



2255 Eastland Parkway, Lexington, KY 40505

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Which Doctrines are Necessary for Unity?

By Dr. Richard P. Bucher

Both in the sixteenth century and in ours, it has been assumed that agreement in every church teaching is not necessary for unity. Separated Christians need only agree on "essential" or "necessary" or "fundamental" doctrine. The previous chapters have shown that all parties in the Reformation disputes or unity dialogues considered this a given. All would have agreed with the well known words of Ireneaus of Lyons recorded in Eusebius's *Church History* that disagreement in regard to the Fast does not destroy but confirms the agreement in faith.^[1] Therefore, in that Martin Luther also insisted that only necessary doctrines were necessary for unity, he certainly was not introducing anything unique or novel. That unity requires agreement in doctrine, but not every doctrine, continues to be assumed in the Ecumenical Movement. In his Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* ("That They May Be One") John Paul II reaffirmed what had been decreed in the Vatican II Decree on Ecumenism: that in unity nothing should be required beyond what is necessary. "From this basic but partial unity it is now necessary to advance towards the visible unity which is required and sufficient (*id quod requiritur et sufficit*) . . . In this process, one must not impose any burden beyond that which is strictly necessary (cf. Acts 15:28)."^[2]

But the problem, concisely stated by Gerard Kelly, is that "The churches do not yet agree on what is necessary (the *id quod requiritur et sufficit*) for the unity of the church."^[3] Adding to the significance of this statement is that it comes at the very end of Kelly's book, which traced the entire history of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. According to Kelly, after seventy years of meetings and dialogues, though real progress occurred on many fronts, this one thing was still standing in the way of the churches attaining full communion: They did not yet agree on what is necessary for unity.

It is the thesis of this book that the disagreement over what is necessary for unity comes from competing doctrinal hermeneutics, often on an unconscious level. The churches, often unknowingly, are defining essential doctrine by different sets of criteria.

This disagreement over what is necessary for unity also stems in part from the inability (or refusal) of the churches to clearly articulate a definitive list of doctrines that are necessary. This problem concerns especially the Roman Catholic Church, but to a lesser extent involves the entire Ecumenical Movement. When the question is asked, "What core teachings and practices do we need to agree on to have full communion?" incredible vagueness of expression abounds. Phrases such as "the apostolic faith"^[4] or "the faith of the Church through the ages"^[5] are frequently recycled with little specificity as to what they mean.

It is never quite clear, for example, what doctrinal agreement the Catholic Church is insisting on for unity. Certain phrases are presented, the content of which is never explained. In Roman Catholic ecumenical literature, the phrases "deposit of faith,"^[6] "the content of revealed faith in its entirety,"^[7] "the whole body of doctrine,"^[8] "the whole truth,"^[9] and "hierarchy of truths"^[10] are examples of expressions that name the minimum doctrinal basis needed for full communion with Rome. But the doctrines and practices that these phrases point to are never fully and clearly explicated. For example, John Paul II writes, "The unity willed by God can be attained only by the adherence of all to the content of revealed truth in its entirety. In matters of faith, compromise is in contradiction with God who is Truth."^[11] But what exactly is "the content of revealed truth in all its entirety"? This is never explained or defined. Again, what is the meaning of this statement: "Full communion of course will have to come about through the acceptance of the whole truth into which the Holy Spirit guides Christ's disciples. Hence all forms of reductionism or facile 'agreement' must be absolutely avoided?"^[12] Unfortunately the meaning of "the whole truth" is not elucidated. How does this kind of obscurity advance the cause of unity? Such evasiveness and murkiness is akin to attempting to hit a target that one cannot see.

When Roman Catholic theologians have occasionally dared to clearly delineate the minimum doctrinal content that is necessary and sufficient for unity, other Catholics have rejected their proposals as wholly insufficient. For example, in *Unity of the Churches: An Actual Possibility*, Heinrich Fries and Karl Rahner proposed eight theses that, if followed, could lead to swift unity among the churches. The first thesis of the Fries-Rahner proposal stated the doctrinal agreement needed for unity: "The fundamental truths of Christianity, as they are expressed in Holy Scripture, in the Apostles' Creed, and that of Nicaea and Constantinople are binding on all partner churches of the one Church to be."^[13] Rejection of this proposal

was swift. Among those dissenting was Avery Dulles. Dulles agreed that the fundamental truths in the Scripture and the Apostles' and Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creeds were necessary--but such fundamental truths fell far short of the doctrinal agreement needed for full, visible unity. Dulles proceeded to mention the procession of the Spirit and the papal and Marian dogmas as examples of additional necessary doctrines--but he did not articulate what the full doctrinal agreement that was needed might be. Once again the precise bare minimum necessary for unity was left frustratingly vague.^[14]

Jon Nilson (himself a Roman Catholic scholar) has captured the problem succinctly:

Without clarity on what is indispensable, there can be no assurance that we are not imposing unjustifiable obligations and demands on partner churches. The only obligations and demands that are justifiable are the ones we hold before God as integral to the gospel. If they include more than the scriptures and the two creeds, we must explain how far they do extend--and why they do so--to our partners.^[15]

What Nilson is missing in the Catholic Church's ecumenical methodology, can be found in Luther's doctrinal hermeneutic. His hermeneutic does clearly define what is indispensable, i.e., what doctrinal agreement is necessary for unity, by clearly defining what makes something a necessary doctrine. Only those teachings that are based on the right Scripture rightly interpreted, and/or are necessary for salvation and integral to the Gospel of grace in Christ Jesus are doctrines that must be agreed upon for unity between the churches. On the basis of his scriptural and evangelical canons, Luther could then draft a statement that proposed the irreducible doctrinal basis for unity, such as the *Smalcald Articles* (chapter five) or *Adoration of the Sacrament* (chapter three). It is precisely this kind of doctrinal hermeneutic that could, if embraced, help to bring about agreement on what is necessary for unity and why.

^[11] Eusebius, *Church History* 5.24.13. These words were contained in a letter that Bishop Ireneaus wrote to Victor the Bishop of Rome in about 190 A.D. Victor had excommunicated all the churches in Asia because they celebrated the Paschal Fast (The Celebration of Christ's Death and Resurrection) on the 14th of Nissan, rather than on the Friday and Sunday following the first full moon after the vernal equinox as did the rest of the churches. Ireneaus admonished Victor to not destroy the unity of the Church over such a thing.

^[2] John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint* (Washington D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1996), par. 78, p. 89.

^[3] Kelly, *Recognition*, 226.

^[4] After decades of ambiguity concerning this phrase, in 1991 the Faith and Order Commission, released a study entitled, "Confessing One Faith," which explained and recommended the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 325 A.D. as a summary of the apostolic faith. However, "Confessing the Faith," was not meant to be a definitive statement, but a working document that solicited response from the churches.

^[5] The Introduction of the 1982 WCC Faith and Order document, "Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry," asked churches to prepare an official response informing the Faith and Order Commission, "the extent to which your church can recognize in this text the faith of the Church through the ages." In Kinnamon and Cope, 178.

^[6] John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, par. 18, p. 23; par. 57, p. 65; par. 81, p. 92; par. 94, p. 105.

^[7] *Ibid.*, par. 18, p. 24.

^[8] *Ibid.*, par. 36, p. 42.

^[9] *Ibid.*, par. 36, p. 43.

^[10] "Decree on Ecumenism," in Walter M. Abbott, S. J., ed., *The Documents of Vatican II*, trans. ed. Joseph Gallagher (Piscataway: New Century Publishers, 1966), par. 11, p. 354. "When comparing doctrines, they [Catholic theologians] should remember that in Catholic teaching there exists an order or 'hierarchy' of truths, since they vary in their relationship to the foundation of the Christian faith." This quote implies that truths are not of the same importance, because not all relate to the foundation of the faith in the same way. Yet, "the foundation of faith" is not defined, and therefore the hierarchy of truths becomes meaningless for ecumenism. This is discussed in Nilson, *Nothing Beyond the Necessary*, 66-74.

^[11] John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, par. 18, p. 24.

^[12] *Ibid.*, par. 36, p. 43.

^[13] Heinrich Fries and Karl Rahner, *Unity of the Churches: An Actual Possibility*, trans. Ruth C. L. Gritsch and Eric W. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press and New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 13.

^[14] Cited in Nilson, *Nothing Beyond Necessary*, 29-39. Also dissenting was Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger,

prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, arguably the most influential Roman Catholic theologian today. He argued that the Fries-Rahner proposal in thesis one was "ecumenism in reverse" that returns to 400 A.D. and ignores everything that has happened since then. Also cited in Nilson, 41.

[\[15\]](#) Ibid., 68.