

- **Heresy and Church Discipline: What are the Limits of Tolerance in the Church?**
- ***L'hérésie et la discipline ecclésiastique: les limites de la tolérance dans l'Eglise.***
- ***Häresie und Gemeindezucht: Wo liegen die Grenzen der Toleranz in der Kirche?***
- **Leif Andersen**

RÉSUMÉ

Selon cet essai, le relativisme moderne a pris pied dans les Eglises au point qu'elles hésitent maintenant à faire face aux questions dans lesquelles la vérité est en jeu ; en conséquence, les idées d'hérésie et de discipline ont perdu du terrain. La discipline est présentée comme un moyen de sauvegarde de la doctrine ; mais elle est en même temps décrite comme un désir de protéger, dans l'amour, la vie spirituelle de la communauté. Dans ce contexte, un certain nombre de questions sont soulevées : Quel degré de dissidence peut être toléré ? Quelle est la relation entre la communauté et les autorités de l'Eglise dans le domaine de la tolérance d'enseignements non orthodoxes ? Quels

critères peuvent être définis pour mesurer l'adhésion à la vérité ?

Concernant ce dernier point, différentes échelles sont élaborées : celle des degrés de dissension, celle des degrés d'unité, et celle des conséquences de la dissension pour l'unité. Le thème de la discipline débouche alors sur celui des conditions de coopération (entre des Eglises en désaccord doctrinal).

L'essai examine finalement la diversité qui existe au sein de la vie de l'Eglise ; diversité qui est considérée comme inévitable et saine. Mais l'auteur lance un appel au renouvellement de la pratique ecclésiale et regrette que les bases doctrinales évangéliques modernes ne fassent que peu de place au concept étudié.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die Grundannahme des Artikels ist, dass moderner Relativismus derart stark in die Kirchen eingedrungen ist, dass man vorsichtig ist, Wahrheitsfragen überhaupt anzugehen. Das hat zur Folge, dass die Vorstellung von Häresie und Gemeindezucht in den Hintergrund getreten ist. Gemeindezucht wird als Mittel zur Absicherung der Lehre untersucht. Dies wird jedoch als liebevolles Anliegen zum Schutz des geistlichen Lebens der Gemeinde angesehen. In diesem Zusammenhang werden eine Reihe von Fragen gestellt: Wieviel Meinungsverschiedenheit kann toleriert werden? Wie sieht die Beziehung

zwischen der Gemeinde und übergeordneten kirchlichen Gremien in Bezug auf die Tolerierung unorthodoxer Lehre aus? Welche Kriterien können aufgestellt werden, anhand derer das Festhalten an der Wahrheit gemessen werden kann?

Zur letzten Frage werden verschiedene Spektren aufgestellt: ein Spektrum von Graden der Meinungsverschiedenheit, von Graden der Einheit, und von Konsequenzen der Meinungsverschiedenheiten für die Einheit. Das Thema Gemeindezucht wird hier geöffnet im Hinblick auf die Bedingungen der Kooperation von kirchlichen Organisationen mit lehrmäßigen Differenzen.

Der Artikel reflektiert abschließend über Vielfalt im kirchlichen Leben, was als unvermeidbar und gesund angesehen wird. Es wird allerdings zur Erneuerung

der Gemeindezucht aufgerufen, und es wird bedauert, dass moderne evangelikale Darstellungen von Lehrgrundsätze der Gemeindezucht wenig Raum einräumen.

Introduction

In an American sociological study of 1991, *What Americans Believe*, people were presented with, among other things, two theses, to which they could indicate different levels of agreement or disagreement.

To the thesis *There is only one true God who is holy and perfect, who created the world and rules it today*, 74% of Americans would 'strongly agree'. At the same time, when it came to the thesis *There is no such thing as absolute truth*, 64% of Americans would 'strongly agree'¹ . . .

What is going on here?! Apparently quite a number of Westerners are trying to hold these thoughts together. To Christian and common logic they are obviously irreconcilable: The belief in a 'one true God' is of course in itself an 'absolute truth'. Yet this is exactly the illogical attitude we are facing again and again in evangelisation and in apologetics.

The attitude of *all-embracing relativism* has become the absolutism of postmodernity. Relativism, not New Age, is the religion of this age! And it is maddeningly difficult to confront. Unlike direct objections to the faith, this gentle all-including tolerance is impossible to address! How should we 'be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us', when nobody hates us anymore?

This absolute relativism bespeaks a grave decay—not only in Christian terms, but generally, in both epistemological and ontological terms. Today's overwhelming uneasiness with terms such as 'truth', 'reason' and 'consistency' is one of history's strongest bulwarks against the Gospel. And we find ourselves in this peculiar situation: Today it is suddenly we who are the defenders of logic, reason and consistency of thought, against this postmodern irrationality!—whereas for centuries we had to defend our belief in a supernatural world, in miracles, in paradoxes against

modernity's fundamentalistic faith in logic and reason. So today we find intelligent Europeans (theologians not least), not being able to grasp a simple meaning from a simple text. Because there is no fixed 'meaning' in any given text.

And this brings me to my point: In missions, apologetics and evangelism we are facing this relativism as a true decay. We feel it as an enemy to the Gospel. *At the same time this is exactly where we ourselves are going.* We also are children of our time! And while we earnestly believe that we are confronting this postmodern relativism all the time *outwardly*, we are at the same time building our own Christian mini-relativism *inwardly*.

'Whether we want to or not, we belong to our own time. And we are sharing its opinions, its emotions, even its delusions' (Henri Matisse).

As evangelical theologians we are bred and breathing not only in a Christian ecumenical context, but more and more in a Christian relativistic context! Just as our postmodern secular fellow human beings feel uneasy with terms like truth and reason, so do more and more the laity and the clergy of our congregations. As soon as discussions are suspected of becoming 'doctrinal' or are dealing with 'teaching', 'orthodoxy'—and above all with 'heresy', Christians escape into expressions like 'tolerance', 'brotherhood', 'peace'—not necessarily out of fear of a harsh and bitter debate, but rather out of this feeling that doctrinal debate in itself is harsh, bitter and uncharitable. So these expressions of good intentions, 'tolerance', 'brotherhood', 'peace', merely become empty clichés.

'Individualism and personal choice in religion have largely displaced loyalty to denominational structures and to inherited doctrinal bastions. This makes it easier for individuals to be syncretistic, or worse, confusedly pluralistic—i.e., people with-

out strong doctrinal commitments may take on highly diverse and even contradictory ideas *without* fusing them, simply letting them stand, unaware that the elementary demands of consistency are being violated.²²

Of course the ontological or epistemological viability of relativism should be a crucial theme for contemporary apologetics. But we need to observe that most people do not deliberately use the cliché 'There is no such thing as absolute truth' in any strict ontological or epistemological sense. Rather, they just mean to say: 'I don't like fanatics'.

This is not strange at all. The fanatical hunting down of heretics and dissidents is a dark chapter in the history of the church, while loving and concerned debate in a brotherly community of disagreement is a very rare animal. So it is no wonder that so many Christians feel it the most charitable thing not to initiate debate at all, not to challenge one another's faith and earnest Bible reading. Because above all it is felt that no one can decide anyway, which interpretation is the proper one. 'One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind' (Rom 14:5)!

Understandable as this position might be, it nevertheless is untenable. And at the end of the day, it is precisely this that is the uncharitable one. Apparently we are caught between two extremes: dogmatic fanaticism and dogmatic indifference. In actual fact, however, we are rather caught in one extreme only, since the extreme of dogmatic fanaticism is virtually non-existent today.

What is the purpose of church discipline?

The means of church discipline or division amongst Christians may be so painful that they can only be handled with grief and trepidation, considering the NT's warning against *dialogismos*³ and its repeated appeals to peace and love. This is so not least because so many apparently doctrinal disputes in history really disguise more

self-interested agendas.

Church discipline, as taught in Matt 18:15-17, 1 Cor 5, 2 Cor 2:1-11, is one of the most controversial teachings in the NT on congregational life. These are not, however, the primary texts of our theme, for they deal rather with church discipline in the context of ethical regulation in the congregation. This is what John White examined in his *Healing the Wounded—the Costly Love of Church Discipline*. Our title, in contrast, thinks of church discipline as doctrinal safeguard: What kind of dissent may we admit in the church? What kind of dissent are we to consider heresy? And what would be the consequences? When does diversity imply division?

This shift of emphasis should not, however, make us forget the primary purpose of church discipline, whether it addresses false teaching or false conduct. The primary purpose is precisely *healing the wounded*. We do not cast out or cut off anyone, except for the sake of repentance and healing: '... hand this man over to Satan [i.e. out from the congregation, out there where Satan rules], so that the sinful nature may be destroyed *and his spirit saved* on the day of the Lord' (1 Cor 5:5).

Therefore, any judgmental, faultfinding or pedantic approach is offensive. The proper approach should always be precisely: *costly love*—even to heretics and schismatics! 'If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. *Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother*' (2 Thess 3:14-15). And not only the brotherly warning is an expression of love; love is the very reason for not associating with him: '... in order that he may feel ashamed', that is: may admit and regret his delusions.

The secondary purpose is safeguarding the congregation: '... Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast ... 'Expel the wicked man from among you'.' (1 Cor 5:6.13)—'secondary', not so that the primary purpose may overwrite the secondary one, forcing us to admit schismatic teaching or destructive conduct for the

sake of the healing of the schismatic, but 'secondary' simply in the sense that love for others always comes before the love for yourself: 'For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers . . .' (Rom 9:3). In practice this means that only those may define and pursue heresy, who do so with reluctance and hesitation. Enthusiastic heretic-hunters are a disgrace in the church. The ideal 'dogmatist' is a timid nature administering a sound holy wrath!

Whence then the 'holy wrath'? Again the proper motive should be *costly love*, namely love for the spiritual life of the fellowship. This is because the motive for doctrinal safeguard is not the conservation of a body of theories, but rather the protection of spiritual life.

How does it work?

'I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them' (Rom 16:17).

Notice that it is not those who warn against the false teachers or keep away from them, who cause divisions!—it is the false teachers! This is especially important in times of great suspicion of the dogmatic concern. Often we are accused of neglecting unity and brotherhood when we express trouble over doctrinal dissension (let alone suggest the possibility of disciplinary action or separation). But a proper and loving doctrinal concern is precisely to care for unity and brotherhood.

We find in the NT a few very concrete expressions for this keeping away from the schismatics:

'Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him' (Tit 3:10).

'If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work' (2 John 10).

'Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands⁴, and do not share in the sins of others. Keep

yourself pure' (1 Tim 5:22).

'With such a man do not even eat'⁵ (1 Cor 5:11).

The easy path in our time would be to concentrate only on the ideal but often (at least in larger churches) non-existent situation: that the synod or the bishops carefully monitor the teaching in the church and, if necessary, take measures against false teachers. This is the New Testament premise, and the precondition upon which the NT instructions are given. The hermeneutical difficulty then is, that in many of our modern churches the means of church discipline lie in the hands of liberal, maybe even heretical church leaders! Some evangelical theologians may even be in the grotesque situation, that they themselves are the prey of disciplinary pursuit.

Therefore, to try without reflection to transfer the NT preconditions to a modern topsy-turvy church situation would be a far too easy path. It would be interesting, but too theoretical and above all ineffective. This is because merely to debate how synods and bishops really ought to handle this strange scenario, that is, by means of a surveillance of the teaching in the church according to the NT model, will be very little costly to ourselves. And my guess is that only very few of us (even those belonging to sound evangelical church bodies) personally have that kind of church discipline to administer. This being so, two far more costly considerations would be:

1. How do we handle the congregational fellowship with church authorities that advocate or at least allow what evangelicals see as false teaching in the church?

It is a painful question for many evangelicals in liberal churches, whether they—simply by sharing membership, ministry and organisational structures with those who do not hold to orthodox Christian belief—are in some sense sharing in their teaching and conduct. I do not want to downplay these scruples, but only to say that I personally do not share them. It is true that we in different ways may be responsible even for the conduct of others (colleagues, church members, bishops)—but only if we keep silent regarding false

teaching and conduct. How can one interpret mere membership as joint responsibility, if we are properly voicing dissociation and warning? Of course the real danger is that this voice of 'dissociation and warning' remains theoretical and abstract and never finds concrete expression.

2. How do we handle doctrinal diversities in our own midst, that is, within evangelical fellowship itself? What would our criteria be for distinguishing between dissensions that do not harm our unity and dissensions that do? This question brings us to the maybe most frightening aspect of this theme!

What are the criteria of heresy?

As evangelicals we have learned to ask one question above all: *What is written?* This means that there are no short cuts when it comes to deciding each and every little question. How seriously should this be taken? It is self-evident that one conference, let alone one lecture, cannot work its way through as much as one fraction of the issues that have tormented 2000 years of church history. We will only try to establish some general principles. And this is difficult enough, since it can happen that bible-believing, sincere evangelicals each comes to his own conclusion. Are we then suddenly obliged to 'have nothing to do with' one another?! Are we no longer to welcome one another into our houses?

Unfortunately, the NT does not supply us with a list of lethal heresies. We have not been given an index of themes on which divergent opinions cannot be tolerated. Moreover, we have not even been given a list of the necessary minimum of doctrines that one must hold in order to be saved. We do here and there find creed-like formulas, where the apostle sums up central Christian dogmas: 1 Cor 15:3-4, Phil 2:6-11, 1 Tim 3:16 etc. But are these *the* central Christian dogmas, or are they only some of them? Can one advocate any opinion whatsoever, as long as one does not violate the letter of these very Christ-centred formulas? Obviously not. As for the Galatians (to whom I shall return), drifting away from evangelical belief as they were, they proba-

bly never questioned any one of these dogmas. Yet they were on the brink of apostasy!

Lacking in such lists of dogmas and heresies in the NT, all Christian traditions have developed a *modus vivendi*, a more or less consciously decided pattern of reactions, when it comes to minor and major dissensions. And I do mean *all* Christian traditions, including those to whose self-image belong doctrinal diversity and tolerance. So when congregations or movements bluntly claim that they will work together on *any* level with *anyone* who carries the Christian name, because they believe this to be entailed in Christian love and ecumenical spirit, such claims should be met with suspicion. *In practice* they too distinguish between Christians with whom they can co-operate without scruples, and those Christians with whom they disagree so severely, that they cannot (for instance) invite them to their pulpit.

When they claim that they have no scruples whatsoever about inviting anyone as a preacher, if only he confesses Christ, and that differences in point of view are only healthy and stimulating, it quickly turns out that they have in mind very distinct themes: different views on baptism, on the gifts of the Spirit or on sanctification. These are the themes that in their view ought not to cause problems. But when you then ask if they would for instance invite a preacher who sincerely confesses Christ, but holds a very liberal view of Scripture or advocates the teaching of *apokatastasis*, they react promptly: 'Why of course not, that's *serious* stuff! So everybody makes distinctions of this sort. What is unfortunate is if one does it unconsciously or by tradition only.

Because of these problems of definition, the larger churches have summarized their respective beliefs in creedal books:

The Ancient Creeds. The Apostles' Creed served as the baptismal confession, while the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds were bulwarks against Christological heresies.

The Confessio Augustana, 1530, was the first Protestant attempt to summarize evangelical belief and at the same time demarcate evangelical teaching from

Catholic teaching on one hand and 'enthusiasm' on the other.

The Confessio Helvetica posterior, 1562, was recognized by the Swiss reformed churches in 1566.

The Heidelberg Catechism, 1563, was the German Calvinist creed.

The Book of Concordia, 1580 (German), and 1584 (Latin), was a huge collection of the most prominent doctrinal writings of the Lutheran reformation, anticipating Lutheran orthodoxy.

The Westminster Confession, 1646, was originally adopted by the English parliament as a norm for the English church, but today serves as creedal statement only for the Reformed churches.

The 39 Articles, 1553 and 1571, and *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1662, form the doctrinal basis of the Church of England.

Not only do these writings differ regarding the positions they hold, they also differ widely regarding their prominence and function in their respective churches. Thus a Lutheran, for example, being used to the importance and usefulness even today of the Augsburg Confession, should not automatically expect a sister church to attach the same importance to its own creedal statements. To some traditions these writings serve as *norma normata* (unlike the *norma normans*, the Scripture), and are binding even today on the liturgy, the clergy and the organisations of the church. To others they serve rather as important sources of information and inspiration, drawing the line of tradition back to their own roots.

However, even as *norma normata* they will always be provisional. High church or traditionalist standpoints may tend to take short cuts via the creedal statements, not engaging in the hard work of contesting for belief by means of the interpretation of Scripture. But the function of the creeds as norms can only be descriptive, never authoritative. They describe the conclusions that we have reached so far by means of our interpretation of Scripture. But they must be permanently questioned by our biblical studies.

Even so, a creed or a doctrinal basis may be adopted as a charter, upon which con-

sent from ministers and preachers may be required, and liturgy, teaching and hymns tested. This is no violation of the higher authority of Scripture, as long as one does not lose sight of the study of the as the superior focus. With this very important reservation we should allow reference to creeds or to a doctrinal basis as a measure of teaching and preaching.

In any case, these writings are serious, carefully formulated and well tested expressions of what was felt to be crucial and decisive at the time of their writing. In practice they work as sort of 'a dictionary of unacceptable positions'. And exactly here lies the difficulty: 'what was *then* felt to be crucial' may no longer be so, because things have changed. Even to the most stubborn traditionalist it is not easy to uphold for instance the 16th century's anathemas against those with whom we today actually share vision and work in obedience to the Great Commission. We need only to think of the mutual denunciations in those days on sacramental questions. Then the theologians were on the brink of denying one another's salvation; today sacramental questions are no more than complications in respect of co-operation (albeit not completely abolished).

The passage of time has called for a new kind of document. Since the beginning of the ecumenical movement different attempts have been made to summarize the essential dogmas, not into new creeds, not for the sake of demarcation and denunciation, but rather for the sake of mutual approach: How close are we after all? Can we de-construct old, maybe unnecessary or obsolete boundaries without compromising our spiritual and biblical integrity? Recently talks have resulted in for instance *The Leuenberg Concordia* as well as *The Porvoo Document*.

But the documents with which I am more concerned here are *The Doctrinal Basis* of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students, *The Lausanne Covenant* and the *Manila Manifesto*. We cannot work through these documents within the scope of the present essay. But in my view these writings are a marvel in the history of the church. They breathe evangelistic zeal,

always controlled by high doctrinal concern. Not intended to replace the creeds or even to update them, they work rather like covenantal documents, committing us to worship and work on the grounds of mutual trust in the biblical viability of one another's position. (For remarks on their weaknesses, see below).

The spectrum of dissension

The superficial clichés of tolerance and charity in the church often acclaim the wide range of views and positions in the church as an advanced spirituality. Doctrinal diversity is mostly looked upon as a virtue, not a vice. Making room for different opinions is an objective in itself, and having to have the 'correct opinions'⁶ is immature, weak and unoriginal. What is often not asked, however, is what these 'correct opinions' bear upon: are we talking about different opinions on the resurrection of the dead, or are we talking about different opinions on beer?! These high-sounding clichés superficially align all kinds of topics, as if they had equal value.

However, there is no escape from the hard work of *distinguishing between different things*.

a. One distinction is the dividing line between Christianity and non-Christianity. This is *the* distinction: the boundary between belief and unbelief. '... if you let yourself be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all ... you have fallen away from grace' (Gal 5:1-4); 'And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile'⁷ (1 Cor 15:17). 'I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God' (Luke 18:14).

b. At the other extreme is the whole range of little disagreements between Christians. These disagreements are no barriers and should not be so. 'So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the

man who does not condemn himself by what he approves' (Rom 14:22); 'But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do' (1 Cor 8:8).

c. *Between these two kinds of distinction lies a whole range of different distinctions:* Disagreements that do not affect mutual trust in common salvation, but nevertheless seem serious enough to affect practical unity and co-operation on different levels. That is, they carry 'disciplinary' consequences ...

What we need is a *spectrum of dissension* (see Figure 1):

a: disparate views on Christ, on resurrection, on salvation, on the Trinity etc. Deviant views on these issues are to be considered heresy in the strictest sense.

b: disparate views on music, on methods, on minor details in exegesis, ethics etc. These are only sound challenges to our brotherly sense of humour and self-irony.

c (in between!): disparate views on baptism, on the Eucharist, on atonement, on the Bible's inerrancy, on annihilation etc. They may not be heretical in the apostasy sense of the word, but they may be *schismatic*, necessarily causing division amongst Christians⁸.

Does Scripture really allow this distinction between distinctions?—I believe so: Just as it is superficial to align all doctrinal disagreements as equally harmless, so it is superficial to treat them as equally harmful. Some dissensions carry with them more fatal consequences than others, affecting one's spiritual life more than others.

One striking example in the NT would be the Galatians, who have taken on serious errors and unhealthy beliefs. And Paul warns them with tears, that *if they continue on this path and begin circumcising one another*, they have fallen away from faith. But they have not crossed that line yet. They are still his children, they are still justified by faith, but their faith is unhealthy and is lacking power and joy

Figure 1

a: *the boundary*

c: serious disagreements

b: minor diversities

and love. Another example is in the letters to the churches in Revelation 2-3: Here we find all degrees of healthy and unhealthy church life: holy and unholy and everything in between. One might even try to distribute the seven congregations along a spectrum of dissension. But the point is that it is not a simple matter to decide whether the conduct of one specific congregation has already crossed that line between orthodox and schismatic teaching, or between schismatic and heretical teaching. Demanding complete consensus in order to accept one another as true Christians would correspond to demanding inerrancy from sinners. Saving faith does not imply inerrancy—which necessarily means: saving faith does not imply complete consensus. It may survive even grave errors in thought and belief.

The Augsburg Confession VII (1530): *Et ad veram unitatem ecclesiae satis est consentire de doctrina evangelii et administratione sacramentorum. Nec necesse est ubique esse similes traditiones humanas, seu ritus aut ceremonias ab hominibus institutas. Sicut inquit Paulus Eph. 4, 5, 6: Una fides, unum baptisma, unus Deus et Pater omnium etc.*⁹

Here then is the difficulty. *Heresy* is not an either/or—it indicates a wide range of more or less serious topics (here embracing apostate teaching as well as schismatic teaching amongst christians). *Church discipline* is not an either/or—it too indicates a wide range of more or less serious acts. The more serious the disagreement, the more serious the consequence. Therefore, corresponding to the spectrum of dissension, we need a *spectrum of levels of unity*. Because the more important a doctrinal controversy seems, the deeper the conflict will affect the unity or the fellowship (see Figure 2):

In this context 'Spiritual unity' does not

indicate the basic trust respecting unity in Christ and in salvation. This trust one can have in anyone who confesses Christ as Lord, without regard to outward unity or disunity. In this context 'spiritual unity' indicates a spiritual fellowship with such a confidence and consensus that you can have complete co-operation on any level. I will expand on this below.

(Of course this is very complex. One may well have one's closest spiritual unity with someone outside one's own congregational unity (because the division between the congregations in question may have little to do with doctrinal issues). And you may have nothing in common whatsoever with the colleague in your own parish. But we shall work with a degree of simplification for the sake of the argument).

Therefore, corresponding to the spectrum of dissension and the spectrum of levels of unity comes then a spectrum of consequences for this unity (see Figure 3):

I realise this is a widening of the theme of 'church discipline'. We are expanding the issue from a question only on disciplinary actions from a church's authorities into this wider angle: *How do doctrinal differences in general affect co-operation and unity?* I have two reasons for this widening of the angle:

One reason is that our basic considerations about the correlations between dogma and unity not only influence the negative case of disciplinary actions or congregational separations, they also influence the positive case of rapprochement and co-operation: How close are we? How far can we go together? Another reason is that when we as evangelicals speak of 'the limits of tolerance in the church', we probably prefer to think in terms of liberal or modernist dissent, or of immorality and misconduct. But our willingness and ability to deal with these issues (which may

Figure 2

human unity — congregational unity — organisational unity — spiritual unity

Figure 3

doctrinal debate — common prayer — organisational cooperation — leaders' conference — common preaching

seem rather safe to us) show only in our willingness and ability to deal with our own issues. We cannot deal with the marks and demarcations of heresy *outwardly*, outside of our evangelical fellowship, unless we at the same time display some willingness to deal with our discrepancies inwardly. Boldly and daringly confronting heresy amongst pastors and bishops in our own churches, and at the same time weakly evading our own conflicts, is merely cheap.

So the points of this third spectrum are:

1. The closer the unity and co-operation, the greater the need for mutual trust and consensus.

From the left: Doctrinal debate one can engage in with anyone—Christians and non-Christians alike. You do not need to guard yourself at all. It requires a minimum of human unity and relations, and no more.

Common prayer requires a minimum of trust in a common faith in God. You have to believe you are all believers (or seekers at least). If you are convinced that your prayers would be directed to two different gods, you have no choice but to separate. Apart from that there are (in my view!) no limits whatsoever regarding with whom you can pray together.¹⁰ Of course, the more you differ from one another in positions and traditions, the more careful you have to be regarding how to administer the common prayer.

Organisational co-operation is possible at a range of different levels. You can work together with one person or congregation or organisation on one field (for instance social work, or New Testament distribution), but not on another field (for instance joint missions, or common preaching). This of course is a common practice of church discipline: distinguishing between different levels of consensus, distinguishing between different levels of joint responsibility.

Naturally this practise does not necessarily appear very 'disciplinary', often it is rather self-evident or given by tradition. But now and then one organisation or church with a tradition of larger tol-

erance or doctrinal indifference proposes to other organisations or churches with a more cautious tradition, suggesting closer relationship and co-operation. And then of course turning down this proposal does have a whiff of 'church discipline'.

The leaders' conference amongst doctrinally differing Christians is in my experience one of the most resourceful and challenging inventions in the church! This is what makes talks, praying and studies possible, even when you are too far from one another for, say, joint missions and common preaching. It is the result of 'church discipline' in the sense that you realise you can't engage completely in joint responsibility and do not have a sufficient consensus on important issues—at the same time it keeps the brotherly talk and careful studies alive and does not allow us to fossilize in prejudice and self-sufficiency.

Common preaching. I realise that many evangelicals will not agree that joint missions and common preaching will require such a degree of doctrinal consensus. It will seem to them too cautious and maybe even obstructing the Great Commission.

2. Having to take disciplinary measures does not imply any judgment on one another's faith and salvation.

The contrary is often felt. And understandable as it is, this feeling is superficial and disastrous. It deepens a conflict dramatically, which already is very difficult to handle. Therefore, in a situation of conflict or breach any precaution must be taken to avoid this feeling. To a certain extent tolerating doctrinal diversity is not only a matter of pragmatism and politeness. You might even name it a consequence of God's very counsel of salvation.

a. The idea of a congregation without any disagreement or diversity whatsoever would be like the idea of a congregation without sin. That would be fanaticism.

b. A congregation without any disagreement or diversity would probably be a congregation under the spiritual tyranny of some seductive psychopath.

c. Alternatively it would be a congrega-

tion with no substantial thinking at all (and then it probably would not last very long either).

d. The very fact of diversity is (or should be) a consequence of our constant individual endeavour to get our own thinking and living more and more in accordance with the Bible's view. It is an expression of the Christian's own progress. It expresses the individual's necessary spiritual warfare.

Heresy amongst evangelicals?

I close by repeating D.A. Carson's words: 'Individualism and personal choice in religion have largely displaced loyalty to denominational structures and to inherited doctrinal bastions. This makes it easier for individuals to be syncretistic, or worse, confusedly pluralistic—i.e., people without strong doctrinal commitments may take on highly diverse and even contradictory ideas *without* fusing them, simply letting them stand, unaware that the elementary demands of consistency are being violated.'

This is true not only of the pluralistic postmodern society, but also of our own temptation to irresponsible passivity when it comes to dealing with our own issues. Suddenly we become mini-relativists: No one can decide anyway, which interpretation is correct. We are usually prepared to search the Scripture, when it comes to our causes confronting *the world*—but when it comes to confronting one another, we in practice suddenly become very reluctant? We are much more focussed upon how to handle our differences and disagreements, than we are focussed upon how we should bring them open-mindedly *to the Scripture* and let them judge between us. In practice, in this respect, open minds are very hard to find. We tend to cling to habitual positions, to the more convenient positions, to the line of least resistance. And only when we can get to contend with society or culture or our own liberal church, are we consistent and eager in our biblical research.

Is this, for instance, the background for the striking silence in *The Doctrinal Basis* of IFES, in *The Lausanne Covenant* and the *Manila Manifesto*, when it comes to our

old tensions concerning the sacraments? In the evangelical tradition we have more or less decided, that this issue is not an issue anymore, at least not in any sense of 'heresy'. To a (declining?) number of evangelical theologians, this decision is a conscious and careful conclusion, reached by means of thorough studies. To an (increasing?) number of evangelical theologians, however, this decision would better have been made by this whole ecumenical atmosphere, in which we for the sake of fellowship and brotherhood often merely avoid the issue.

A few decades ago, the question of infant baptism, *pro and con*, would make a serious theme exactly under the heading *Heresy and church discipline—what are the limits of tolerance in the church?* Today very few of us would even consider this a topic. And probably none of us would think in terms of *heresy*, when it comes to infant baptism / adult baptism. *But how?* How did we reach this new attitude? By means of careful studies?—or rather overwhelmed with a postmodern atmosphere of tolerance and doctrinal indifference?

I'm mentioning this also because in many of our churches precisely the issue of baptism is an issue of church discipline. If for instance a member of a Lutheran Church, already baptized as a child, decides to receive baptism again as an adult believer, he or she will be excluded automatically (actually, in the Danish State Church this tends to be the *only* issue of church discipline whatsoever!). And in many Baptist or Pentecostal churches you cannot become a member of the church, unless you receive baptism as an adult. The 'church discipline' works both ways exactly on the issue of baptism—and yet we keep silent on it in these very carefully formulated documents.

Division amongst evangelicals?

To me it seems an important acknowledgement that even among evangelicals disagreements may be so grave that they prevent co-operation *on some levels*, and that they should so. This is a consequence of mutual love and respect, not a contradic-

tion to it.

This is in principle no different from the considerations we all engage in all the time. Whom are we to invite as a preacher?—as a guest lecturer?—as an associate professor? With whom would we feel secure joining on a campus missions? With which publishing houses would we release this and that book together? Is his or hers or their view on baptism a problem? On sex before marriage? On the Lord's Supper? On the essence of atonement? On the gifts of the Spirit? On the ministry of healing? On the Bible's inerrancy? On perdition as annihilation?

Asking such questions is exactly 'the costly love of church discipline'. One major difficulty is, however, that even asking so is often being misunderstood as a condemnation of others for unbelief, because we have been nurtured with ecumenical clichés about fellowship and partnership with all Christians, no matter the degree of doctrinal discrepancy. And this is not without reason, of course. These clichés *also* express a sound attitude of repentance, because in all the centuries before the ecumenical movement any doctrinal discrepancy has been the cause for fanaticism and condemnation. Still, as superficial clichés only they leave us with little ability to distinguish between different levels of diversity and different levels of partnership. This is because they do not solve anything; they just cover it up.

Never without scruples

Who can work his way through such awesome topics and face such a responsibility with total self-confidence? I strongly believe that no healthy Christian can do so without severe scruples, both when it comes to how to distinguish properly, and when it comes to one's own doctrinal position.

Footnotes

- 1 D.A. Carson: *The Gagging of God*, Zondervan, Michigan 1996, p. 23
- 2 D.A. Carson 1996, p.16
- 3 1 Tim 2:8
- 4 As I understand this warning, it does not

warn against touching anyone (say, the demon-possessed) or against overdoing the prayer ministry! Rather it (in the light of the context) warns against *superficially calling and ordaining unfit elders* into ministry. Because in doing so, you'll make yourself responsible for their sins.

- 5 *sunesthiein* not meaning the modern business lunch, probably (in my view!) not even meaning the fellowship of the Eucharist, but rather the awesome denotation of the eating together in almost any culture in history except the Western: that you cannot eat with your enemy, and you share the fate and doings of your meal mate. The issue is again that you should not share in the sins of the heretic, but keep yourself pure.
- 6 In Danish it may only be pronounced with a sneer.
- 7 Strictly speaking this does not deal with the *belief* in resurrection, but the *fact* of resurrection. But I cannot read the context otherwise than counting belief in the resurrection as a cornerstone in Christian conviction.
- 8 This paper does not (apart from here) distinguish between heresy and schism. Actually it should!—but I'm avoiding it for a reason that will become clear.
- 9 And to the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike. As Paul says: One faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all, etc. Eph. 4, 5, 6.
- 10 Personally I have experienced one painful situation where brothers (influenced by a theologian from another country) felt forced to withdraw from any spiritual fellowship with the rest of us, even refusing to pray together with us—since there were doctrinal (minor!) differences between us, and they were convinced that they therefore could not allow themselves to pray with us. Much to their astonishment this foreign theologian at the end of the day also refused to pray with them, since they also held slightly different opinions.