheran interest has concentrated on the areas in which local dialogues have taken place, in particular Germany, USA, Finland and Romania.³

The working procedure of the Joint Commission consists of plenaries and preparatory group meetings. The preparatory group meets every second year, presents first versions of discussion papers and drafts a proposal for a common statement to be discussed by the next year's plenary. Sometimes the preparatory draft has been completely rewritten during the plenary meeting, and always it has become significantly revised. Since the joint statements are written during the meetings, both parties must be able to have drafters who can draw together and formulate very rapidly the intensive discussions of both the preparatory group and the plenary.

Limassol 1995: Soteriology of the Ecumenical Councils

The preparatory group of the Joint Commission came together to discuss "Soteriology" in Venice from October 5 to 10, 1994. On the basis of two preparatory lectures, first draft of a statement "Understanding of Salvation in the Light of the Ecumenical Councils" was written and sent to the participants. In this first draft the Lutheran doctrine of justification was presented as forensic and relational event. The draft is unclear of whether the Orthodox side approves of this description of salvation.⁴

The plenary then met at Limassol, Cyprus, from August 1 to 8, 1995.


⁴ All unpublished drafts, aide-memoires and lectures are available at the Ecumenical Archive of the University of Helsinki and in the Institute for Ecumenical Research, Strasbourg. Present were in Venice: Lutherans: William Lazareth (co-chair), Anna Marie Aagaard, Gerhard Krodel, Eugene Brand; Orthodox: John Romanides, Albert Latham, Gennadios Limouris
Finnish Lutheran bishop Kalevi Toiviainen criticized the draft because of its forensic and relational emphases. He also lifted up the view of Christ present in the faith of the justified person as an alternative which may serve as bridge between Lutheran and Orthodox soteriologies. Toiviainen's initiative thus brought the results of regional Finnish-Russian and German-Romanian dialogues to the Joint Commission.5

A new draft was elaborated in which Toiviainen's proposals were taken into account. It was nevertheless extremely difficult to find common ground. This was not due to Lutheran accents but rather to the insistence of the Orthodox drafters who claimed that the threefold sequence of "purification, illumination and glorification" is the only acceptable characterization of salvation. This claim, put forward with great emphasis by John Romanides, did not seem to provide many points of convergence with the Lutheran doctrine of justification. For this reason, the final text of Limassol 1995 remains very general in its common affirmations.6

In this text one should first look at how Lutherans formulate their own doctrine. Justification is understood as forgiveness of sin and the gift of new life. As such justification becomes a participation in Christ present in faith. The believer participates in Christ and all his gifts in the church. (L9) This Lutheran description keeps the door open towards a sacramental and ontological understanding of salvation, as emphasized by the Orthodox churches. With a similar Lutheran move it had already been possible to formulate common statements in the regional dialogues7. But since this was not possible at Limassol, Lutherans were


6 This and some of the following represent the author's own judgment. The drafting group of Limassol consisted of Laham, Phidas, Romanides, Aagaard, Marshall and Saarinen. - In the following, the paragraph number of the text is given in brackets as follows: L = Limassol 1995, S = Sigtuna 1998, D = Damascus 2000, O = Oslo 2002. The source texts are found either in www.helsinki.fi/~risaarin (English) or in Dokumente 1983-2003 (German).

7 Especially in the Finnish-Russian and German-Romanian dialogues, see Saarinen 1997.
rather disappointed with the outcome of this plenary.

Churches say together in the common statement of Limassol 1995 that salvation is understood as "liberation from the dominion of the devil and the restoration of our communion with God" (L6). The threefold structure of purification, illumination and glorification also appears in the text. It is presented as outcome of the salvific communion and understood in the light of several biblical texts. (L6) This was a compromise that receives some concepts of mystical theology while embedding them into a biblical framework.

Sigtuna 1998: Justification, Theosis and Synergy

The difficulties experienced at Limassol delayed the rhythm of the next preparatory meeting. After more than two years' interval it took place in Princeton, USA, from October 9 to 11, 1997. From the Lutheran side, Bruce Marshall had prepared an extensive background paper titled "Salvation as Justification and Deification", whereas the corresponding Orthodox paper by Vlassios Phidas dealt with "Synergy".\(^8\) Marshall reviewed extensively the soteriological outcome of various regional dialogues. Thus his paper offered a theological support for the Lutheran view expressed in Limassol. The text of Phidas formulated many points of convergence regarding the difficult topic of salvific co-operation.

With the help of these two constructive papers the Princeton meeting was able to draft a preparatory statement "Grace, Justification and Synergy". It was further developed and discussed at the plenary meeting in Sigtuna, Sweden, from July 31 to August 8, 1998.\(^9\)

The Sigtuna meeting was an exceptionally constructive plenary in the history of the Joint Commission. It did not create much new, but the plenary was able to adopt the outline of Princeton text. Thus the Joint Commission finally received many of the soteriological insights of earlier regional dialogues. The common statement of Sigtuna was titled

\(^{8}\) Manuscripts available in the above-mentioned archives. Marshall's paper has later been published as "Justification as Declaration and Deification", *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 4, 2002, 3-28. - Present were: Lutherans: Lazareth (co-chair), Aagaard, Marshall, Saarinen, Sven Oppegaard; Orthodox: Spiridon (co-chair), Chrysanthos, Gennadios, Phidas.

\(^{9}\) Present were: Lutherans: Lazareth (co-chair), Kretschmar, Aagaard, Lars Eckerdal, Toiviainen, Eeva Martikainen, Albrecht, Felmy, Hirpo, Johnson, Paul, Pitters, Oppegaard; Orthodox: Spiridon (co-chair), Gennadios, Romanides, Phidas, Ionita, Osipov, Merras.
as "Salvation: Grace, Justification and Synergy". In eight long paragraphs, a biblical outline of salvation history and the doctrine of grace is outlined. Sigtuna text emphasizes the human powerlessness and God's initiative in salvation. Grace is totally and fully the gift of God. Only the Holy Spirit can enlighten and strengthen the human will.

(S4-5).

Concerning the paragraph on the interplay between God and the human will, in other words: synergy, it is stated jointly that grace does not work out of necessity. Human beings can resist grace. The Orthodox side now also emphasizes the absolute initiative of God in the process of salvation. (S5) Both churches affirm the reality of grace as a participation in God. Lutherans are able to affirm the biblical meaning of theosis (2 Peter 1:4 and Col. 2:9). Traditionally, Lutheran theology does not speak about theosis but about sanctification or the presence of Christ in faith. Although Lutherans have not received the doctrine of theosis as such, the view of Christ present in faith can be employed as a theological parallel to the Orthodox understanding of salvation. In this sense both churches can affirm the reality of the believer's participation in divine life. In this context the theology of the cross is underlined.

(S6-7).

For several reasons it may be said that the text adopted in Sigtuna remains the most important theological result of the Lutheran-Orthodox Joint Commission thus far. The Orthodox side presents the doctrine of theosis in such a manner that the Lutherans were able to understand it as a biblical view. On the other hand, Lutherans introduced the concept of sanctification, or the insight concerning the presence of Christ in faith, from their tradition and used it to argue that the Protestant doctrine of justification is not completely alien to the idea of participation in divine life. The Sigtuna text employs biblical language and avoids stating anything on the extremely difficult issue of whether this participation exclusively consists of God's "energies", as the Palamitic version of Orthodox mysticism has claimed.

The preparatory group met again at Khania, Crete, from October 9 to 13, 1999. It drafted a text titled "Word and Sacraments (Mysteria) in the Life of the Church". The draft was strongly revised at the tenth

---


11 See also the insightful analyses by Johannes Oldemann, "Rechtfertigung und Theosis im Kontext des ökumenischen Dialogs mit der Orthodoxie", Catholica 56, 2002, 173-192.
plenary meeting of the Joint Commission at Damascus from November 3 to 10, 2000.\textsuperscript{12} This text also begins a new overall topic "The Mystery of the Church".

The Damascus text contains a general presentation of the concept of sacrament and a joint discussion concerning the Word of God. In the beginning, the biblical concept of mysterion is characterized and the church is described as the body of Christ. The grace of the sacraments is conceived as a free gift of God. (D1-3).

For the Lutheran participants it was of great importance that the Word of God then becomes introduced in a manner that is both kerygmatic and trinitarian. Word and sacrament have their foundation in Christ. The sacramental grace flows from the sacrifice of Christ in Golgatha. (D4-5). When the believers confess the faith of the church and participate in the sacramental life of the church, a human response to the Word of God is performed (D6). In this dynamics of word and response the Orthodox idea of synergy also finds its expression. In this framework the word can be said to have a temporal priority in relation to the sacraments. But the text also states that word and sacrament are interdependent. (D6)

In spite of these convergences it was difficult in Damascus to achieve a more precise common understanding of the nature of the church and its ministry. In its final paragraphs the common text says that Lutherans and Orthodox understand the church as the body of Christ which is both a divine and a human reality. The church exists as a community of the faithful through the history. The Damascus statement confirms that the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments by the ordained ministers are essential for the life of the church. In the sacrament created things become symbols of Christ's sacrifice and resurrection. When the text finally says that the sacraments enable a participation in the koinonia of the triune God, it becomes clear that the "symbol" comprises the reality of salvation. (D7-8).

The Damascus text employs the two background papers, "The Life

\textsuperscript{12} Holm 2002 has published the English text of both Khania 1999 and Damascus 2000. - Present at Khania were: Lutherans: Lazareth (co-chair), Kretschmar, Aagaard, Saarinen, Oppegaard; Orthodox: Gennadios (co-chair), Laham, Phidas, Elpidophoros Lambriniadis. - Present in Damascus were: Lutherans: Lazareth (co-chair), Aagard, Musa Biyela, Lars Eckerdal, Felmy, Kretschmar, Mickey Mattox, Pitters, Saarinen, Klaus Schwarz, Jeffrey Silcock; Orthodox: Gennadios (co-chair), Lambriniadis, Christos Voulgaris, Osipov, Ionita, Wsiewolod Konach, Merras, Saba Esber.
of the Church in Word and Sacrament” by Georg Kretschmar, and “The Word of God and Sacraments in the Life of the Church” by Vlassios Phidas. It was important for Lutherans that word and sacrament could be elaborated in a theological and, in particular, ecclesiological manner. The good experiences from Sigtuna, as well as the readiness of Lutherans to speak of salvation as participation in divine life, contributed to this state of affairs. But it was also evident in Damascus that the basic ecclesiological differences are not found in this topic, but rather in the churches' view of ministry. It is therefore understandable that the new general rubric, “The Mystery of the Church” still remains in the background.

Oslo 2002: Sacraments as Means of Salvation

The preparatory committee met again in St. Petersburg from February 19 to 23, 2002. It commented the papers by Christos Voulgaris, “The Sacraments of the Church as Means of Salvation” and Jeffrey Silcock, “The Sacraments as Means of Salvation”. It also prepared a draft "Mysteria/ Sacraments as Means of Salvation". Again the theology of ministry remained in the background; both the papers and the draft concentrate on the number and theological meaning of sacraments.

At the eleventh plenary of the Joint Commission in Oslo, October 3 to 10, 2002, we were glad to see that the Patriarchate of Jerusalem and the Church of Serbia were represented in the Orthodox delegation. The Orthodox involvement in our ecumenical dialogue was thus strengthened at the same time while many Orthodox exercised criticism at the ecumenical movement. The draft from St. Petersburg was almost completely rewritten in Oslo. Some topics, for instance the eucharistic sacrifice, were extensively discussed in the background papers and in

---

13 Manuscripts, Helsinki and Strasbourg archives mentioned above.
14 Manuscripts are available in above-mentioned archives. Present were: Lutherans: Kretschmar (co-chair), Saarinen, Oppegaard, Mattox, Silcock; Orthodox: Gennadios (co-chair), Voulgaris, Osipov, Ionita, Laham, Lambriniadis.
15 The final text of Oslo is available in English in www.helsinki.fi/~risaarinen and in German in Ökumenische Rundschau 52, 2003, 227-229. Present were: Lutherans: Kretschmar (co-chair), Oppegaard, Felmy, Esbjörn Hagberg, Marshall, Martikainen, Pitters, Roman Pracki, Saarinen, Schwarz, Silcock, Mattox; Orthodox: Gennadios (co-chair), Lambriniadis, Phidas, Laham, Aristarchos of Constantin (Jerusalem), Osipov, Vajko Spasojevich (Serbia), Ionita, Georgios of Arsinoe, Wsievolod Konach, Merras, Meletios Ulm.
the plenary, but left unmentioned in the common statement. In spite of these limitations the statement was able to reach some interesting convergences.

The opening paragraphs outline the salvatory significance of sacraments and connect the topic with ecclesiology. A careful elaboration of eucharistic ecclesiology can be recognized. As in Damascus 2000, the church is described as mysterion and as the body of Christ. This time, however, the description is distinguished from the Roman Catholic view of the church as sacrament. (O1-2).

The iure divino character of ordained ministry is underlined. Although both churches can say that the ordained minister in some sense performs the office “in persona Christi”, it remains clear that different views of ministry underlie the common affirmation. (O3) Concerning the effect of the sacrament, however, a genuine convergence is achieved: both churches reject on the one hand the Donatist heresy and on the other hand the view that the sacraments would be effective by the mere performance of an act (ex opere operato). (O4-5).

The Oslo text also deals with the number of sacraments. Both churches affirm an open concept of sacramental reality and say that although a given number of sacraments - seven or two - is traditional, this need not be the only theological possibility. Salvation is, however, invariably connected with the sacraments, even though both churches affirm the freedom of God's salvatory action. The text further emphasizes the importance of the three sacraments of initiation, baptism and the eucharist being the proper means of salvation. (O5-6).

Both churches affirm the real presence of Christ in the eucharist. The Orthodox do not say, however, that the body and blood of Christ are “in, with and under” the bread. Instead, they claim that after the epiclesis there is no more bread and wine, but the body and blood of Christ. This formulation does not mean an affirmation of transubstantiation, but it only emphasizes the reality of the change in elements. (O7) In spite of the expressed convergence on the issue of real presence, the eucharistic theology still needs to be developed in future discussions. The issue of sacrifice needs to be addressed; the Oslo formulations further allow for different interpretations of the real presence in the eucharist.

Although many tasks still remain, Oslo 2002 common statement brings the global dialogue more or less to the level achieved in some regional dialogues concerning sacramental theology. Both in
Damascus 2000 and in Oslo 2002 the Orthodox participants have been able to approach the specific doctrinal issues of Lutheran sacramental theology. This mutual understanding is especially visible in chapters dealing with "ex opere operato" and the real presence. At the same time, the theology of ordained ministry remains open.

Future Prospects: 2003 and Beyond

In spite of the above-stated lacunas in eucharistic theology, the plenary in Oslo decided to discuss as its next topic "Baptism and Chrismation as Sacraments of Incorporation into the Church". For this purpose, a preparatory meeting was held in Ierapetra, Crete from 1 to 6 October 2003. The plenary meeting held in Durau, Romania, 7 to 15 October 2004, was given the task of elaborating the results of this preparatory meeting.

Even though a discussion of baptismal theology can be regarded as a necessary step in the deeper understanding of sacraments, one cannot avoid the conclusion that the treatment of ecclesiology and in particular the theology of ministry were again postponed. It is obvious that the most difficult problems are found in this area. Given the failure of regional dialogues to produce real progress regarding church and priesthood it is understandable that the global Joint Commission hesitates to discuss the nature and purpose of the church. Some other developments in contemporary Orthodoxy, for instance the Orthodox criticism of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in the late 1990s and the ecumenical and social ethical guidelines of the Russian Orthodox church from August 2000 seem to signalize that no real progress in ecumenical ecclesiology will occur in the imminent future.

Let it finally be stated that Anna Marie Aagaard's personal activity and insight were again seminal when the Orthodox criticism of the WCC was being discussed from 1999 to 2003. That the so-called

---

16 When the present Festschrift is published, my above-mentioned website will inform of the results of these discussions.
17 Cf. e.g. Saarinen 1997, 261-263.
19 In addition to her personal work in that commission, her book: Anna Marie Aagaard & Peter Bouteneff, Beyond the East-West Divide: The World Council of Churches and "the Orthodox Problem", Geneva: WCC 2001, should here be highlighted.
"Special Commission for the Orthodox Participation in the WCC" was able to create confidence and let the Orthodox voice be better heard in the WCC certainly had to do with many things. Among them, various bilateral dialogues had at least created a network of ongoing doctrinal work which takes the concerns of the Orthodox churches very seriously. At both personal and thematic level, there was thus a constructive interaction between our Joint Commission and the simultaneous discussion in the WCC.

The work of Lutheran - Orthodox Joint Commission from 1994 to 2003 should be read against the sometimes very critical and many-sided background of wider ecumenical movement. The bilateral discussions described above may appear as tedious and old-fashioned. No participant of our dialogue would claim, I think, that any great ecumenical breakthrough has taken place. But it is also evident that the second decade (1994-2003) of the Joint Commission's work has been more fruitful than its first decade (1981-1993). Given that during the second decade the Orthodox have been critical of Western churches in many other ecumenical forums, it is encouraging to note that they have at the same time worked seriously and consistently in the Lutheran - Orthodox Joint Commission. Similar observations can be made concerning some regional dialogues as well.20

Of course this does not mean that we should be satisfied with the results of Lutheran - Orthodox Joint Commission. Many thematic items would have deserved a more profound and comprehensive treatment. But at least our dialogue has continued with some integrity and the participating churches have been able to draft modest common statements. There are not many other areas in which similar Lutheran - Orthodox cooperation has taken place. It may be possible to replace a theological dialogue with some other form of confidence-building cooperation. Church leaders should honestly consider such other forms of mutual contacts. But at least until Lutherans and Orthodox find other fruitful and long-standing forms of cooperation and common exercise of Christian faith, we are called to continue our doctrinal dialogue in this modest but nevertheless continuous and constructive fashion.