



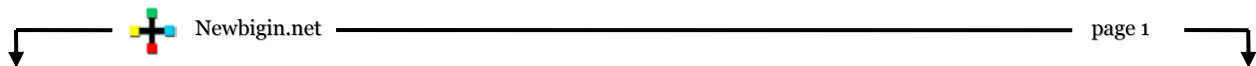
## Faith and Faithfulness in the Ecumenical Movement

1984

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

*Faith and Faithfulness* (ed. Pauline Webb; Geneva: WCC Publications, 1984): 1-7.

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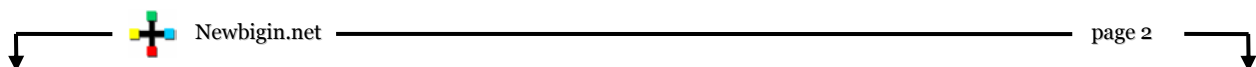


The letter inviting me to contribute an essay proposed as title for my contribution "The Ecumenical Movement and the Recovery of Faith". When I read those words, I was at once reminded of a conversation in which I had said that we were in the midst of a crisis of faith, and was sharply checked by Philip Potter. "Is it a crisis of faith," he asked, "or a crisis of faithfulness?" That was authentic Potter!

In preparing to write this essay I have read through all Philip's reports as General Secretary to the Central Committee and to the Assemblies at Nairobi and Vancouver. In all of these I have been struck by the way in which he insists on holding these two together – faith and faithfulness. A discussion of faith would be academic and irrelevant if it was not always conducted in view of the question: "And what will faithfulness imply?" If this essay in any degree succeeds in avoiding that irrelevance, it will be at least partly because of Philip's warning.

### *Changing currents of theological opinion*

Surely it is part of our calling in the ecumenical movement to proclaim one faith, no less than to affirm one baptism and to seek visible unity in one body, even as we acknowledge one Spirit, one Lord and one God and Father of us all. But it is equally sure that there is and has always been a great variety in the expression of the faith which we profess. Critics in the conservative evangelical camp sometimes irritate us by picking on some statement by a conference or committee and telling the world that this is "what the World Council of Churches believes". It is hard, for those who are accustomed to a tightly drawn credal test for admission to fellowship, to understand the bewildering plurality of doctrinal statements emanating from



ecumenical gatherings – some of them, by any standard, extremely odd. And of course it is true that certain theological influences have been predominant at various times, though never in such a way as to silence other voices.

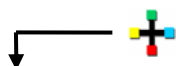
In the formative years, when the European churches were battling for their life against the new totalitarianism, ecumenists were happy to don the strong armour of Barthian theology. In the years of European and North American affluence, theologies which celebrated the secular were (at least in the affluent sectors of the churches) predominant. And as the voice of the peoples, whose exploitation was the underside of this affluence, began to break in, theologies of liberation spoke powerfully to the conscience of churches everywhere. Yet none of these has been at any time the one voice of the ecumenical movement.

Leaving aside these changing currents of theological opinion, there have been long-term changes which have a certain continuity discernible from the beginning until today. Let me deal with three of them.

There is, firstly, the shift in balance brought about by the growing participation by churches of the third world. In 1948 the WCC was essentially a body representing the churches of the old Christendom. There were, of course, representatives of some "younger churches" at Amsterdam, but they were on the margin – ardently pursued by the photographers but not candidates for the seats of power. The thought and feeling of that Assembly were still deeply rooted in the sense of the fractured Christian heritage of the past. The tensions were within the western tradition. Today the situation is profoundly different. Voices from Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Pacific are at least as powerful in shaping debate as those from Europe and North America, and they come out of experiences very different from those of the West. Quite different perceptions and hopes are at work.

Secondly there has been the profound (if only slow and gradual) change in perspective brought about by the full participation of the Orthodox churches in the life of the WCC. The change here is very slow, because the separation between East and West has been so long, deep and bitter that the building of bridges needs long patience even when there is abundant good will on both sides. I shall return to one implication of this at the end.

Thirdly there has been a development, also slow, concealed and difficult to document, and yet of great importance. I refer to all that has been involved in the knitting together of four very different

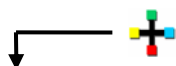


movements into a single entity. Each of them – the missionary movement, Faith and Order, Life and Work and the Christian education movement – had developed its own style of theological statement. Each needed the other in order to correct tendencies which could lead away from the integrity of faith and faithfulness. Each had insights needed for the recovery of that integrity. The knitting together of these four has been a slow and difficult task, not yet fully accomplished.

### *The goal of visible unity and the struggle for faithfulness*

First among the functions and purposes of the WCC as stated in its Constitution is "to call the churches to the goal of visible unity in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship". Unity in faith is at the heart of our quest. An ecumenical movement which was simply an alliance of separate churches for mutual help, but which did not challenge those churches to re-examine the deepest sources of division, would be a betrayal of our calling in Christ. It is necessary to say this plainly since there are voices which seem to advocate exactly this. They would be content with an alliance of denominational bodies which did not call in question the very existence of these bodies, their legitimacy as forms of the catholic church. Sociologists have pointed out that the denomination (which is essentially a product of the North American experience in the past two hundred years) is the form taken by a privatized religion in a secularized society, a religion which no longer makes total claims on the life of society. A denomination is a voluntary association of like-minded people who have joined together to practise and propagate some form of the Christian religion. It does not claim to be the catholic church, but only to be one possible and partial manifestation of it.

But the church of the New Testament, which is always a visible body of people who can be named, is something for which a much more awesome claim is made. It is the *ecclesia tou theou*, the assembly of actual men and women whom the living God is gathering in each place and in all places. It is not a body formed by its members to express one among a variety of possible religious experiences. It can therefore have no other label attached to it except the name of the place where the assembling is taking place. It is the company of those people whom God has gathered in each place and in all places. It cannot be qualified by any label describing some idiosyncrasy of belief or practice. It is both local and catholic, but it cannot be denominational.

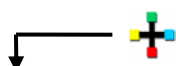


The Constitution of the WCC from which I have quoted commits the member churches to nothing less than the restoration of the visible unity of the church local and catholic. This precludes the possibility that the Council should simply be the servant of the churches as they are, for it calls in question their legitimacy. Here is the necessarily painful and controversial prophetic role of the Council. In accepting membership we place our formulations of the faith under the scrutiny of others. Not that they are our judges, but that their appeal to scripture and the ecumenical creeds compels us to put new questions to old certainties in which we have been nourished as Christians. In accepting membership in the WCC, our churches are agreeing to open themselves to radical questioning from others – ultimately from the Lord of the church himself – about their faith and their faithfulness.

All of us who have shared in the ecumenical movement know how costly this can be. We know also how full of promise it can be, but the promise is for those who pay the cost. In the bewildering medley of different expressions of the faith, there is a temptation to give up the struggle and retreat into the security of one of the hallowed traditions. To abandon this security and come out into the open ground of controversy requires a deeply rooted faith – faith in Christ and faith that he is greater than any present understanding of him, faith, therefore, that he has more of himself to reveal than I have yet learned.

Perhaps the most difficult part of this ecumenical experience is learning to distinguish between the legitimate diversity of expressions of the faith, which is a necessary corollary of the diversity of human cultures, and the illegitimate diversity which allows culture to co-opt and silence the authentic voice of the gospel. We touch here, obviously, the problem of syncretism, and a Western European is the least qualified to speak on this subject since the kind of theology that I read in English is much more open than most others to the charge of syncretism – that is to say, of allowing the culture (the "modern scientific world view") to determine what the gospel shall be allowed to be.

In a much-quoted sentence the Nairobi Assembly said: "Jesus Christ does not make copies; he makes originals." That might seem to license a boundless proliferation of different expressions of the faith. But Jesus Christ is one, not many, and – as the Nairobi statement makes clear – the differences are not to be accepted as



permanent but are to become the occasion for "a mutually corrective exchange", for "we need each other to regain the lost dimensions of confessing Christ and even to discover dimensions unknown to us before".<sup>1</sup>

There is a faith once delivered to the saints which stands unalterable; yet we only learn to confess it as we struggle together in the way of actual obedience. We join in confessing that Jesus is Lord, but we inevitably begin by giving to the word "Lord" the connotation that we derive from our culture. The confession is true only insofar as it is Jesus who defines the meaning of the word "Lord", and not our understanding of lordship which shapes our vision of Jesus. As we are – *in via* – we have a bewildering variety of visions (shaped by our different cultures) of who Jesus is.

We shall know truly who he is only at the end when he shall be acknowledged as Lord by every tongue. On the way we need each other for mutual correction as we struggle, in the actual circumstances of our contemporary world, to embody in action our perception of his lordship. There can thus be no true confession of the faith apart from a shared and mutually correcting struggle for faithfulness.

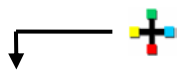
### *The marks of faithfulness*

As I have re-read Philip's reports to the Central Committees and Assemblies over a period of a dozen years, I have been struck by the fact that they reflect the four-fold pattern which is embodied in the Basis of the WCC. According to this, the WCC is a fellowship of churches which:

- 1) confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour,
- 2) according to the scriptures, and therefore
- 3) seek to fulfill together their common calling
- 4) to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

1. Fundamental to the existence of the WCC is the confession of the centrality, finality and decisiveness of Jesus Christ. This utterly simple and yet totally determinative confession is what relativizes every other commitment, every other confession, every other style or variety of experience, and obliges the churches to commit themselves to one another in a common quest for a true confession of the one

<sup>1</sup> *Breaking Barriers: Nairobi 1975*, ed. David M. Paton, London, SPCK and Grand Rapids, Wm B. Eerdmans, 1976, p.46.

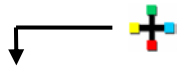


faith and an authentic faithfulness in living by its light and power. Here is the ultimate and irreducible faith-commitment which is the starting point of all our endeavours to understand and to cope with the bewildering experience of being a human being. Here is the answer to every attack upon the ecumenical movement. Here we stand. We can do no other.

2. This confession is "according to the scriptures". We are not free to define faith and faithfulness as we will. We do not just talk to each other and compare our experiences. We search the scriptures together, each listening to what the other hears in them of God's word. In each of Philip's reports as General Secretary, and in spite of the vast range of issues covered, he has engaged in serious biblical exposition, probing the scriptures – not for proofs of pre-selected positions, but for new insights to illuminate the contemporary tasks of the Council. In this he has helped to keep us true to something which is vital to our integrity as a council of churches. It is a serious matter that so much contemporary biblical scholarship appears to have retreated into an academic arena where the scriptures cease to be the light to guide us in our practical obedience and become rather an occasion for the exercise of the skills of an investigative archaeologist. Philip has helped to keep in the centre of attention that essential clause in our Basis – "according to the scriptures".

3. But Philip has not allowed us to forget that the purpose of it all is that the churches should "fulfill together their common calling". We learn rightly to confess the faith when we are seeking to be faithful. Faith and faithfulness are reciprocally related. It is not that we engage in action first and then reflect theologically afterwards. The danger in that formulation is that the criteria for action are derived from sources apart from faith. Nor is it that we develop a precise formulation of the faith as a matter of pure mental activity and then proceed to translate it into action. Discipleship is both believing and acting, both trusting and obeying, and we learn both together by a single commitment. We are always in danger of falling into one or the other of two aberrations: to become a mere political pressure group re-echoing some secular ideology, or to become a pious huddle without any effective bearing on secular reality. Effective discipleship will

always have as its distinctive mark that quality of overflowing victory in the midst of struggle which comes from a



life hid with Christ in God. Among the fierce polemics that have beat upon the WCC as it has struggled for faithfulness in matters of racial and social justice, Philip has helped to keep us true to that mark.

4. The end of the matter is the glory of the triune God. I have noticed how often Philip's reports have led up to an explicitly trinitarian statement. Is it because of the growing influence of the Orthodox in the WCC that the doctrine of the Trinity has moved so much more into the centre of attention in recent years? Certainly it has become clear, I think, that there has been a kind of unacknowledged unitarianism in much of western theology, and that we cannot find a strong framework for the fulfilment of our common calling without rediscovering the length and breadth and height and depth of a fully trinitarian understanding of God.

To say that the end of the matter is the glory of God is not to repeat a mere platitude. It is to affirm that without which the churches are a tiresome irrelevance. No one has done more than Philip to bring worship into the very heart of the great ecumenical gatherings, and if the Vancouver Assembly is remembered gratefully as above all an ecumenical offering of worship and adoration to the triune God, there could be no more fitting climax to the service which Philip has rendered to all of us who share in the life of the ecumenical movement.

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