

# IS DIALOGUE HAZARDOUS TO ECUMENISM?

Robert W. Bertram

If we distinguish between bad dialogue and good dialogue, then, yes, bad dialogue is indeed hazardous to ecumenism. But good dialogue, by contrast, is the very soul of ecumenism. In what follows I would like to go so far as to propose that good dialogue may even be, like Word and Sacraments, a “mark of the Church,” what the tradition calls a *nota ecclesiae*. Goodness knows, there is still plenty of bad dialogue around, often palmed off as good, even by professional ecumenists and theologians. But there are also signs of good dialogue, maybe not overwhelming signs, but frequent enough and recent enough to be promising. So recent are the instances I have in mind that I’m tempted to refer to bad dialogue as the “old” way of dialoguing and good dialogue as a “new” way of dialoguing.

## I.

The old way of dialoguing assumed that doctrinal differences can only be church-dividing, and that that is all they can be. The fallacy here is not in seeing doctrinal differences as divisive. They are that. In fact, they had better be, if they are differences in doctrine, the doctrine of the Gospel. However, the same two church bodies whose dialogue reveals how painfully at odds they still are over some fundamental article of the Gospel may well find that that is painful to them only because on other, equally fundamental articles of the Gospel they are remarkably close. When that is so, the very differences which still divide them may at the same time serve as means for drawing them together. Just how, we shall explain in a moment. For now, suffice it to say, it is bad dialogue which fails to recognize how opportune—not just divisive, but also opportune—such remaining doctrinal differences can be for churches who otherwise are already near in Christ.

The old approach to dialogue typically requires as a prerequisite to Church unity some sort of doctrinal consensus statement officially subscribed by both parties to the dialogue. The at least tacit presupposition is that the two dialoguing church bodies may not begin being Church together until such a doctrinal

agreement has been reached, and all previous doctrinal contradictions have been resolved. Until then they may both be churches in their own right, but not together one Church—except perhaps “invisibly.” Their dialogue is strictly preliminary to their “visible” unity as Church. The dialogue itself, for all its visibility, does not qualify as Church unity. First comes dialogue, and only after that, assuming the dialogue yields doctrinal accord, comes Church unity. Such a view of dialogue, I am suggesting, is bad, and is bad ecumenism and, so I hope, is fast becoming old.

Who are the proponents of this old view of dialogue? Not just the separatists, the exclusivists, but also the trigger-happy, overly impatient ecumenists. The exclusivists, of course, are the ones we usually associate with the premise, except that in their case the premise surfaces in reverse form. I have in mind those anxious ecumenists who, unnerved by persistent doctrinal differences between two dialoguing churches, feel compelled to minimize those differences or relativize them, presumably on the same exclusivist assumption that, if the differences were acknowledged as that, as differences in doctrine, they could only polarize, nothing else.

Elaborate efforts are therefore made to dismiss what truly are differences in doctrine by reducing them instead to cultural hangovers from the past, to polemical excesses by the ancestors, to theological idiosyncracies or “thought structures” peculiar to one or the other denominational tradition, to pre-critical readings of Scripture, and so on. In that case, the ecumenists and the exclusivists whom they berate are not basically that different. The one simply zigs where the other zags, both of them betraying in practice the same mistaken assumption: doctrinal differences can only disunite, nothing more.

You have heard it said that a relativist is just an absolutist in sheep’s clothing. Maybe, but there is no reason why the ecumenical movement should be fleeced in the process. For instance, when a given dialogue is beset by the pressure to de-doctrinalize all remaining differences between the dialoguing churches, not only does that bring the exclusivists back out of the woodwork with their charges of a cover-up, but also it tends to discourage real candor between one church’s dialoguists and those of the other church and even amongst those on the same dialogue team, lest they too appear exclusivist. All of which only reinforces the bad assumption that differences between dialoguing churches concerning “the truth of the Gospel” are unmitigatedly divisive. They are not. At least they need not be.

## II.

Doctrinal difference between dialoguing churches not only divides such churches; it can also simultaneously conjoin them. And by “difference” I mean not just a divergence in perspective or in exegetical preference but, if necessary, outright opposition between two contending confessions of the faith to the point where, if one is right, the other is wrong. Now that may be a worst case scenario,

but in principle even such diametric differences as that can be accommodated in what I am calling good dialogue. What makes such dialogue good, however, is not the starkness of the differences between the dialoguing churches, as if difference were to be valued for its own sake. Indeed not. I am presupposing that the churches in question have already found a rich measure of the Gospel of Christ in common and that whatever serious differences persist are difficulties to be met, not to be romanticized.

Nevertheless, the secret of such good dialogue is that, given what doctrinal difficulties do exist, the dialogue partners seek to make the most of them rather than make the worst of them or make them disappear. But they make the most of their differences *together*. Together they recognize their differences not only as obstacles (that too) but as resources for mutual admonition and mutual correction. I hope you won't think it trivializing or compromising when I refer to this sort of dialogue as *a mutual exchange of yes-buts*. "Yes," says church A to church B, "yes, you do have a point, for example, in your upholding of the historic episcopate. In fact, so valid is the point you are making about the episcopate, about the apostolic mandate of the ministry, that it needs to be affirmed by other churches than your own, for instance by ours, even if what we affirm about your doctrine of episcopacy is not exactly the same thing you affirm about it. On the other hand, our 'yes' is a 'yes-but.' That is, we deny that bishops need to be specially ordained, having already been ordained, as presbyters, into the one and only apostolic ministry there is."

Of course that much, what church A says to church B, is only half the dialogue. That by itself is hardly mutual admonition, not until church B responds with its own yes-buts. For example, "Yes," church B might say in return, "yes, there is indeed only one apostolic ministry, the same one to which presbyters and bishops alike are ordained. And you, church A, have a historic calling within the whole Christian Church to keep that reminder before the rest of us. However," church B continues, and now comes the equally essential "but," "our prior concern here is not with who is ordained but with who does the ordaining, something which only the apostles' successors can do, bishops who stand within the apostolic relay from ordainer to ordainer."

At first glance such an exasperating exchange of yes-buts might seem to yield nothing but a stand-off, a classic case of talking past each other or, worse yet, of sheer stonewalling. What, you might ask, could ever come of such a dialogue in the way of "visible" Church unity? Mightn't it be better, even if somewhat disingenuous, to pretend that the differences between church A and church B are not really doctrinal but, shall we say, merely historical or symbolic? Then, under the pretense that the differences are not doctrinal, they might the more easily be engineered out of existence by clever rewording or by legislative ploys or by handpicking the right theologians. For if we do not resort to such strategies, if instead we admit that the differences do touch the very substance

of the faith, aren't we doomed to wait till hell freezes over before the two churches can begin being Church together?

"Can begin being Church together?" Look again. What else are these two churches doing, right in the thick of dialogue, but being Church together—already? Who else would care enough to wrestle the whole intricate issue of apostolic succession to the floor, pro and contra, except fellow Christians who already agree passionately about the church's need of apostolicity? Their dialogue is not some *precondition* to their eventually living together. It is already an act of living together, somewhat noisily perhaps, not without strain but not without deep mutual commitment either.

Their differences are clearly doctrinal and their doctrinal differences do separate them, of course. Yet notice how vigorously they share those differences, each with the other. If in the past these differences kept them apart, in their dialogue today these same differences, ironically, draw them together as well, the way fond couples are kept together by their need also of mutual correction. Neither of the two churches will ever again be the same without the other, even if their differences remain unresolved, so long as those differences continue to serve dialogically. The yes-buts of one church penetrate the consciousness, the doctrinal consciousness of the other—that is, insofar as both can trust that their very differences, even insoluble ones, are usable for each other's edification, not just separation.

That is what I mean by good dialogue, a mutual exchange of yes-buts such that honest-to-God differences of doctrine, beyond being barriers to unity, become enactments of unity as well. Such dialogue is what Bonhoeffer might have called a "polemical unity" and what some of us have called "critical mutuality." In such a transaction the two churches are already being one Church. If nothing else, that has the merit of taking seriously the great doctrinal controversies in the Christian tradition for what they were, not just fits of absent-mindedness or hot-headedness for us now to explain away, but unique, epochal plumbings of the Gospel's depths, often at extreme cost to its confessors and martyrs. We the beneficiaries are obliged, if only by our confessional subscriptions but really for better reasons, not to let that bequest go to waste. Good dialogue, I find, has the effect of heightening gratitude for that bequest.

### III.

The example I cited a moment ago about church A and church B trading yes-buts over the issue of apostolic succession was intended as a hypothetical example, though I suppose current events are making that example less and less hypothetical. Let me cite two other examples, both of these quite actual, both of them highly publicized, both of them from the last few years, both of them examples from which I have learned hands-on. Each of the two cases exemplifies, more or less, that feature of good ecumenical dialogue which I have dubbed "a mutual exchange of yes-buts."

The first example is from the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue/USA. I refer specifically to “round seven” of that dialogue, on the theme of “Justification by Faith.” The results of the round were published in 1985 in our dialogue’s Volume Seven, also titled *Justification by Faith*. The second chapter of that volume is, I think, a “sleeper,” a slumbering giant with the latent potential of reconceiving ecumenical dialogue for the better. It comes as close as anything I know in recent, high-visibility ecumenism to acknowledging real and abiding doctrinal differences, but then (and this is the point) reappropriating them for a mutual exchange of yes-buts, all as an act of being Church together. The chapter in question, under the innocent title of “Reflection and Interpretation,” summarizes the lingering differences between Roman Catholics and Lutherans under such sub-themes as “forensic justification,” “sinfulness of the justified,” “sufficiency of faith,” and so on.

Granted, at first reading the chapter may seem a bit insipid, like a toothless, almost wimpish listing of first the one church’s position and then, side by side, the contrasting position of the other church. What contributes to this misimpression of a merely neutral list of harmless differences is that at times the authors seem to be hinting that the differences aren’t really all that different or all that doctrinal, surely not differences between truth and falsity, but mostly different ways of saying the same thing, merely contrasting “patterns of thought in the two traditions,” each influenced by its own understandably relative “concerns.” So I grant, the discriminating reader may have to peel away a stratum or two of editorial overlay to get down to the truly critical, mutual admonitions and corrections which in fact are at work here between the two churches’ theologians—all of whom, I can assure you, are also genial colleagues and fellow believers.

Consider, for instance, the following specific exchange of yes-buts in connection with the sub-theme, forensic justification, where isolated emphasis, Catholics fear, could “encourage a certain disregard of the benefits actually imparted through God’s loving deed in Christ” (51). In quoting the sentence, I’ve omitted most of the polite qualifications with which the original sentence is hedged about. Even with my omissions the quotation still gets by with saying that Catholics “*fear*” this or that emphasis by the Lutherans. Truth is, Catholics don’t so much “fear” that emphasis, as if their aversion to it were largely psychological. What the Catholics do is *oppose* this Lutheran reason. What is here understated as their “fear” is in fact a polemically reasoned “but.”

And what, in this instance, is the Lutherans’ yes-but to the Catholics? The “yes” is that “Lutherans also affirm the reality of sanctification and good works,” indeed as the very effect of God’s forensic “declaration” (50). The “but” is that Lutherans “fear [*sic*] that the Catholic emphasis on the non-forensic aspects could tend to throw believers back on their own resources” (51). Granted, again, the word “fear” is too psychologizing and relativizing a term to do justice to the doctrinal antithesis which Lutherans intend. However, please

notice what is going on here is not some side-by-side listing of two independent, free-standing doctrinal positions. Nor is it even a list of what the two churches say *about* each other; they are here saying them *to* each other.

Moreover, what they are saying to each other, *contra* as well as *pro*, is meant not for widening the divisions between them, but for mutual correction and admonition. It is, we might say, doing Augsburg and Trent over, but this time without flying apart ecclesiastically. Even the cadets at West Point learn to re-enact the Battle of Gettysburg short of bloodshed. Good ecumenical dialogue as a mutual exchange of yes-buts need not minimize the differences which persist, nor minimize their doctrinal disjunctiveness. But it does reconstrue these differences as simultaneously opportune for mutual help. My own conviction, I must say, is that where such doctrinal dialogue is taking place there ought also to be the resumption of eucharistic fellowship, at the least. I recognize that we differ on that matter, though even that difference strikes me as an allowable difference, an *adiaphoron*. But what is not *adiaphoral*, so I believe, is that the kind of mutually critical dialogue reflected in chapter two of the volume, *Justification by Faith*, is already an act of Church unity.

As chapter two puts it, “Each tradition [Catholic and Lutheran] wishes to guard against what the other sees as weaknesses.” That is obviously true. What is questionable is the next sentence. Each tradition “is convinced that it can do so within its own framework” (51). Isn’t it likelier that for each tradition to guard against those weaknesses “within its own framework” it needs something more than its own framework? It needs the other tradition to help it guard against those weaknesses, even if in the process that other tradition risks heresy. All the more reason, then, why *that* tradition likewise needs *this* tradition. Doesn’t this whole transaction recall what Luther describes as the “mutual conversation and consolation of the brothers [and sisters]”? He puts that on a par, you remember, with preaching and Sacraments as one of God’s lavish ways of surrounding us with the Gospel, being Church together (SA III,iv).

Chapter two of *Justification by Faith* concludes by saying, “Lutherans and Catholics can share in each others’ concerns in regard to justification and can to some degree acknowledge the legitimacy of the contrasting theological perspectives and structures of thought” (57). As I mentioned earlier, we need not trivialize what really are differences in doctrine by reducing them, as this sentence might, to “contrasting theological perspectives and structures of thought.” But the real point of the sentence is to say, “Lutherans and Catholics *can share* in each others’ concerns in regard to justification.” The writers even grant that the differences which remain do “seem irreconcilable.” All the same, even in face of what they admit is an “*impasse*,” they still boldly conclude, “It is necessary for both sides to take seriously the concerns of the other and to strive to think jointly about the problems.” That is what I mean by good dialogue as a mutual exchange of yes-buts.

#### IV.

A second example from recent years is a dialogue which has involved many churches, a “multilateral” dialogue. I refer to that fifty-year project by the World Council of Churches’ Commission on Faith and Order which in 1982 culminated in the so-called “Lima Document” or “The BEM Document,” *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*.

If you have seen the document, you know how its pages are laid out in a distinctive format, each page containing two parallel vertical columns. Dividing the page that way allows the right-hand column to be used for a running “commentary” on the main text, to the left. The main text is printed in plain type-face, and the commentary on the right is italicized. The main text, in the left-hand columns, functions something like the old doctrinal consensus statements in traditional ecumenism. The parallel commentary on the right provides second thoughts, qualifications, implications positive and negative, even correction and admonition. Taken together, and the two columns dare not be read separately from each other, they form an inextricable exchange of yes-but. The Lima document is itself a kind of internal, doctrinal dialogue between churches, reciprocating both yeses and noes. But for all of its inconclusiveness, canonically speaking, the dialogue is no less an act of churches being Church together, or at least beginning to be.

For instance, in the document’s third section, on “Ministry,” there is a statement on the neuralgic issue, “The Ministry of Men and Women in the Church.” The main text, on the left, observes that “an increasing number of churches have decided that there is no biblical or theological reason against ordaining women, and many of them have subsequently proceeded to do so.” But the next sentence, still in the main text, adds: “Yet many churches hold that the tradition of the Church in this regard must not be changed” (24). In this instance we have yes and no right within the main text. So what is left for the Commentary to add by way of a further yes-but?

What the Commentary adds is a reminder to both groups of churches—both those which do ordain women and those which don’t—that those who differ from them hold the positions they do for profoundly theological reasons, on grounds of faith. “Those churches which practice the ordination of women do so because of their understanding of the Gospel and of the ministry.” Conversely, “Those churches which do not practice the ordination of women... believe that there are theological issues concerning the nature of humanity and concerning Christology which lie at the heart of their convictions” (25).

Now that would seem to leave as church-dividing an impasse as any we could imagine. Still, the Commentary forges right ahead and dares to suggest a “but,” namely, that the disagreeing churches should do their critical thinking about the ordination of women, not in isolation from those churches with whom they disagree, but, on the contrary, right “within the ecumenical fellowship of

all churches.” That amounts to saying, *yes*, your disagreements over ordaining women are doctrinal all right, *but* then all the more reason why those doctrinal differences should be shared. And isn’t such sharing already a stage in Church unity, not just a prerequisite to it but an instance of it? That is what William Lazareth and Nikos Nissiotis described in the Preface to the Lima document as “doctrinal convergences step by step,” “in the process growing together in mutual trust,” but never by means of anything less than what they also call “critical evaluation” (ix).

## V.

Let me conclude by admitting that this whole proposal has an obvious weakness or, more accurately, an apparent weakness. The proposal is that when churches already agreeing in fundamentals of the faith continue to disagree on other fundamentals, but disagree face to face and for the correction and care of each other, the very mutuality of their disagreement is an enacting of their oneness. The trouble is, the dialogues we have been talking about have traditionally been confined to a handful of experts, usually a few theologians speaking for their respective communions, which over the centuries comprise millions of believers. Isn’t that pretentious, then, to suggest that, when these small theological elites engage in ecumenical summitry, their entire communions are thereby engaging, somehow vicariously, in an ecclesially meaningful exchange of yes-buts?

Yes, that is pretentious. And I can admit that pretense without for a moment detracting from the dedication of the dialoguists themselves, the awesomeness of their gifts to the Church, the exhausting and often thankless years off their lives for Church unity. No one appreciates more than they how disproportionate is their own success around the dialogue table compared to the meager fallout it enjoys within their churches’ dioceses and congregations. Really, whatever is accomplished in these esoteric, often stratospheric summit dialogues is entirely dependent on what comes next, on how the results of these dialogues are “received” by the respective churches. That decisive next step is what in ecumenical terminology has been called “the reception process.”

Traditionally, in what I’ve been calling the “old” approach to ecumenical dialogue, the reception process involved appropriate authorities in the churches’ governance, say, a national conference of bishops or a denominational assembly. These authorities were assumed to have informed themselves on what the dialoguists had done. It was then up to the authorities to receive, or not, the dialogue document, voting it up or down or perhaps sending it back for more work. In any case, the receivers were not the dialoguists. Dialoguing was one thing; receiving was something else. And of course any “visible” unity between the dialoguing church bodies could not commence until their respective authorities had finalized this process of reception.

It is my suspicion that the Holy Spirit is disinclined to be any longer restricted by such organizational niceties. So the signs of the times seem to indicate. The trend, if that's not too big a word, seems to be that what formerly was the reception process is becoming an extension of the dialogue. I count that a plus, not unqualifiedly so, but far more a plus than a minus. Bishops' conferences, rather than content themselves with receiving or not receiving the recommendation from the dialogue, are sending back itemized critiques—shall we say, yes-buts—to the dialoguists. In more democratic bodies whole church conventions are doing the same thing, the responses to the dialoguists being in some cases quite elaborate and sophisticated.

A national conference of bishops, for example, might have noticed from the dialogue document that there really are differences which remain between their own church and the other church in dialogue. That by itself does not surprise the bishops, but more than that, they may sense that despite those differences, or worse yet, by very means of the differences, their own dialoguists seem to see opportunities for unity with the other, different church. To the bishops that may seem disconcerting or at least premature.

Meanwhile, the other church body's executives, particularly its professional ecumenists, may hurry into print with documents of their own, perhaps aimed primarily at controlling the damage the dialogue did and reassuring the bishops in the other church. Maybe the reassurance takes the form of explaining that whatever differences their own dialoguists had raised are not really all that doctrinal, and therefore are not serious cause for ecumenical concern. Meanwhile, still other parties in both churches do perceive that the differences are indeed doctrinal, and say so, but then conclude that that is what dialogue, good dialogue is for. See how the mutual exchange of yes-buts proliferates and expands. If you have a compulsion for tidiness, you will not welcome this development. I do welcome it, though at the same time I pray especially these days for the poor bishops and executives.

Meanwhile, you ask, as the poor dialoguists get from their churches not "reception" but instead more and more dialogue, what do *they* do? Here they had thought their work was finally finished and that they could at last move on to the next topic. Instead, they are now asked to respond to their church bodies' responses, still on the previous topic. But that poses a dilemma. When a response comes back to the dialoguists from, let us say, the Lutheran churches, shall only the Lutheran dialoguists reply? Shouldn't their Roman Catholic fellow dialoguists join them in the reply? After all, the original dialogue document, for example, *Justification by Faith*, had been signed by Catholics as well as Lutherans. But then notice how increasingly difficult it is to keep track of the players, or at least of their confessional identity. For now suddenly you might have, as one party to this new "dialogue," some critical faculty members from a Lutheran seminary and, as the other party, Lutheran *and* Roman Catholic dialoguists responding to that faculty. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* had

been sent out by the Commission on Faith and Order to the churches of the world inviting their "critical evaluation." I doubt that any of us on the commission had anticipated how thoughtful and how voluminous the response from the churches would be. By now the replies fill six volumes. At our last meeting of the full commission, at Budapest in 1989, even though we were committed to moving forward to new and different projects, a major part of our business had to be devoted to drafting a whole new round of yes-butts to the yes-butts we had evoked from the churches. The temptation was to wonder when the gathering would ever find time to get around to the really ecumenical work of Church unity, when in fact that was precisely what we were being compelled to do by this whole new level of unexpected dialogue.

The receivers, you notice, are getting restless and are demanding to be part of the dialogue. Next thing you know, we'll have congregations of other confessions involved, and synods with dioceses, and about matters of faith, yet. Will we be able to stand that much unity? There is one way to find out.