

***RECEPTIVE ECUMENISM AND ECCLESIAL LEARNING: LEARNING TO BE  
CHURCH TOGETHER***

**JOINT SECOND INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON RECEPTIVE  
ECUMENISM, AND THIRD ANNUAL GATHERING OF THE  
ECCLESIOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS NETWORK**

**USHAW COLLEGE, DURHAM, UK  
11<sup>TH</sup> – 15<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY 2009**

**SESSION 9: FINAL PLENARY  
14<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY 2009, 3.50 - 5.30 PM**

**RESPONSE**

**James Haire<sup>1</sup>**

I am honoured to give this response to this significant conference on *Receptive Ecumenism and Ecclesial Learning: Learning to Be Church Together*. In doing so, I wish to thank Dr Paul Murray and his colleagues for arranging this important event, dealing as it has so richly with many central issues for Christianity. It has been an excellent gathering.

If wish to reflect on some of the issues of this conference, and then suggest some matters that seem to me to flow from those issues.

Let us begin with the basis of why we are here. We need to hear the voice of God because that is central to our identity as Christians. How do we listen to the voice of God? It is not our task primarily to invoke God for our particular view of the world, but rather, in humility, to sit and listen as that divine voice comes to us from God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Let us, then, go to the very heart of our existence as Christians, and as the church. The inexplicable will of God to be for, and with, humanity implies that the church's life cannot begin to be understood in terms of the structures and events of the world. Equally, God's inexplicable will to be God with, and for, humanity implies that we should always understand our life as Christians theologically. These simple, yet profound, facts derive from the mystery of the triune God not to be God apart from, or separate from, humanity, but rather to make God's very life intersect with the unity of the Son of God with us. Our theological basis as Christians and as the church is in

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the wonder of God's condescension, in the intentionality of God's solidarity with sinners, that is, with those who find their self-identity solely within themselves, and find their self-justification and sole solace in themselves alone, without any reference to God. The church is called to exist solely through the solidarity of Jesus Christ with those who are alienated from God, by Christ going to the extremes of alienation for humanity, so that humanity might through him come close to God. At the heart of our faith is expressed the fact that God does not wish to be alone in celebrating the wonder God's inexpressible love for humanity. God in Christ calls into existence an earthly Body of his Son, who is its heavenly head, in order that humanity may responsively rejoice with God in the harmony and peace which God has established for creation.

If the being of the church and its life is predicated upon the grace of Jesus Christ as itself defining God's action in the world for the reconciliation of creation, including humanity, then its life of harmony is that which it receives from him, who is its life. The church's very existence will be shaped by the manner in which it confesses this truth to be its very life.

We in our time live in a deeply ambivalent age, an age of high technology and of medieval conflict, and an age until recently as strangely confident of the saving powers of the market-place as a previous age was strangely confident of the saving powers of collectivism. Christians are thus called to a life of praise, which embraces all of our personal and social life, in all its practical, ethical, religious, political and intellectual aspects. That praise will be both culture-transforming and culture-renewing, over against the self-worship of individuals and nations in our time.

Against this theological foundation, I then use the three major points of the Basis of the World Council of Churches (WCC) to reflect on the specifics of this conference, and to see how we might develop certain areas.

According to the Basis of the WCC, the WCC is a fellowship which does three things:

1. **firstly**, it first confesses the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour;
2. **secondly**, it does so according to the Scriptures; and
3. therefore, **thirdly**, through it the churches seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

**First**, the unity of the church is primarily a response to what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. It is not what we do; it is what has happened to us, what has been given to us. God in Christ takes the remarkable step of choosing to be God for us and with us. This inexplicable act of God to identify with us is the foundation of what being the church is. God calls us to God's very self. God chooses to be in solidarity with us. God does not wish to be alone in celebrating the wonder of God's inexpressible love for humanity. Therefore, we are called to a life of praise, not simply something that comes from our mouths or from our hands, but something that comes from our entire personal and social life, whether that is practical or ethical, religious or political, pragmatic or intellectual. Our intellectual life is an expression of praise. Our political life is an expression of praise. So is our religious life, our practical life, and our ethical life. At the heart of the ecumenical movement is the centrality and finality of Jesus Christ. It is not so much about what we want to do but about what is

possible for us under God in Christ to achieve. Here the significance of the difference between “the primary” and “the secondary” needs to be stressed. In the long biblical tradition the primary is the worship and service of God. The secondary are all those very important matters in personal and community life, and in the life of faith, which nevertheless cannot take the place of the primary. The skills of the doctor, of the accountant, of the financier, of the academic, of the manager, and of the minister and priest, are most important, but nevertheless secondary. If any of them take the place of the primary, then we enter the world of idolatry. In recent times we have seen that in relation to the central place sought by the financier and the accountant. However, it can happen too in the church. Thus, the centrality of primary theological issues has been most important in this conference; they must be guarded for our ecumenical future. Related to this has been a very significant factor in this conference, that is, the honesty with which confessional traditions represented here have been able to rehearse their histories in a non-reactive and a non-defensive manner. In particular, I was greatly moved by Rowan Williams’ material on the Anglican tradition; this set an example of high integrity followed by others. This ability in historical reflection and self-examination in an ecumenical context has, I believe, been of greater significance for the future than we realise. It is an understanding of the true place of the secondary (in this case, the histories of our traditions) in the context of the primary (the worship and service of the Triune God).

**Second**, as the Basis of the World Council of Churches goes on, we are to act “according to the Scriptures”. We are not free to define faith as we will; we do not just talk to each other and compare our experiences. We cannot just gather together and engage in comparative ecclesiologies. The experience of the Church of South India (1947), the Church of North India (1970) and the Uniting Church in Australia, (1977) among others, was that union would not have come about if the negotiations had simply continued in convergence ecclesiologies. Those united churches had to go back and see how each Church could “reform” itself “according to the Scriptures”. Moreover, the dominant theologies of the World Council of Churches over time - Barthian theology, secular theology, liberation theology, political theology, and so on - did not seek to claim to be the whole truth each of itself. “According to the Scriptures” speaks for us and against us. Despite denominational and theological differences, “according to the Scriptures” has become one of the great unifying factors for Christianity. Now, from this conference we see that we need to widen this vision in our time. In this conference the emerging issue of “scriptural reasoning” (particularly between Judaism, Christianity and Islam) has been explored and examined. This has also happened in recent times in Asia and Australasia, both in inter-faith dialogue, and in the resolution of situations of conflict and violence, as for example in Eastern Indonesia (in the areas around Ambon). There, I have been involved in the negotiations to end violence between Christians and Muslims. In such negotiations, this scriptural reasoning in relation to the Bible and the Koran has been very important. Both for Christianity and for wider inter-faith dialogue it needs to be sustained and developed.

**Third**, in the Basis of the World Council of Churches, the churches are called to “seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit”. This affirms that, without its Trinitarian centre, the churches and the ecumenical movement are no more than a tiresome irrelevance. We are called to

fulfil something. Discipleship is both believing and acting. A number of matters flow from this third point:

*First*, ecumenical dialogue should not simply be for the benefit of the two dialoguing churches. It can, of course, be for the benefit of the whole ecumenical movement. However, more precisely, it may well be that two churches, through dialogue, can be involved in bringing about the union of two (or even three) *other* churches. This is an important learning from our conversations at this conference.

*Second*, in relation to our ecumenical discussions of baptism, we need perhaps to speak more the whole process of initiation, rather than speak only of baptism. This has wider implications than simply for non-paedo-baptist traditions.

*Third*, we need to press on with the relationship of what we have worked at in this conference and the areas of apostolicity and mission, particularly *missio Dei*.