

1. General Remarks

Speaking as a member of the EKD (Evangelical Church in Germany) I can appreciate the stage on the way to a common ecclesiological statement that has been achieved by the Faith and Order Document “The Nature and Mission of the Church” (NMC).

There are very crucial ecclesiological issues and helpful aspects elaborated in this text. However, it is obvious that further work has to be done to develop a declaration of convergence as it has been achieved in the “Lima-document”. From the perspective of Protestant Churches a declaration of convergence should not try to argue for one certain concept of ecclesiology, but rather try to develop an ecclesiological framework that allows to take different theological issues into account. Accordingly, it can be underlined, that “to participate in a council of churches does not imply that all members regard all other members as churches in the same sense in which they regard themselves” (n. 8, p. 12).

a) The nature of the Church

It is most important that NMC starts by describing the Church as a creation of the word and of the Holy Spirit (*creatura verbi et creatura spiritus*, I, A, I, p. 13). In this sense the study document definitely “reflects an emerging convergence on the nature and mission of the Church” (cf. the second question, p. 12), even though the relation between the word of God and the Holy Spirit is not conceived precisely. The previous version of the study “The nature and purpose of the Church” was more consistent in this respect.

b) The structure of the document

The exploration of the nature of the Church in section I A is based upon biblical insights referring to the main ecclesiological descriptions found in the Bible. This is very convincing. However, the differentiation between the nature of the Church treated in chapter I and the church in history treated in chapter II can be misunderstood. Although the study does not intend to separate the nature of the Church from its historical development and its mission, there are phrases, that can be misunderstood in such a way (e. g. NMC 48: “Being also an historical reality, ...”).

c) The concept of unity

In order to develop a way to deal with the issue of limits of diversity, it is necessary to agree on the goal of ecumenical encounter. Although member churches of the WCC agree on the concept of “visible unity” hitherto there is no agreement on what “visible unity” exactly means. In some parts of NMC visible unity is described as visible communion, whereas in the context of eucharist it is spoken of “full visible unity”. To develop a consistent understanding of “visible unity”, it is important to start from the concept of *koinonia* as it is explained in NMC 24-33. Furthermore, it has to be reflected on whether and how there can be a distinction between the foundation of the Church and its shape.

2. Reflection on “Limits of Diversity?” (p.37)

From a Protestant perspective the dialectic relation between unity and diversity that is explained in NMC 62 can be fully agreed with. On the one hand, it is important to note that “unity, particularly when it tends to be identified with uniformity, can be destructive of authentic diversity and thus can become unacceptable” (NMC 62). But on the other hand, it is also important to keep in mind that there “are limits within which diversity is an enrichment but outside of which diversity is not only acceptable, but destructive of the gift of unity” (ibid.). This

is compatible with the Protestant concept of church communion realised in the Leuenberg Church Fellowship (Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe, CPCE).

a) The CPCE concept of visible unity

The CPCE's concept of church community is explained in the document "The Church of Jesus Christ". Referring to Article 7 of the Confessio Augustana it claims that true unity of the church depends on a common understanding of the Gospel and of an administration of the sacraments that corresponds the word of God¹. Accordingly, the fellowship of Protestant churches in Europe is based upon a shared understanding of the Gospel that is described in the Leuenberg Agreement. It interprets the Gospel as "the message of Jesus Christ, the salvation of the world, in fulfilment of the promise given to the people of the Old Covenant" (LA 7). The Agreement finds the "true understanding" of this good news in the doctrine of justification according to the understanding of the Reformation (LA 8). This doctrine understands the message of Christ (LA 9) as the Word through which God "by his Holy Spirit calls all men to repent and believe" (LA 10), which promises righteousness in Christ to all believers and thus liberates and enables them for a "responsible service in the world" (LA 11). This expresses not only the foundation of the faith of individual Christians, it states at the same time **what the church lives by**, namely the gospel as a "power of God" (Rom. 1:16). With this it is also decided how and the purpose for which Christians and the churches exist in the world.

The CPCE concept of church communion corresponds with the third type of ecclesiology mentioned on p. 39 of NMC. Thus CPCE-member-churches do not identify their "own community with the One Church", nor do they "speak of elements or different degrees of fullness of the Church". Yet they do "not place all ecclesial bodies on the same level, either". According to the CPCE-understanding "the One Church of Christ exists wherever the Gospel is rightly proclaimed and the sacraments are duly administered, because Christ is present and at work wherever these means of his grace are present". Wherever agreement on the proclamation of the Gospel is obvious and the sacraments are administered in accordance to the Word of God the unity of the church communion can be experienced as visible.

b) Limits in diversity referring to the proclamation of the Gospel

According to the Protestant perspective diversities are illegitimate, if they are derived from an interpretation of the Gospel that contradicts the testimony of biblical scriptures. According to the testimony of the Bible the Gospel proclaims God's grace consists in justification by faith alone and, therefore, is not depending upon human works. Diversities in the official teaching and practice of churches that afflict with this understanding of the gospel cannot be allowed from a Protestant view.

c) Limits of diversity referring to the administration of the sacraments

Protestant churches strongly underline that baptism is "a basic bond of unity. The recognition of the one baptism into Christ constitutes an urgent call to the churches to overcome their divisions and visibly manifest their communion in faith and through mutual accountability in all aspects of Christian life and witness" (NMC 74). Since baptism is "the celebration of new life through Christ and of participation in baptism, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ" (NMC 75), it

¹ In CA 7 wird gelehrt, „daß alle Zeit müsse ein heilige christliche Kirche sein und bleiben, welche ist die Versammlung aller Glaubigen, bei welchen das Evangelium rein gepredigt und die heiligen Sakrament lauts des Evangelii gereicht werden. Dann dies ist gnug zu wahrer Einigkeit der christlichen Kirchen, daß da einträchtiglich nach reinem Verstand das Evangelium gepredigt und die Sakrament dem gottlichen Wort gemäß gereicht werden. Und ist nicht not zur wahren Einigkeit der christlichen Kirche, daß allenthalben gleichformige Ceremonien, von den Menschen eingesetzt, gehalten werden, wie Paulus spricht zu den Ephesern am 4.: ‚Ein Leib, ein Geist, wie ihr berufen seid zu einerlei Hoffnung euers Berufs, ein Herr, ein Glaub, ein Tauf.‘“ Siehe: Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche, hg. im Gedenkjahr der Augsburgischen Konfession 1930, 12. Aufl., Göttingen 1998 (im folgenden BSLK), 61,8-17.

can only be celebrated once. Accordingly, it is most important to solve the problem of “re”-baptism mentioned in the box on p. 45 under b). With respect to this crucial issue it is worthwhile to note that in Germany ten churches declared officially mutually to recognize their baptism – beyond them the Roman-Catholic Church, the Evangelical Church in Germany and some Orthodox Churches in Germany. However, the status and the meaning of this declaration has to be resolved.

With respect to the eucharist significant differences that have to be dealt with in the future are listed in the box on p. 47-49. However, the alternative between understanding the Lord’s Supper as “primarily a meal where Christians receive the body and blood of Christ, or primarily a service of thanksgiving” (p. 48) has been overcome by the Leuenberg Agreement. From a Protestant perspective the most important issue to be discussed is the question whether the eucharist can be seen as a sacrifice. In terms of terminology it would be more consistent to follow some bilateral dialogues and speak of the Lord’s supper instead of using different terms.

At the end of the box it is said that “for some churches the practice of ‘Eucharist hospitality’ is the antithesis of the commitment to full visible unity” (p. 48 to 49). This can be understood as corresponding to the Protestant point of view, as long as full visible unity means regular eucharistic communion including the possibility of intercelebration.

d) Limits of diversity referring to ordained ministry

It is very important that the NMC starts its reflection on ministry by dealing with the ministry of all the faithful saying that through “their participation in Christ ... Christians are constituted a royal priesthood” (NMC 84). Accordingly, “on the basis of the one baptism into Christ” there “is an obligation resting equally on all ‘to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour’ in all the varied situations of need in the world throughout the ages” (Lk 4,18-19; NMC 85). This has to be understood in the light of NMC 52 and 56 where the gift of apostolicity is explained as an essential attribute of the Church. Thus the Church as a whole has to realise its apostolicity and is responsible to work on it. As a consequence, there is an interdependence between the ministry of all the faithful and ordained ministry. This could have been pointed out more clearly.

The document adequately states that there “is no single pattern of conferring ministry in the New Testament” (NMC 87). Although the “threefold ministry of bishop, presbyter and deacon had become by the third century the generally accepted pattern” (ibd.), it has to be realized that the “Spirit has at different times led the Church to adapt its ministries to contextual needs”, as the document points out. With respect to the historical development it is not evident that the threefold ministry can be explored “as a means to and expression of unity” (NMC p. 52, point b in the box). Certainly, if the threefold ministry is understood as a hierarchy combined with different grades of ordination this is not acceptable from a Protestant point of view.

e) Limits of diversity referring to the ministry of oversight and primacy

The stage of the ecumenical discussion on “Episkopé, Bishops and Apostolic Succession” is summed up very well in the box on p. 54. It is most important that “reflection on the more general concept of a ministry of episkopé ... has helped to bring to light hitherto unrecognised parallels between episcopal and non-episcopal churches in the way oversight is exercised” (ibd.). However, the communal and collegial aspects of exercising the ministry of oversight should be linked more closely. From a Protestant point of view the “corporate, representative exercise” of oversight “in the areas of leadership, consultation, discernment, and decision-making” (NMC 97) cannot be restricted to church leaders. Collegiality rather entails synodical or presbyterial forms of exercising oversight. Thus, CPCE-churches consider synods not only as an instrument to discern truth in crucial situations as it is said in NMC 100, but as a regular element of episkopé.

For Protestant churches even in recent years it is difficult to say that “universal primacy can be seen as a gift rather than a threat to other churches” (NMC 103). As the universal primacy of the Pope is based upon a universal power of jurisdiction and infallibility it is – at least potentially – a

threat to Christian confidence that the Gospel witnessed in the scriptures of the Bible is a sufficient source to decide on dogmatic and ethical questions. Protestants do recognize the papal ministry as an institution within the Roman-Catholic Church, but not as an universal institution for all Christian churches. A ministry of universal oversight would have to be exercised in a conciliar and collegial way.

In the conclusion NMC draws a rather optimistic and encouraging picture of what the ecumenical movement has achieved in recent years (esp. NMC 119). However, it cannot be ignored that the present ecumenical situation is disappointing in many respects. According to the Canberra-Statement the “goal of the search for full communion is realised when all the churches are able to recognise in one another the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church in its fullness” (quotation from NMC 122). But so far this goal has been only realised by the churches who where able to sign the Porvoo-Agreement and by the churches who are memberchurches of the CPCE. If all churches take seriously the fact that the Church in its human dimension is still subject to the power of sin (NMC), they should also reflect individually and in dialogue their continuing to resist the recognition of other churches as churches of Jesus Christ.