

## Christian disunity - the Archbishop's new approach

### 4. A good pragmatic answer

I want to recommend Dr Williams's approach as a good pragmatic answer to the failure of the covenant proposals in 1982. Standing where he does between Rome and outright Protestant Dissent, he is in a good position to see the whole ecumenical situation in the round. The leaders of the the United Reformed Church have, as it seems to me, never had to lift up their eyes to the hills of Rome, because their assumption has always been that before we came to that potential obstacle to visible organic unity the United Reformed Church would be safely tucked up in some larger organisation, and some one else would have to undertake the negotiations. No Archbishop of Canterbury has ever had that comfortable option.

I think that it is very important that we in the URC now pause for a moment and consider where we are going and what it would feel like to arrive at the end of the road to visible organic unity. That means considering, however superficially, the present position of the Roman Catholic church. I do not suggest that any of us will be there at the end of the road; but it is often convenient to be clear about where one is going. A second reason for looking in the general direction of Rome is that examining the official Roman Catholic position on a religious problem often clarifies the mind. Thirdly, if you know what you do not believe, you are half way towards understanding what you would want to say to the world affirmatively if you had to continue in separate existence for an indefinite period playing a part in a Christian orchestra (or chorus).

But before looking at the official position of the Roman Catholic church on unity today, which is bound to be unfamiliar work and a little bit technical, I have to accept that it would be much easier simply to go on as before. We in the URC could return a polite formal answer to the Archishop, thanking him for his concern, pointing out that we are all very busy at the moment, and asking if he would mind calling back later. We might even ask our leaders to try to speed up the existing negotiating process a bit to get it over with. Those of our ministers who are engaged in negotiating with the Methodists and the Anglicans wrote in a recent report about their negotiations being like a stately dance. We could encourage them to break into a quickstep with a view to an early result. We could urge our ministers to resign themselves to re-ordination. We could resolve not to grumble when next asked to raise our contributions to the Ministry and Mission Fund by 3% yet again while we wait for a new covenant, or, worse still, a new merger. We could continue to mark time filled with foreboding, for even a covenant is likely to lead to unwelcome change. It makes me gloomy when I contemplate either of

these scenarios. I think that it might be more exciting to take up Dr Williams's invitation to pick up a new life with a purpose as a separate community.

The argument in this piece. As we shall see, Rome has a timescale in which seventeen or eighteen hundred years are like an evening gone. At our present rate of contraction we seem likely to have about thirty. We are, or should be, in a hurry to 'make a difference' in what remains for us of separate existence. Now is, surely, not the time to be bargaining away the hard won insights of the last Protestant Reformation, just when, looking to the future, freedom to speak about Jesus to our neighbours is at a premium. It is not just that we owe it to the people outside church doors to maintain the belief that God is still at work and (in among other places) still at work in the labours of biblical scholars and historians. Our Roman Catholic friends, who are at last beginning to yearn and agitate for freedom, will be badly let down if we now sell out for some 'formula we can just about live with'. We must, I believe, look to the future and leave the divisions of the past to wither if they will. We are often billed as one of the 'free' churches; I have tried to explore one aspect of freedom in considering Dr Williams's idea of 'space' in my pieces under the title *\*Defending the church's truth claims\** on this website.

The Archbishop and the Cardinal. Wishing to make clear his commitment to Christian unity, Dr Williams went out of his way to visit both Rome and Istanbul (Constantinople) in the first year of his new ministry. He later delivered a keynote address at the conference on unity held at St Albans Cathedral on the 17th May 2003. Dr Williams clearly has relations with Rome in the forefront of his mind; he can hardly have forgotten about Rome when putting forward his new approach. The conference at St Albans was notable for the presence of a very distinguished representative of the Roman Catholic church, Cardinal Kasper. He was (and may still be) the current President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. His keynote address to the conference was a definitive exposition of 'pluriformity within unity' as understood in Rome in 2003. I urge you to read what he said. It can be found at [www.sfes.faithweb.com](http://www.sfes.faithweb.com)

What is Rome's vision of unity?

Rome's contribution to unity. Only one matter needs to be mentioned before commenting on Cardinal Kasper's careful presentation. Whatever the situation may have been when negotiations about institutional unity first started, today the pope regards declaring what the Christian faith is as his contribution to unity. In his introductory letter to the *\*Catechism of the Catholic Church\** (English version, Geoffrey Chapman, 1994). he writes of the Catechism as "intended to support

ecumenical efforts that are moved by the holy desire for unity of all Christians, showing carefully the content and wondrous harmony of the Catholic faith". I have looked at some aspects of that harmony which I find disturbing in my pieces on \*Defending the church's truth claims\* on this website.

Rome validates. How does Rome go about securing unity? It is clear that Rome sees the way to unity as a process of negotiation in which Rome decides what is and what is not 'valid'. Unity is all about Rome acknowledging that other people's visions are, or are not, valid. That is what the Roman church means by 'pluriformity within unity'.

Dealing with the Assyrian church. Cardinal Kasper gave this example: "The Assyrian Church, which separated" [from the Roman church, that is] "in the 4th century after the third Ecumenical Council of Ephesus (381) and which for a long time was accused of being Nestorian, uses as anaphora (eucharistic prayer), the anaphora of Adai and Mari, without the words of institution in a narrative form. It is probably the oldest anaphora we know, going back to the second century and composed in the Aramaic language, the language of Jesus himself. This church, which possesses an undoubtedly valid episcopate, confesses the same eucharistic faith we confess. It is unimaginable and unthinkable that she has celebrated throughout the centuries a Eucharist that is invalid. Thus two years ago the validity of this anaphora was officially acknowledged by the Catholic Church.

One of the most renowned liturgists has expressed the opinion that this decision is the most important ecumenical decision since the Second Vatican Council, because it touches the very heart of the Eucharist and is therefore of fundamental significance for the concept of pluriformity within unity." (my square brackets)

The key words in that passage (apart from "thus two years ago the validity of this anaphora was officially acknowledged by the Catholic Church") are "without the words of institution in a narrative form"; that is, the Assyrian church has been holding 'communion services' and its people have been 'taking communion' without telling the familiar story beginning with the words "the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread" and so on. It is reasonably certain that the Assyrian church has been using this eucharistic prayer in Aramaic from the very beginning; for who can imagine circumstances in which a church would feel it right later on to remove the words of institution from the liturgy, if they had ever been included in it?

The wider importance of the separate witness of the Assyrian church. The anaphora of Adai and Mari can be found on the internet and makes strange reading to us in the West today, but it is important for any one who is concerned to know as much as possibly can be known about that amazing time when the Jesus phenomenon was fresh in every believer's mind. This importance becomes apparent when we enquire how this separate tradition can possibly have survived. Trying to answer that question takes us straight back to the first days after the crucifixion when the earliest followers of Jesus were coming to terms with his continued presence with them and wondering how best to celebrate that presence. How can we account for the striking omission of the words of institution, which the Western church has come to see as the heart of the Eucharist? Syria is not all that far from Jerusalem as the crow flies. The Jewish community there must have been one of the first communities outside Jerusalem to hear of the resurrection. If Jesus did himself institute the Eucharist at the Last Supper, as the Roman church believes, it is difficult, but not impossible, to imagine how any Christian community so close to Jerusalem could in the early days remain ignorant of that important action of Jesus. Yet, if the Assyrian church knew from the beginning that Jesus had instituted the sacred meal, what conceivable reason is there why that community should have chosen to omit the words of institution? One possible conclusion would be that it had been founded by persons bearing a separate tradition.

Why did the Assyrian tradition endure? There must have come a time, long before the split with the Roman church became formalised, at which the Assyrian church became aware that most other Christians had a liturgy which included words of institution. Why not join the pack at that stage? Surely, they did not join the pack because they thought that their tradition was a better tradition; 'better' because that is what they had been taught by those who had seen the Lord and had walked all the way from Jerusalem to tell them about it. The implication is that the Assyrian church received the gospel at a time when the words of institution were not part of the eucharistic liturgy of the persons who brought the gospel to them. This possibility is reinforced by the existence of the early church manual known as the \*Didache\*

The \*Didache\*. It is, I believe, of great significance that the absence of any words of institution in the anaphora of Adai and Mari has a close parallel in the absence of any words of institution in the forms of service in the \*Didache\*. The \*Teaching of the Twelve Apostles\*, or \*Didache\*, is, I believe, the oldest surviving book of church order. There are good reasons for thinking that it was written in Syria at the end of the first century CE. It contains two forms of eucharistic celebration, but in neither of them is there a hint of a Passover meal, of a Last Supper, or of a connection with the death of Jesus: see the discussion in John Dominic Crossan's \*Historical Jesus\* HarperSanFrancisco, 1991 p. 360 and following.

The evidence of the practice of the Assyrian church community from the second century CE taken together with the manual of church order produced in Syria at the end of the first century CE strongly suggests that there was not from the very beginning one single apostolic tradition that Jesus said something important at 'a last supper' and so 'instituted' the eucharist. The implication is rather that there was in the beginning another separate tradition which did not 'know' or 'imagine' that Jesus had told his closest friends at a last supper how best they could celebrate his continuing presence with them. The existence of such a separate tradition from the very beginning suggests that Jesus may not have instituted 'the Eucharist' at 'the Last Supper'. It may be that the appropriate conclusion to draw from the evidence is that it was the leaders of a Christian community which first linked eucharist to last supper after Jesus' crucifixion.

Putting together the bits of evidence we now have, as Professor Crossan does, it begins to look as though in the earliest days after the crucifixion some followers, happy that all that he had stood for had been vindicated, thought that it was appropriate to celebrate the continued presence of Jesus with them with a joyful feast, a 'little Easter' on the Lord's day; others celebrated with thanksgiving for the mystery of his death and sacrifice, while others again, it may be, celebrated a eucharist of bread and fish. All were filled with gratitude for what God had done for them; not everyone at first felt moved to make the same response.

We should be grateful to Cardinal Kasper for giving us all a rare and chilling example of the Keys of the Kingdom actually grinding in the locks, for it illustrates vividly what an idiosyncratic understanding of how God works that great institution which is the Roman Catholic church affirms. The Roman Catholic church believes that God is the author of the scriptures. It reads 'Matthew' 16. 18,19 literally. It believes that the current Bishop of Rome is the successor of Peter and that what he forbids on earth will be forbidden in heaven. We delude ourselves if we suppose for one moment that the Pope does not take the responsibilities which he believes to have been laid upon him with the utmost seriousness.

The considerations which may enable validation. We can see why the renowned liturgist mentioned by Cardinal Kasper thought this particular bit of papal 'validation' was so significant. For us the reasons which enabled the Pope to validate the rite are also of great significance, for, unlike the Assyrian church, we have no apostolic succession of bishops and do not believe in trans-substantiation. Even the formula of 'pluriformity within unity' will not enable the Pope to acknowledge that our witness is valid. At any grand visible organic consummation

attended by the Roman Catholic church we shall, unfortunately, not be able to enter the Christian fold.

In Part 5, how Rome believes the Spirit works and Rome's basic requirements for unity.