EDITORIAL ESSAYS

WHERE WE DWELL IN COMMON

Roger Haight, S.J.
Union Theological Seminary, New York

The great surge of Christian missionary activity during the course of the nineteenth century elicited a new concern for church unity. Was this missionary activity, after all, spreading division? In 1910 representatives of Protestant churches came together to respond to that question in Edinburgh at The World Missionary Conference. The conference in its turn channeled the concern to the sending churches. Although somewhat slowed down by World War I, the ecumenical movement grew and was punctuated by landmark events in The Universal Christian Conference on Life and Work (Stockholm, 1925) and The World Conference of Faith and Order (Lausanne, 1927). The report of this second conference included a description of what the churches assembled in their representatives shared in common and the many things that distinguished and sometimes divided them. When the World Council of Churches came into existence in August of 1948, the Faith and Order movement was integrated into it as a distinct agency whose concern was the doctrinal unity of the churches. Its signal achievement thus far has been the document entitled *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, frequently referred to as the Lima document, which sketches a proposal for a common understanding of these three aspects of the church across the churches.[1] This document is the best example of what I will call "transdenominational ecclesiology," and the fact that it has received so much attention from the churches indicates that it plays some important role in the whole church.[2] The quest for unity in

[1]World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry,* Faith and Order Paper 111 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1982). Referred to below as BEM. Faith and Order is working on an analogous document whose draft form is *The Nature and Purpose of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, Faith and Order Paper 181 (November 1998); cited as FO-181.

[2]In the course of the 1980s the Christian churches of the world reacted to BEM and

Roger Haight, S.J. teaches systematic theology at Union Theological Seminary (New York, NY 10027). Previously he was for many years a faculty member at Regis College in Toronto and at Weston Jesuit School of Theology in Cambridge, MA. In addition to his recent two-volume Christian Community in History, *his books include* Dynamics of Theology *(2001) and* Jesus Symbol of God *(1999). He is a past president of the Catholic Theological Society of America.*

HORIZONS 32/2 (2005): 332-51

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900002577 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the whole church struggles up hill against the gravitational pull towards a fragmentation of Christianity into churches. The break between the churches of the East and the West brought little scandal because they had gone separate ways since the patristic period and lived in separate worlds. But the Reformation so shattered the unity of the western church that in time Christians accommodated themselves to the divisions. Ecclesiology became a discipline proper to each church and polemical in its self-definition over against other churches. Today distinctive identities are taken for granted, nurtured, and cherished. At the height of the enthusiasm of the ecumenical movement H. Richard Niebuhr showed how deeply denominationalism finds its roots in the whole everyday life of the community and cannot be reduced to matters of doctrine.[3] Historical consciousness has explained diversity and made it acceptable. The idealism of the ecumenical movement and the achievement of the World Council of Churches appears against this background dispersion and fragmentation. But whereas many theological disciplines have become eclectic across confessional boundaries, ecclesiology has remained a more or less tribal discipline.

The title for this essay could be "The Case for Transdenominational Ecclesiology." The name points to the effort to cut across denominational ecclesiologies and characterize a common Christian ecclesial life. Modeled on the efforts of Faith and Order, it seeks to formulate a characterization of the church that is common to the Christian churches or denominations.[4] It is a form of comparative ecclesiology that explicitly deals with pluralism by integrating into its method of understanding the church sources that transcend the boundaries of a single church. It operates by comparison and contrast, by assimilation and distinction, and seeks to achieve a unified understanding of the church that all churches could recognize and in some measure claim as their own.

The point of this essay is to argue for broader participation in this kind of work. This requires that such an effort be "situated" in the sense of responding to certain needs in the church at large and at the present time. It would entail a careful definition of such a subdiscipline and a fuller account of its sources and method. Making the case for transdenominational ecclesiology would also have to argue the goals and mer-

these reactions filled five volumes. A summary response of the Faith and Order committee of the WCC is *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry 1982-1990: Report on the Process and Responses,* Faith and Order Paper 149 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990); cited as FO-149.

[3]H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Meridian, 1957, orig. 1929).

[4]The terms "communion," "denominations," "churches" are not used technically in this essay but loosely and almost synonymously.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900002577 Published online by Cambridge University Press

its of such an enterprise as well as respond to some obvious objections to it.

With these goals in mind, what follows is divided into four parts. The first part raises up some historical considerations that help situate this ecclesiological project and define some of the premises that in effect make up its presuppositions. The second part then responds to the main objection to such a project, namely, that the object of this ecclesiology does not exist because no one belongs to a common church but only to particular churches. The third part deepens the response to objection by further clarifying the method and goals of a transdenominational ecclesiology, and the fourth proposes a broad structure for building such an ecclesiology.

I. Premises of a Transdenominational Ecclesiology

I begin by situating the quest for a transdenominational ecclesiology. What allowed the ecumenical movement to occur in the late modern period? The centripetal force of the ideal of Christian unity was never lost and polemic itself bears witness to a sense of the unity of truth and a desire for unity. But why did the value of unity become so forceful in the twentieth century that it could challenge the ingrained division among the churches? To situate transdenominational ecclesiology I appeal to history and two basic ideas or forms of consciousness that serve as its premises: historical consciousness and a positive appreciation of pluralism.

The most dramatic shift in the history of ecclesiology after the period of the Reformation was mediated by the rise of historical consciousness. Historical consciousness allowed the latent ideal of unity to take on a new importance in thinking about the church. This can be illustrated most clearly in the ecclesiology of Friedrich Schleiermacher.[5]

Schleiermacher manifested the historical consciousness that characterized his thinking in his systematics when he defined dogmatic theology as "the science which systematizes the doctrine prevalent in the Christian church at any given time (CF, §88)." He recognized the fact that human consciousness and ideas are always tied to the particular world in which they are thought (CF, §§5, 30). The development of doctrine is a natural consequence. "No definition of doctrine, then,

[5]The ecclesiology of Schleiermacher is contained in his systematics: *The Christian Faith*, ed. by H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963), 525-695. (Cited in the text as CF by paragraph.) An interpretation of Schleiermacher's ecclesiology is found in Roger Haight, *Christian Community in History, II: Comparative Ecclesiology* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 311-36. Cited below as CCH, II.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900002577 Published online by Cambridge University Press

even when arrived at with the most perfect community of feeling, can be regarded as irreformable and valid for all time" (CF, §154).

Schleiermacher's theology was itself ecumenical and sought to bridge the Lutheran and Reformed traditions in a common doctrine.[6] The church for him was the community of the followers of Jesus Christ who shared in the God-consciousness mediated by the Redeemer and were animated by the Spirit. This community was structured, on the one hand, by essential and invariable elements given through Christ and the Spirit at its origins, and, on the other, by mutable elements in virtue of its constant interaction with the world. This gave his ecclesiology the flexibility to encompass many of the variations to which history gives rise. His sense of history allowed him to develop several basic principles that helped orchestrate or manage the diversity that existed in the churches beyond the essential structures. In other words, diversity in Schleiermacher did not automatically translate into division but should be able to be contained by communion. Some of these principles are the following: "Whensoever separations actually occur in the Christian church, there can never be lacking an endeavor to unite the separated" (CF, §150). "The complete suspension of fellowship between different parts of the visible church is unchristian" (CF, §151). "All separations in the church are merely temporary" (CF, §152). Christian loyalty to a specific denomination is conditional: "The essential thing is that each should love the special form of Christianity to which he adheres only as a transient form of the one abiding church, though a form that involves a temporary being of its own" (CF, §152).

The historical consciousness that is reflected in Schleiermacher and increasingly after him has a dialectical character, in the sense that it contains two dimensions that are in tension and pull against each other. On the one hand, historical consciousness legitimizes diversity; it explains difference through the mediation of culture and society; it deabsolutizes aspects of the church that are not essential. It thus retrieves the distinction developed in the Reformation and contained in the term *adiaphora*: there are elements in the constitution of any given church that are indifferent, that do not make a difference, and where differences may be tolerated in an essential unity. It also looks forward to such ideas as the hierarchy of truths (Vatican II). In matters of doctrine it recognizes that transcendent reality cannot be ultimately circumscribed and contained by human formulas. But, on the other hand, historical consciousness proffered certain essential elements that always appear where the church exists because they define its essential being even as they relativize the differences. These are fundamental

[6]"Author's Preface to the Second Edition," CF, p. xxiv.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900002577 Published online by Cambridge University Press

insights and lessons without which there could not have been an ecumenical movement.

The second experience and set of ideas that form a premise for a transdenominational ecclesiology can be summarized as a positive appreciation of pluralism. Pluralism here does not mean sheer diversity, but difference that subsists in a larger common matrix of shared ideas, values, and living space. Pluralism is unity amid difference. A positive construction of pluralism means that differences are not merely tolerated as a necessary evil, but recognized as a value. While such a recognition may be implicit in historical consciousness itself, and therefore is implicit in the ecumenical movement itself, still a positive experience of difference has to be continually learned and the ecumenical movement itself deepened this conviction even as it in turn sustained the ecumenical movement.

An analysis of the origins of the ecumenical movement reveals that it was driven by a fundamental corporate experience that took the shape of a negative experience of contrast.[7] Negatively, missionaries came to the awareness that the divisions generated in the West or sending countries were inappropriately imposed on new Christians. Missionaries were literally spreading Christian dissension wherever individual missionaries or mission churches competed with each other. Positively, the way forward in this situation obviously had to entail some form of cooperation, and this was modeled by nondenominational missionary societies formed by people of multiple denominations who came together not on the basis of their own denominations but on principles that were shared by but transcended all the denominations. When this energy was pooled, as in The World Missionary Conference (1910) and subsequent ecumenical gatherings, it mediated the experience and the insight of how pluralism can work constructively. This became the positive energy that drove the ecumenical movement forward. Unity can sublate or draw up into itself and not negate plurality and difference.[8] One has to add here that such a notion of pluralism is indeed a "beautiful idea," but one that is often impracticable and frequently fails. Pluralism is existential and has to be negotiated anew at every turn; the World Council of Churches is itself a constant manifestation of that.

The practical demands of ecumenical association and common

[7]I follow Edward Schillebeeckx's schematization of this basic human reaction as having three simultaneous and interacting dimensions: the first is a negative experience that something is fundamentally wrong; second, a positive background of an ideal allows the negative to appear as such; and, third, a spontaneous impulse seeks to resist or negate the negation. See Schillebeeckx, *The Church: The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 5-6.

[8]Haight, CCH, II, 370-71.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900002577 Published online by Cambridge University Press

participation forced certain ecclesiological principles onto the table. Early on the World Council of Churches made it clear that it was not a church, yet it had to face ecclesiological questions. The WCC could only exist on the basis of certain ecclesiological principles which it had to formulate in a way that would satisfy its constituents. Three such principles help to clarify its status and shed light on the whole church. First, all the churches which make up the WCC share a unity from their common faith in Christ and participation in the Spirit. This is fundamental and radical. Second, this profound, substantial, and transcendently grounded unity itself forces the admission of the limitations contained in the provisions that define each church as distinctive. This is a dialectical conviction: these provisions give each church its identity, but they are in fact also restrictions which are transcended by the real unity that is shared and experienced in common. Third, this dialectical tension gives rise to the impulse and movement to try to capture that common existence that was begun by Faith and Order at Lausanne, is reflected in BEM, and continues today.

These two forms of consciousness, a sense of historicity or historical consciousness and a positive appreciation of pluralism, respond to the present situation of the church. That situation can be characterized as one of increased tension between the impulse towards unity and the forces of dispersion and fragmentation. Perhaps at no time in the history of the church has the whole Christian movement witnessed more diversification than today as the church becomes ever more deeply contextualized outside of western cultures. This is especially visible in the breathtaking spread of pentecostal Christianity and a corresponding constriction or proportional shrinking of the mainline churches of the West.[9] The fragmentation among the churches in the West, generally from the Reformation up to the present but especially in North America, pales in comparison with the multiplication of churches that is presently going on especially in former missionary countries. The forces of fragmentation are felt as well within worldwide churches and communions of churches. We witness a confusion between the bonds which should hold a church or a communion together and what ordinarily would be called *adiaphora*, things that should not be allowed to break or prevent unity. Instead of an expansive and free existence in Christ, more and more churches are seeking a narrow sectarian or culture-based and excluding identity. The tension between unity and difference has grown palpable across the world church today and the

[9]See, e.g., the analysis of world Christianity as proffered by Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) and "The Next Christianity," *The Atlantic Monthly* 290 (October 2002), 53-68.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900002577 Published online by Cambridge University Press

basic insights that were internalized in the ecumenical movement need constant relearning and radicalization.

Finally, a definition of the situation of the church today has to be set in one further all encompassing context, namely, the consciousness and the recognition of the world religions with which Christianity coexists today. The situation of the church today is one in which churches, church, and world religions all live together in an increasingly smaller, globalized world. Members of these religions are gradually becoming more familiar with each other in an interconnected world of business and migration. The force of this new interaction between the religions is overt and profound. Christians share a new common or homogenized identity in the bigger picture defined by their relationship with the other religions. The new common identity appears both in the eyes of others and in our own basic self-definition in dialogue with other faiths. Together, as Christians who make up one Christian church, we have a feeling that we must dialogue with other religions and apply the same principles of historicity and pluralism to understand them as we did to understand each other, lest religion and our relationship to the God of all become another reason for conflict rather than an antidote to it in a world ripe for massive violence.

II. The Referent of a Transdenominational Ecclesiology

The question implicit in this subheading is whether or not a transdenominational church exists. The main reservation relative to the project of constructing a transdenominational ecclesiology lies in the realization that no such church actually exists, nor can it. No one belongs to a transdenominational church because all churches are specific, historical organizations with a particular identity. Even the theological construct of a universal, invisible church is not really a church but precisely a dimension of the churches taken abstractly. So too, a transdenominational church and an ecclesiology that represents it are fictive constructions, assemblies of abstract notions, that do not refer to anything real, and one cannot pledge loyalty to an abstraction. So goes the typical objection.

Much of what is said in this observation is true and it raises the question of the logical status of a transdenominational ecclesiology. What is referred to by a transdenominational ecclesiology? It is clearly not the same kind of reality as a particular church; a transdenominational ecclesiology will not share the same logical status as a Lutheran or an Orthodox ecclesiology, for example. An examination of the relationship between a transdenominational ecclesiology and the ecclesiology of a particular denomination will help to clarify the object of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900002577 Published online by Cambridge University Press

study. What follows provides a first appreciation of a transdenominational ecclesiology, and the next section on method will indicate more fully its logical status.

While from one point of view no one belongs to a transdenominational church, from another perspective everyone belongs to this church because it consists in that ecclesial existence which all Christians share in common. By definition, then, a transdenominational ecclesiology refers to an abstraction, but a kind of abstraction that need not be regarded pejoratively. This "church" is not a particular church, but the foundational elements of every church or what all ecclesial existence shares in common. In fact this common ecclesial existence may take different forms. So, for example, one baptism may be administered in different ways; one function of oversight and regulation of community life may take different political forms; one *ministerium* may be organized differently in different churches and ecclesiologies. This common church and its corresponding ecclesiology is indeed an abstraction, because it only subsists in actual concrete churches with their proper self-definitions and understandings based on their particular historical existences, practices, and beliefs. But it is none-the-less real as the fundamental core of the actual churches.[10]

The reality of the referent of a transdenominational ecclesiology is ultimately proven by the spontaneous demand for it that arose with the ecumenical movement and the continued striving for a statement of what the member churches of the World Council of Churches share in common. The reactions of the churches to BEM in the 1980s proves that that document had traction, that it came close enough to a description of the churches who engaged in the process of designing and criticizing it that they entered into dialogue with it. Any attempt to put into formulas what members of the many churches share in common will by definition aim at being the property of all the churches. But, at the same time, in its reduced and abstract or generalized form, the description of this ecclesiology will only approach this goal asymptotically. Not only is this common existence historical and thus always shifting, as an ideal theological reality it will take as many different concrete forms as there are particular churches.

[10]Edward Farley describes "ecclesial existence," which is a foundational form of what is intended here, as related to the nineteenth-century quest for the essence of Christianity. But it is no mere abstraction or unchanging kernel in the husk. Rather it is defined both historically and theologically. In its historicity, common ecclesial existence is always changing; because it is theological, it cannot be reduced to any of its particular historical manifestations or to a particular abstract, static construction. Ecclesial existence has the quality of an ideal, but one that is always being readjusted to historical conditions. See Edward Farley, *Ecclesial Reflection: An Anatomy of Theological Method* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 198-205.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900002577 Published online by Cambridge University Press

A transdenominational ecclesiology is not a substitute for or a rival of any denominational ecclesiology. Logically, it must not be lined up on the same plane as the ecclesiologies of the churches. It has to be read alongside, not instead of, the ecclesiology of any given church. Transdenominational ecclesiology is not post-denominational; it does not compete with actual ecclesiologies or aim at replacing them. Rather, it relates to each one of them ideally as a description of that which is shared in common among all ecclesiologies.

To sum up: this is not the ecclesiology of a single or particular church, but aims at being a common possession of all the churches. It does not replace or rival any denominational ecclesiology. This ecclesiology provides no plan for a merger or federation of churches and takes no position, positive or negative, on the desirability of forming such union churches. This ecclesiology is an attempt to represent an understanding of the church which, in the measure in which it is accepted and shared among the churches, points to bonds of unity across differences. Therefore the status and function of this ecclesiology are dialectical, and it can only be appreciated dialectically. This means that it entails an intrinsic tension between the elements or dimensions that define it. The most prominent tension within this ecclesiology is the quality by which it simultaneously reflects unity and encourages differences within that unity. This ecclesiology has an ideological function of expressing common identity amid real diversity. The success of this ecclesiology has to be measured in degrees by the various parties to which it appeals: the highest degree will be found in the measure of its ability to express with relative adequacy a real common understanding of the church that can also acknowledge real differences without allowing them to undermine the unity constituted by shared reality and meaning. Individual churches will have more to say about their own particular identities and their own understandings of the elements that make up this common ecclesiology. But that "more" will not transcend, in the sense of "leave behind," what Paul was referring to when he spoke of one faith, one baptism, one Lord, and one Spirit. This ecclesiology will consistently reach for the historical and qualitative substance that binds the churches together as church.

III. Methodological Considerations

Discussion of a method for developing a transdenominational ecclesiology will also define more precisely the logical status of the results. I take up the following considerations relative to this ecclesiology: its sources, audience, method, aim, characteristics, and the ex-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900002577 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ample of such an ecclesiology provided by the documents of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches.

1. The *sources* for a transdenominational ecclesiology are no different than those for ecclesiology generally, but it is useful to make these explicit. These sources may be divided into historical and theological sources, but materially speaking these two types of data are sometimes contained in the same documents. It is more helpful to divide the sources into historical and contemporary documents.

The first group of sources, then, are historical in the sense of being contained in texts representing the past. These include, first of all, documents that help understand the historical origins or genesis of the church. In fact the main source for this would be the New Testament, even though that history does not lie on the surface of the text, but requires critical exegesis. A whole host of other historical sources other than canonical literature can be brought to bear to help understand the genesis of the church.

A second historical source is the New Testament precisely as a witness to revelation to which the whole church appeals as the theological norm for its understanding of the church. History alone cannot provide an adequate conception of the church because its members have always understood the church in its relation to God. God is at work in the foundations and ongoing life of the Christian community. The criterion for all Christian theological understandings of the church ultimately refers back in some way to the New Testament witness.

A third historical source consists in the history of the church and the history of ecclesiology within that history. The church is a historical organization with concrete histories in various times and places. The only way to gain a concrete understanding of the actual church is to trace its existence from its origins to the present.

The second group of sources are more or less contemporaneous to the present. They are twofold: the one category of contemporary of sources contains all the official documents that define, regulate, and give normative expression to the constitution of the various churches. The church as a whole consists in churches which are public social organizations, and the self-understanding of each one is contained in the public life of the community and the documents that represent it. The other category of contemporary sources consists in the writings of theologians who interpret for the world the many churches to which they belong and which they explicitly or implicitly represent in their writings. Both of these sources usually combine social, historical, and legal material with theological construal. Other disciplines, such as sociology, provide other vehicles and means for access to the life of the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900002577 Published online by Cambridge University Press

church, but one might presume that these will be included in the evidence presented by the theologians.

2. Before turning to a consideration of the methods used to interpret these sources, it will be helpful to consider the *audience* of such an ecclesiology. The audience addressed has a good deal of bearing on the methods employed. The effort to characterize the common, transdenominational nature of the church is addressed simultaneously to people inside and outside the church.

The audience for any ecclesiology, in the first place, is made up of the body of fellow Christians. Ecclesiology like Christian theology generally consists in reflection on reality in the light of the symbols of faith by members who share that faith; it addresses others within the Christian fold. In this respect, ecclesiology uses insider language and appeals to insider experience to express coherently what Christians share in common.

But the church is also a public institution or organization with an existence and, in most conceptions, a function in society. This relationship has been and still is subject to the widest variations among the churches in different times, places, cultures, and societies. In each case such a relationship should be the object of reflection, and so it merits attention in a transdenominational ecclesiology as well. The church as a whole needs to make itself known and in some measure intelligible to the differentiated world in which it exists. This outward orientation, whether missionary or simply functional within a secular society, will have a significant effect on the method of interpretation.

3. I turn now to a more focused examination of the *method* for interpreting or constructing the transdenominational dimension of the church. Three distinct dimensions of that method stand out as three distinct logical processes in dealing with the sources. These procedures are comparative, normative, and apologetic. I take them up in that order.

Comparative. The quest for a formulation of the nature and character of the Christian church in transdenominational terms is an explicitly comparative effort. It is a form of comparative ecclesiology that deals with pluralism in constructing an interpretation of the church. This means that to arrive at its conclusion this ecclesiology must weigh a considerable amount of diverse evidence arising from the various churches. It must then, by comparison, contrast, and synthesis, seek a broad understanding that both represents the various ecclesiologies and is identical with none of them. Quite simply, the whole of the evidence for such an ecclesiology comes from historical instances of the church, in the past and in the present, so that every representation of a transdenominational ecclesiology must implicitly appeal to the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900002577 Published online by Cambridge University Press

whole range of historical data which it sifts and measures by comparison.[11]

Normative. Comparative theology, however, entails a theological imagination, and theology as a normative discipline cannot consist merely in the comparison of historical data. To put this in graphic terms, a transdenominational ecclesiology cannot be reduced to a negotiation of a committee representing actual churches. Theology is not only a historical but also a normative discipline that does not necessarily characterize the way things are, as would a descriptive social science, but the way things should be. In other words, there must be some criteria for judging between the alternatives offered by a comparative menu. And if the result is to be a truly common understanding of the church on which the many churches agree, the criteria by which such understandings and judgments are made must be commonly accepted and consistently applied. For example, the New Testament is the most common and basic authority in the church, and it has to be brought to bear on the process by which comparison and dialectic yields to judgment and decision.[12]

Apologetic. Apology means self-explanation. An apologetic dimension of method means that exposition contains reasons that make plain the positions taken. But explanation may be slightly different for insider and outsider, although they approach each other. Reasons for an outsider require a correlation with things familiar or apparent to experience. A method of correlation places in conjunction the propositions of faith and the conditions of the everyday world. This correlation does not generate proof, but a dialogue that in a variety of ways according to different axes of correlation clarifies the path that faith takes. This dialogue with the world corresponds with the impulse of universally relevant truth to be shared and the missionary character of the church. The apologetic dimension of comparative ecclesiology will appear most clearly when the audience includes those of other religions. For example, when Christian ecclesiology is compared with accounts of the community life of other religions, its apologetic character

[11]I have stated this process in a literal way that makes it an impossible task. Obviously there are many disciplined short cuts to the consideration of the whole range of the history of the church and its ecclesiologies. BEM, for example, was constructed by a group of theologians, representing many traditions and churches, who entered into critical conversation.

[12]There are other places where one can find authoritative interpretations besides the New Testament. For example, a near universal testimony to something in the church across its history in a variety of regions offers a strong testimony to authenticity. Still other criteria can be formulated as well as candidates for loci for a commonly accepted authoritative witness.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900002577 Published online by Cambridge University Press

becomes more sharply defined.[13] Moreover, given the way in which the secular scientific world has formed a culture that affects everyone, in many cases an apologetic dimension is also needed for insiders.

Together these three qualities of ecclesiological method, its being comparative, normative, and apologetic, describe a way of dealing with the sources in the effort to delineate the common ecclesiology latent in the many ecclesiologies that subdivide the great church into its many churches.

4. Before commenting on the characteristics of a transdenominational ecclesiology, I want simply to reiterate the goal of this project which was already described in the previous section. The *aim* of this ecclesiology quite thoroughly determines its chief characteristics. The point of transdenominational ecclesiology is to characterize the common nature and characteristics shared by all Christian churches in the welter of different churches that are spread all over the world. The more churches can identify with and appropriate its formulations, given ordinary theological criteria for adequacy, the more successful such an ecclesiology will be. This represents an ongoing and never ending project that can be achieved only by degrees.

5. The ongoing, dynamic method and process of this ecclesiological task, and the difficult and delicate nature of its goal in a world of churches that distinguish themselves from each other in sometimes uncompromising ways, dictate a special kind of style. Two *characteristic qualities* help define its language.

First of all, this ecclesiology will consist in broad, inclusive, and deliberately non-specific referential language in its description of church institutions. A remarkably similar set of theological symbols, frequently drawn directly from the New Testament or derived from New Testament tropes, are used to characterize the church in all of its denominations. Differences begin to occur when specific churches are organized in different ways and take up particular sets of ceremonies and devotional and ethical practices, so that the theological language takes different concrete shape. As a consequence, an ecclesiology which attempts to characterize what is common to ecclesial life across the churches will have to use language that draws back from the concrete specificity that fills the corporate imagination of the churches and states things in a deliberately generalized way.

Take, for example, the case of baptism. Important and, for some, church-dividing alternative practices of baptism are found in infant baptism and the baptism of believers. These are, moreover, differences that make a difference in the life and style of a community. Implicit

[13]See, e.g., the comparative ecclesiology of Keith Ward in his *Religion and Community* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900002577 Published online by Cambridge University Press

imaginative reference to the one or other practice in the context of specific churches, therefore, will completely color the understanding and appreciation of this particular feature of ecclesial life and add up to really different understandings of baptism. But, in fact, one can find coherent and convincing rationales for both of these practices in the history of ecclesiology. Moreover, drawing back from the specific practices, both the churches which baptize infants and the churches which baptize only adults baptize with a baptism that shares many of the same elements. There is also much in common in the two understandings of what is going on in this rite. The general theological grounding of baptism in both cases, that is, as distinct from the specific prescriptions, is based on an appeal to the New Testament. It may even be said at a certain theological and ecclesial level to be the same baptism. It possesses in both cases the same theological and ecclesiological "nature."

Second, this transdenominational ecclesiology will have frequent recourse to the principle of functionality relative to church institution and ministry. "The principle of functionality in ecclesiology refers to the way ministries were adopted in the church to meet the needs of the community. The institutionalization of the church proceeded according to sociological patterns of routinizing the charismatic ministry that addressed the needs of the community as they arose. The goal is always the well-being of the community and the exercise of its mission to continue the ministry of Jesus Christ in history. Whatever is needed to accomplish its mission, wherever there is a need to be met by a certain ministry, that ministry is provided spontaneously by the community in its self-constitution in and through God as Spirit."[14] Given this genetic structure of ministry and institution, a transdenominational ecclesiology can focus attention on the service that the institutional forms of particular churches provide in order to find continuity and thus bridge the differences with a functional consistency or sameness. This strategy of finding analogies of function can give transdenominational ecclesiology leverage for reading a common substance across denominational boundaries.

Take, for example, the question of the fundamental unit of the church. The issue contained in this question governs an ecclesiological imagination at a fairly fundamental level and can be a thoroughly dividing issue. Is the fundamental unit of the church the congregation, as

[14]Roger Haight, *Christian Community in History, I, Historical Ecclesiology* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 63-64. "By functionality I mean something that gains its value from something else on which it is dependent. The dynamics of functionality are analogous to the interrelationship between means and ends: measures taken lead to certain results; and goals or projected results determine the means to be employed," (ibid., 63).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900002577 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in many different denominations of "congregational" churches, or is it the diocese, an understanding institutionalized in the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Anglican churches. The question of nature of episcopacy and its place in the church is closely bound up with a conception of the fundamental organizational structure of the church. This question was faced in the Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue and handled functionally.[15] In Lutheran ecclesiology the basic unit of the church is the parish or congregation; in Catholic ecclesiology it is the diocese with the bishop at the center. Through a functional imagination one can cut through the formal, juridical or canonical understandings of the matter to find existential meetings points. So it was in this comparative dialogue. "With respect to Roman Catholics, the international Roman Catholic-Lutheran Joint Commission has noted that, despite the definition of the local church as the diocese, 'in actual fact it is the parish, even more than the diocese, which is familiar to Christians as the place where the church is to be experienced'" (LCD-X, 84).[16] One sees a frequent appeal to functional equivalence between different formal institutions or different names of offices and operations. Juridicism or fixation on historical institutions as absolute sets up a permanent blockage to elementary religious and theological perception (LCD-X, 121).

In the end, these two characteristics of deliberate vagueness of object-reference and a stress on the existential function of various institutions characterize this form of ecclesiology for a reason. They should not be conceived as weaknesses, but rather as ways of protecting legitimate diversity within unity.

6. The process connected with the development of the document *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches and the continuing process of reflection after it provide the best *examples* of a transdenominational ecclesiology.[17] The goal of this effort is "to give expression to what the churches can now say together about the nature and purpose of the

[15]Randall Lee and Jeffrey Gros, eds., *The Church as Koinonia of Salvation: Its Structures and Ministries: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue, X* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005). Cited as LCD-X by page number.

[16]This statement is balanced by another statement expressing the regional side of ecclesial existence: "'The local church is not a free-standing, self-sufficient reality. As part of a network of communion, the local church maintains its reality as church by relating to other local churches'" (LCD-X, 90, citing the "Joint Working Group of the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church," §13).

[17]The World Council of Churches' document BEM was followed by five volumes of responses by various churches, and a summary reaction to these responses is WCC, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry 1982-1990: Report on the Process and Responses* (see n.2 above). Since then the Faith and Order Commission has been working on a transdenominational document representing the church as a whole. The latest draft of this

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900002577 Published online by Cambridge University Press

church and within that perspective to state the remaining areas of disagreement" (FO-181, 4). More specifically, it attempts to develop specific documents which can be recognized by the churches as the "faith of the church through the ages" (FO-149, 8). The subject matter is not any church's ecclesiology but "our" Christian ecclesiology. It looks toward a common recognition of a formulation of something that can be agreed upon and held in common as authentically Christian by all parties. The phrase "convergence document" is used to describe "the fruit of what all of [the churches], after a long period of dialogue, [are] now able to affirm together beyond their different theological perceptions" (FO-149, 9).

These documents are built on a foundational tension between general statement and implicit detail, which shades into a tension between unity and diversity. Herein lies the very challenge of such an enterprise. "There is a rich diversity of Christian life and witness born out of the diversity of cultural and historical context" (FO-181, 62). Not only unity but also this diversity is a gift of God to the church because the whole is enriched by the parts (FO-181, 61). The tensive character of these two dimensions is addressed explicitly: "Each local church must be the place where two things are simultaneously guaranteed: the safeguarding of unity and the flourishing of a legitimate diversity. There are limits within which diversity is an enrichment and outside which it is not only unacceptable but destructive of the gift of unity. Similarly, unity, particularly when it tends to be identified with 'uniformity,' can be destructive of authentic diversity and thus unacceptable" (FO-181, 63). To preserve this tension the conceptualization of this ecclesiology must be such that it captures the unity among the churches by implicitly recognizing legitimate differences in particular churches. It reaches for the deepest sources of unity with God and among the churches. It thus challenges the churches to assume critical responsibility for what they consider obstacles to various levels of communion.

To sum up: transdenominational ecclesiology uses the same sources as other forms of Christian theology, but is attentive to the existence and tradition of the whole church, to the extent this is possible, and not exclusively one denomination's tradition. It addresses both insiders and outsiders, but with a particular consciousness that it represents the whole church in the context of other world religions. In other words, the field or horizon for understanding is expanded. The method is simultaneously comparative, normative, and apologetic; it involves a consistent comparison between churches and perhaps religions, a quest for a normative theological understanding allowed by the

document is WCC, *The Nature and Purpose of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement* (see n.1 above).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900002577 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Christians sources of revelation, and a critical correlation with the contemporary world of human experience. The goal is a common Christian understanding of the church. The characteristics of the content of this ecclesiology will be tensive and dialectical. Its broad and generalized formulas will always give rise to the differentiations that exist in all the particular churches. But where it succeeds it will be a common bond between Christians which different churches can embrace, and a bridge which will allow easier communion with each other.

IV. Structure for Understanding the Church

How should the elements that constitute the church be organized in a rational way? Is there a way of relating the various dimensions of the church to each other that is descriptive of all churches without being the sole or distinctive property of a particular church? What plan represents a common or neutral ground for laying out the foundation and framework of a transdenominational church?

To address this issue I turn to the sociology of organizations to find a schema for understanding organizations as such. The church is much more than a human institution, but it is also a historical community that falls within the scope of the sociology of organizations. The discipline of sociology thus provides a kind of neutral ground that in turn yields a heuristic structure which can be used to present the elements that make up the church. The reasons for turning to the sociology of organizations for a model for describing a transdenominational ecclesiology can be summarized by shorthand: it offers a pattern for understanding all organizations and thus a shared, nondenominational superstructure containing the elements of a "transdenominational church." Such a broad heuristic structure correlates neatly with the goal of finding a formulation of the church that abstracts from particular churches to find what is common among them all. Because it is sociological, it will have to leave room for the question of the distinctive nature and purpose of the Christian church. A sociological understanding cannot be allowed to become reductive and diminish the self-understanding of the church from something that exists on the basis of the initiative and support of God to an institution of merely human construction. In other words, the sociology of organizations will have to be adjusted to the reality of the church which it simultaneously interprets so that it not distort the church's own convictions about the kind of organization it is.

I propose the following schema of five elements or dimensions of the church which are drawn from the sociology of organizations and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900002577 Published online by Cambridge University Press

adapted to the study of the Christian church.[18] The manner in which they are laid out here gives the impression they are objective dimensions of any particular organization. But I employ these five elements as purely formal ideas without specific content. They are heuristic categories which in turn represent sets of relevant questions which may be asked of any given organization and which will generate responses that help clarify its nature. In fact, these questions are usually answered in the ecclesiology of any given church or denomination; they correspond with and run parallel to actual ecclesiologies. A comparison among various ecclesiologies will show that the more integral an ecclesiology of any particular church is, the more the questions proposed in this schema will be answered.[19]

First, what is the nature and the purpose of the church? How does it understand itself on this basic ontological level? This question has a specifically theological character: what are the common theological symbols, meanings, and values that characterize the church as a whole and hold it together as a body?

Second, what is the institutional or organizational form of the church? Its polity? Its structure of ministry? Its chain of authority?

Third, who are the members of the church? What does it take to become a member? And how do the various roles within the church define how the members relate to each other?

Fourth, what are the activities of the church? What are the actions by which the church fulfills its purpose, goal, or mission? What are the church's patterns of assembly, prayer, worship, and liturgical life? What are its views of the sacraments? What is the ethic of the Christian community? How is Christian behavior or the Christian life or Christian spirituality understood? The last two questions, however, cannot be answered apart from consideration of the last area of attention.

Fifth, what is the relation between the church and the world? How does the church view the society beyond its boundaries, and how does it draw or define those boundaries? How does the church view itself vis à vis the wider world of history and the immediate future? The question of its conception of the absolute future brings the interrogation around full circle and back to the ontological conception of its nature and purpose.

Taken together these questions do not represent the genesis of the church; this is a descriptive and not a developmental model. But the

[18]These five elements of organizations are inspired by W. Richard Scott, *Organizations: Rational, Natural, and Open Systems* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1981), 13-19 and *passim*.

[19]Such is the finding of my study of the history of ecclesiology in *Christian Community in History*, especially in volume II which treats ecclesiologies comparatively from the sixteenth century forward.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900002577 Published online by Cambridge University Press

diversity of the sources shows readily enough that the church is no static institution or organization. Moreover, the original genesis of the church can be displayed within the context of this scheme. The New Testament and the non-canonical literature of the first and second centuries show traces of all of these facets of the church as an organization in the process of being formed, that is, in various embryonic and developmental stages of the genesis of the more fully developed institutions that constituted the church. The normative developmental considerations of the church which are crucial for a transdenominational ecclesiology are thus not left behind in this interpretive organization of the data but are integrated into it. In sum, this set of categories brings together in dialogue the many churches that exist today all of which share different forms of these elements of common ecclesial existence. It also provides a set of questions addressed to the New Testament and the original genesis or development of the church which shares a universal authority for a normative understanding.

To conclude: this essay has outlined a proposal for the ongoing task of constructing a transdenominational ecclesiology, not as the central task of this discipline, but as a distinct enterprise of comparative ecclesiology along side denominational ecclesiology. It has discussed in order the premises, nature, method, and structure that such an ecclesiological effort might assume. I conclude with a statement of the function such an ecclesiology might play. This is not the ecclesiology of any specific church, and thus its relevance cannot be judged by its adequacy in representing a particular church but in its function relative to all the churches and their ecclesiologies.

As a transdenominational ecclesiology becomes more and more accurate in representing what Christian churches share in common, it will accomplish three things. It will, first of all, deepen the understanding of the church shared by all Christians. When such an ecclesiology approaches a formulation of what all churches share in common, it drives theological understanding to the deeper level of the concentrated substance of ecclesial faith. It tends to eliminate widespread confusions between what is substantial in the Christian church and what is changeable and changing. This seems to be quite urgent in the church today as a defense against new impulses toward fragmentation.

Second, such an ecclesiology increases the breadth of an understanding of the church. Transdenominational ecclesiology breaks open the limitations of individual denominational ecclesiologies in its consideration of the broad variety of aspects the whole church has assumed across the varieties of its denominations. This cannot but expand an ecclesiological imagination to conceive new creative possibilities for any particular church and tradition. In this respect pluralism

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900002577 Published online by Cambridge University Press

within the great church becomes a sign of richness and fullness of Christian life and not a defect in the church.

Third, transdenominational ecclesiology shows the possibilities for mutual recognition of the churches of one another. It forms a common bridge which may allow mutual recognition to cross over to more formal communion. This should not be regarded as a simple crossing; it has been and is a difficult corporate mental transition filled with real obstacles. But the process of reflecting on transdenominational ecclesiology is itself a significant movement in this direction.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900002577 Published online by Cambridge University Press