



National Council of
Churches in Australia

Faith & Unity Commission

Living Word, Living Tradition

Lutheran–Roman Catholic Dialogue in Australia, 2011

Introduction

The Bi-Lateral Commission of the Australian Lutheran and Roman Catholic Churches concluded their dialogue “Living Word, Living Tradition” in 2011. The Faith and Unity Commission of the National Council of Churches offers a response to this document as follows:

Commendation

The Lutheran and Roman Catholic Churches are to be commended for this document which articulates significant convergence in the theologically disputed area of the relative valuing of Scripture and tradition in the contexts of revelation and of ecclesial authority.

Summary of the dialogue

1. Both Lutherans and Roman Catholics use the term “word of God” in three distinct ways:
 - i. A word from God in which God and God’s plan of salvation are revealed to us. God’s ultimate self-disclosure is the second person of the Trinity, made flesh in the person of Jesus Christ.
 - ii. The written word of God – i.e. God’s self-expression by means of the Holy Spirit, who communicates through human writers.
 - iii. The saving word witnessed and received in every generation.
2. The basic insight that assisted the dialogue to reach a consensus is that the Holy Spirit continues to guide the life of the church. The Last Supper discourse in John’s Gospel has Jesus promising the Holy Spirit – “to remind you of all that I have said” (Jn 14:25) and “to guide you into all truth” (Jn 16:12). The Holy Spirit inspired the apostles and others to proclaim and teach the word. They handed on what they had received from Jesus and the apostolic community. The Holy Spirit also led the human authors of the Scriptures, and guided the early church in the gradual establishment of the canon of the Scriptures.
3. Scripture has a vital role in the life of both churches – in worship, preaching, teaching and the exercise of authority. For Lutherans, the Scriptures are the “only rule and guiding principle” for the evaluation of all teachings and teachers. Roman Catholic teaching states that the Scriptures are due no less reverence than Christ’s Eucharistic presence.
4. The document identifies a number of agreements between Lutherans and Roman Catholics, including:
 - i. Scripture is the inspired word of God through which God speaks God’s word to us.

- ii. In the Scriptures God's saving plan is revealed, and this is centred on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh.
 - iii. The Holy Spirit enables us to hear and receive the word of God and to put it into practice.
 - iv. The Scripture is at the centre of the life of the church, nourishing and ruling its preaching, liturgy, prayer, ministry, authoritative teaching and theology.
 - v. Handing on the apostolic faith in the life, teaching and worship of the church is central to the church's task.
 - vi. The teaching authority assists the church to rightly interpret the word of God. This teaching authority is not above the word of God but stands in its service.
 - vii. The bishop/president has an important pastoral role in oversight of the interpretation, proclamation and teaching of the word. Synods and councils are important in receiving the word of God and testing its proper interpretation.
 - viii. After identifying these points in common the document identifies a major area of difference: the relation between Scripture and Tradition. Both churches present their understanding of the problem before presenting a statement of convergence.
5. A distinction between three meanings of the word tradition proved helpful in sorting out the issues between Lutherans and Roman Catholics. The three meanings are:
- i. Tradition as the process of transmitting divine revelation.
 - ii. Tradition as the Spirit-guided interpretation of the apostolic faith in the life of the church in, for example, its liturgical life, the creeds, and the great ecumenical councils.
 - iii. Traditions as human traditions that are not integral to the apostolic faith, but have grown up in the life of the church.
6. Lutherans were able to recognise that the first two senses of tradition are what they refer to when they speak of confessions of faith and of passing on (confessing) the apostolic faith. Since the Second Vatican Council, Roman Catholics have developed a richer understanding of tradition, now understanding it in the context of salvation history and the communication of God's saving word and action. They speak of tradition as a dialogue of salvation.
7. Roman Catholics have come to a clearer understanding that at the time of the Reformation human traditions obscured the good news that we are justified by faith in Jesus Christ as a free gift of God's grace. Roman Catholics agree with Lutherans that there is a need to test human traditions and that this testing is done by the sense of the faith of the whole people of God and ultimately by the teaching authority of the church. They also agree that these human traditions must be tested against the good news of Jesus Christ found in the biblical word of God.

Key Learning for both churches

- 8. The dialogue partners have been able to see beyond the disputed questions of the sixteenth century and to understand each other in a new light.
- 9. Through the dialogue these churches now have a richer, less controversial and more dynamic understanding of the word of God in the church.
- 10. These churches believe that they share a common faith concerning the revelation of God and its transmission through the ages.

Responses from “Faith and Unity” Members

11. There was wide agreement with the various affirmations that were able to be made in this dialogue, particularly with the following:
 - i. The Holy Spirit as the source of both Holy Scripture and Tradition.
 - ii. The importance of Scripture as a basis for Tradition.
 - iii. The New Testament as the basis for contemporary encounter with Christ.
12. Three levels of meaning for the ‘Word of God’: The divine Logos, the written word inspired through the Holy Spirit and the proclamation of, and witness to, the gospel in every time and place.
 - i. The distinction between Tradition and traditions.
13. Some of the insights deriving from the discussions of the Faith and Unity Commission:
 - i. All members appreciated the high importance given to both Scripture and Tradition in the document, and the affirmation of their inter-relatedness in the life of the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
 - ii. There was a discussion of the “inner aspect” of tradition deriving from the Orthodox insight that the meaning of tradition could not be defined exhaustively by its outer forms such as creeds, liturgical tradition, decisions of councils and the teaching authority such as the magisterium. These are understood as the external deposit of God’s truth. For the Orthodox the inexhaustible aspect of tradition is the life, presence and witness of the Holy Spirit leading to a revelation of Jesus Christ himself.
 - iii. Some members recognised that their denomination’s view of the authority of Tradition was not as prominent as in the Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches. Nevertheless, the Churches of Christ and some other churches see the role of the Holy Spirit as one which continually guides the life of the church, and would want to hold historically and culturally shaped traditions as open to dialogue with the modern context. The Society of Friends in seeking a direct experience of God through “listening together,” do not seek authority from church tradition or words from the Bible. Nevertheless they view both Scripture and Tradition as sources of deep wisdom.
14. Issues, Questions and challenges arising from “Living Word, Living Tradition.”
 - i. What can the Christian Churches learn from the significant work of convergence achieved in “Living Word, Living Tradition”? To what extent can those churches suspicious of the authoritative status of Tradition accept its interpretation in this document?
 - ii. Are *some* denominational differences partly semantic? How can we explore these differences and encourage others to do so?
 - iii. The difference between churches arose at a particular moment in history, and usually pointed to a real problem in church practice at that time. We are challenged to study that historical moment and understand what led to the differences, but also to consider to what extent churches in our own time have undergone reform so that the problems of an earlier era no longer apply.

NCCA Faith and Unity Commission
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