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# Hermeneutics in *The Church. Towards a Common Vision*

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## **Abstract**

Hermeneutics in *The Church* is related to the tradition (faith and order) of the church itself and its common discernment with an eye to unity, to the churches' discernment of one another, and to the church's/churches' interpretation of the world. The world needs to be interpreted and this interpretation needs to be done by the churches together, who therefore need to discern their faith together as well.

## **Keywords**

Interpretation, tradition, unity

## **Introduction**

The document *The Church. Towards A Common Vision* (henceforth: *The Church*),<sup>1</sup> prepared by the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches for the latter's general assembly, is one of the latest major ecumenical documents, if not the latest, and often regarded as the

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<sup>1</sup> Commission on Faith and Order, *The Church. Towards a Common Vision* (Geneva: WCC, 2013).

(intended) successor to the 1982 BEM-report. This paper explores what this new document has to say on one of the topics that has concerned the ecumenical movement since its inception: hermeneutics.<sup>2</sup> A reason for addressing this topic is found in the first lines of the introduction to the document, where the issue addressed by it, is formulated in terms of a problem of common understanding (sc. of the nature of the Church) and living in accordance with the revealed will of Christ, two hermeneutical topics *par excellence*:

Thy will be done are words that countless believers from all Christian churches pray every day. Jesus himself prayed similar words in the garden of Gethsemane shortly before his arrest (cf. Matt. 26:39-42; Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42). In John's gospel, moreover, he revealed his will for the Church when he prayed to the Father that all of his disciples be one, so that the world may believe (cf. John 21:17). To pray that the Lord's will be done thus necessarily requires a wholehearted endeavour to embrace his will for and gift of unity. The present text – The Church: Towards a Common Vision – addresses what many consider to be the most difficult issues facing the churches in overcoming any remaining obstacles to their living out the Lord's gift of communion: our understanding of the nature of the Church itself.

In surveying and analyzing what this new document has to say on the topic of hermeneutics, in some instances, but without engaging in a full-blown comparison, particular attention will be given to the way in which insights from the 1998 Faith and Order paper on hermeneutics, *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels* (henceforth: *A Treasure*), itself a response to the reception of the BEM-report, have, or have not, been received by this new document.<sup>3</sup> This is done, not in the last place because *The Church* identifies and aligns itself with the hermeneutical questions that were raised in the aftermath of the BEM-report (see the following remarks in the introduction: “The many official responses to Faith and Order's Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, of 1982, showed that the process of reception that follows the publication of a convergence text can prove to be as important as that

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. the succinct overview offered by: Michael G. Cartwright, ‘Hermeneutics’, in: Nicholas Lossky/José Míguez Bonino/John Pobee/Tom F. Stransky/Geoffrey Wainwright/Pauline Webb, *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2002), pp. 513-518.

<sup>3</sup> Commission on Faith and Order, *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels, an instrument for an ecumenical reflection on hermeneutics* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998).

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which led to its production.”) The method that will be followed is that of a close reading of *The Church*, focusing on those sections that have something to say on issues of interpretation and hermeneutics. The paper is part of a longer standing interest in hermeneutics in the ecumenical movement, both in its multilateral and in its bilateral forms;<sup>4</sup> what follows will be informed by my earlier studies. In doing so, I hope to give an answer to the question what role hermeneutics play in this new ecumenical document and make a contribution to the discussion about it.<sup>5</sup>

**Hermeneutics in *The Church. Towards A Common Vision*: An Overview**

Apart from references to the proclamation of the Word and the kingdom of God in sections 2, 4, and 5, a first more extensive remark occurs in section 6, where a very brief overview of the proclamation of the Gospel (and its relation to culture) in the history of Christianity is given:

One challenge for the Church has been how to proclaim the Gospel of Christ in a way that awakens a response in the different contexts, languages and cultures of the people who hearth at proclamation. St. Paul’s preaching of Christ in the Areopagus at Athens (Acts 17:22-34), making use of local beliefs and literature, illustrates how the very first generation of Christians attempted to share the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection, drawing upon and, when necessary, transforming, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the cultural heritage of their listeners and serving as a leaven to foster the well-being of the society in which they lived. Over the centuries, Christians have witnessed to the Gospel within ever increasing horizons, from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (cf. Acts 1:8). Often their witness to Jesus resulted in martyrdom, but it also led to the spread of the faith and to the establishment of the Church in every corner

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. Peter-Ben Smit, ‘The Meaning of “Life.” An Essay in Ecumenical Hermeneutics,’ *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 43 (2008), pp. 320-332, *Tradition in Dialogue. The Concept of Tradition in International Anglican Bilateral Dialogues* AMSTAR 3 (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2012), a manuscript for a further monograph, provisionally entitled *From Canonical Criticism to Ecumenical Exegesis? A Study in Biblical Hermeneutics*, is currently under review for publication in 2014. – References to secondary literature will be kept to a minimum in the course of this essay.

<sup>5</sup> Notably, the term “hermeneutical” only occurs once in the document, in a title cited in footnote 11.

of the earth. At times, the cultural and religious heritage of those to whom the Gospel was proclaimed was not given the respect it deserved, as when those engaging in evangelization were complicit in imperialistic colonization, which pillaged and even exterminated peoples unable to defend themselves from more powerful invading nations. Notwithstanding such tragic events, God's grace, more powerful than human sinfulness, was able to raise up true disciples and friends of Christ in many lands and establish the Church within the rich variety of many cultures. Such diversity within the unity of the one Christian community was understood by some early writers as an expression of the beauty which Scripture attributes to the bride of Christ (cf. Eph. 5:27 and Rev. 21:2).<sup>7</sup> Today believers from churches which once welcomed foreign missionaries have been able to come to the assistance of churches by whose agency they first heard the Gospel. (6; 7 adds to this that the current globalized, multi-religious world, with its modern means of communication, and a variety of responses that churches offer to this, complicates all of this even more.)

Thus, a hermeneutical topic that is also of considerable significance in *A Treasure*, is placed fairly close to the beginning of *A Church*, prefacing, in a way, what will follow by placing it in the context of the tension between Gospel and culture and at the background of a not unproblematic history of Christian mission, while the entire document already has a hermeneutical drift, a drift that derives from the history of the ecumenical movement as a whole, which has been the embodiment of the common discernment of the faith (and hence of the church). *A Church* places itself in this tradition, both in general and in particular in its section 8, where "the leaders, theologians and faithful of all churches" are invited "to seek the unity for which Jesus prayed." – A related question of hermeneutics is addressed in section 9, where not so much the issue of the joint discernment of unity is addressed, but rather the different ways in which churches can recognize in each other – a hermeneutical act – in one another the church of Christ (see also 8).

Then, in its section 11, *The Church* addresses a hermeneutical issue that is more closely related to the interpretation of (the sources of) the faith again:

All Christians share the conviction that Scripture is normative, therefore the biblical witness provides an irreplaceable source for acquiring greater agreement about the Church. Although the New Testament provides no systematic ecclesiology, it does offer accounts of the faith of the

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early communities, of their worship and practice of discipleship, of various roles of service and leadership, as well as images and metaphors used to express the identity of the Church. Subsequent interpretation within the Church, seeking always to be faithful to biblical teaching, has produced an additional wealth of ecclesiological insights over the course of history. The same Holy Spirit who guided the earliest communities in producing the inspired biblical text continues, from generation to generation, to guide later followers of Jesus as they strive to be faithful to the Gospel. This is what is understood by the “living Tradition” of the Church. The great importance of Tradition has been acknowledged by most communities, but they vary in assessing how its authority relates to that of Scripture. (Section 11)

Thus, the tension between the normativity of Scripture (and of tradition deriving from it) is presented as a hermeneutical starting point, while at the same time the factual plurality of both the contents of Scripture and of tradition are identified and connected again to the work of the Spirit, producing the “living Tradition.” The obvious hermeneutical problem that this “wealth of ecclesiological insights” also constitutes, the document will address in its next section, but not after having noted that the relationship between Scripture and Tradition (written with a capital “T”) is a matter of discussing among the churches. The latter is, to some extent, surprising, given that it seems to contradict the language, if not the content of the insights of the 1963 Montreal Conference’s insights on this topic (and their positive in *A Treasure*). As already indicated, section 12 of *The Church* discusses the diversity identified in section 11 as being indicative of the fact that “legitimate diversity” is part of the catholicity of the Church, in the sense that it points to the “incarnation” of the one message of salvation in different contexts.

In what follows next in *The Church*, a broad outline of a common ecclesiology is presented under the heading of “The Church of the Triune God as Koinonia” (sections 13-32), which contains many hermeneutical decisions, but pronounces much less on the matter itself than the preceding sections. Hermeneutical issues arise again after this, in the part of the document entitled “The Church: Growing in Communion” and here especially in relation to the church’s (ordained) ministry, which is part of a subsection on the “essential elements of communion: faith, sacraments, ministry”. Here, first a hermeneutical starting point is formulated, followed by a hermeneutical demand:

Regarding the first of these elements, there is widespread agreement that the Church is called to proclaim, in each generation, the faith “once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude v. 3) and to remain steadfast in the teaching first handed on by the apostles. Faith is evoked by the Word of God, inspired by the grace of the Holy Spirit, attested in Scripture and transmitted through the living tradition of the Church. It is confessed in worship, life, service and mission. While it must be interpreted in the context of changing times and places, these interpretations must remain in continuity with the original witness and with its faithful explication throughout the ages. Faith has to be lived out in active response to the challenges of every age and place. It speaks to personal and social situations, including situations of injustice, of the violation of human dignity and of the degradation of creation. (Section 38)

Following these formulations, section 39 notes that the 1992 study *Confessing the One Faith* has provided a way of “showing substantial agreement among Christians concerning the meaning of the creed professed in the liturgies of most churches” while “[i]t also explained how the faith of the creed is grounded in scripture, confessed in the ecumenical symbol and has to be confessed afresh in relation to the challenges of the contemporary world.” In the same breath, *The Church* goes on, however, to note how *A Treasure* did a lot of good work in 1998, but that the question of hermeneutics really remains open:

In 1998, *A Treasure in Earthen Vessels* explored the ongoing interpretation of Scripture and Tradition in handing on the faith, noting: - The Holy Spirit inspires and leads the churches each to rethink and reinterpret their tradition in conversation with each other, always aiming to embody the one Tradition in the unity of God’s Church. While the churches generally agree as to the importance of Tradition in the generation and subsequent interpretation of scripture, more recent dialogue has tried to understand how the Christian community engages in such interpretation. Many bilateral dialogues have acknowledged that ecclesial interpretation of the contemporary meaning of the Word of God involves the faith experience of the whole people, the insights of theologians, and the discernment of the ordained ministry. The challenge today is for churches to agree on how these factors work together.(39)

The section on authority in the church (“The Gift of Authority in the Service of the Church” 48-41), that precedes the section on ministry in

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the church (“The Ministry of Oversight (episkopé)”) is a next instance where the question of hermeneutics, now in the sense of how hermeneutics should take place within the churches, surfaces again. Outlining first, in 48, how all authority in the church derives from Christ, who shared it with the apostles, whose “successors in the ministry of oversight (episkopé) exercised authority in the proclamation of the gospel, in the celebration of the sacraments, particularly the eucharist, and in the pastoral guidance of believers.” Thus, the ministry of episkopé is tied to the authority of Christ and to the interpretation (c.q. proclamation) of the faith. Quite in line with this tie into Jesus Christ’s authority, ecclesial authority is christologically qualified: “Authority within the Church must be understood as humble service, nourishing and building up the koinonia of the Church in faith, life and witness; it is exemplified in Jesus’ action of washing the feet of the disciples (cf. John 13:1-17). It is a service (*diakonia*) of love, without any domination or coercion.” (49, see also 50) Section 51 attempts to tie ecclesial authority and its ministerial bearers both to Christ and to the whole people of God; the part of which that is related most directly to hermeneutics runs as follows: “Its exercise includes the participation of the whole community, whose sense of the faith (*sensus fidei*) contributes to the overall understanding of God’s Word and whose reception of the guidance and teaching of the ordained ministers testifies to the authenticity of that leadership.” (51) Or, put more comprehensively: “The sense for the authentic meaning of the gospel that is shared by the whole people of God, the insights of those dedicated in a special way to biblical and theological studies, and the guidance of those especially consecrated for the ministry of oversight, all collaborate in the discernment of God’s will for the community. Decision-making in the Church seeks and elicits the consensus of all and depends upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit, discerned in attentive listening to God’s Word and to one another. By the process of active reception over time, the Spirit resolves possible ambiguities in decisions.” (51) This, as well as the subsequent remarks about the ministry of episkopé are, as far as its hermeneutical aspects are concerned, largely in line with what was said earlier in *A Treasure* 49-66.

Next, *The Church* turns to the topic of ministry *sensu stricto*, noting that this ministry, understood as ministry of episkopé, here (52) defined as a ministry of coordination, is a gift of the Spirit, has been given form differently in different times and places, while it always “is in the service

of maintaining continuity in apostolic faith and unity of life,” having as “a principal purpose” “to safeguard and hand on revealed truth, to hold the local congregations in communion, to give mutual support and to lead in witnessing to the gospel.” At least two of these four items, c.q. the first and the last, are directly hermeneutical in nature. Having stated this, *The Church* goes on to note the local and supra-local dimensions of this ministry, which issues into a brief consideration of its personal, collegial, and communal aspects in the language of BEM. To this, section 52 adds a consideration of the relation of this ministry of oversight, as it is now called again, to synodality and conciliarity.

Having thus discussed the ministry in the church, *The Church* turns to the supra-local level of communion and discernment and with that to the question of primacy, which also stands in the service of hermeneutical processes, recognizing that whenever the church gathers for common counsel “there is need for someone to summon and preside over the gathering for the sake of good order and to facilitate the process of promoting, discerning and articulating consensus.” (53) In particular, this person, who will subsequently be described in terms of primacy, has “to give voice to the voiceless.” In the subsequent sections, 54-57, *The Church* describes some historical aspects of primacy in the church (pentarchy, primacy of the See of Rome) and the ecumenical discussion about the desirability of a “universal ministry of Christian unity” as it has been provoked by Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order (56).

When *The Church* turns to its next topic, “The Church: In and For the World”, hermeneutics remains in view, given that one of the ways in which the position of the Church vis-à-vis the world is conceptualized is as a mediator of divine revelation (see 58), or, as 59 puts it: “The Church’s mission in the world is to proclaim to all people, in word and deed, the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ.” This, to be sure includes working for peace and justice. In 60, *The Church* goes on to note that the current awareness of religious pluralism (and its positive evaluation), both leads to a renewed reading of the New Testament, with more attention for Jesus’ appreciation of those who were foreign or “other”, and also to a renewed appreciation of that which is good and true in other religions. Thus, the interreligious encounter has consequences both for the interpretation of the own tradition, c.q. the New Testament, and for the interpretation and evaluation of other (non-Christian) traditions. The remarks about the New

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Testament here belong to the most concrete remarks about acts of interpretation in the entire document.

From interreligious encounter, *The Church* turns to “The Moral Challenge of the Gospel”, noting that the church strives to “take shape as the community seeks to understand God’s will within the various circumstances of time and place.” (62) Thus, the moral challenge is also a hermeneutical challenge. *The Church* provides a formulation of this challenge, which covers both aspects of its content and shape, and of the way in which it might be addressed within the community of the church:

Together with the adherents of other religions as well as with all persons of good will, Christians must promote not only those individual moral values which are essential to the authentic realization of the human person but also the social values of justice, peace and the protection of the environment, since the message of the gospel extends to both the personal and the communal aspects of human existence. Thus koinonia includes not only the confession of the one faith and celebration of common worship, but also shared moral values, based upon the inspiration and insights of the gospel. Notwithstanding their current state of division, the churches have come so far in fellowship with one another that they are aware that what one does affects the life of others, and, in consequence, are increasingly conscious of the need to be accountable to each other with respect to their ethical reflections and decisions. As churches engage in mutual questioning and affirmation, they give expression to what they share in Christ. (62)

The moral challenge thus also is a hermeneutical challenge, it seems, in a threefold way, i.e. with regard to the world, to the own tradition, and to the different traditions with their differing views on a range of subjects and their relative importance (see also 63).

In its subsequent consideration of “The Church in Society”, *The Church* addresses some further aspects of the church’s interpretation of the (suffering) world, using a hermeneutics that issues into a particular practice – or at least leads to a call for this. This is to say: from the perspective of the Gospel, or God’s love, the church understands the world as suffering and as in need of compassion. Thus, the world interpreted by faith, leads the church to challenge structures of injustice, poverty, etc. That this requires discernment is identified by the document as well:

“Each context will provide its own clues to discern what is the appropriate Christian response within any particular set of cir-

cumstances. Even now, divided Christian communities can and do carry out such discernment together and have acted jointly to bring relief to suffering human beings and to help create a society that fosters human dignity.” (64)

Notably, this particular way of seeing the world from the perspective of the faith also entails a reevaluation and reinterpretation of history, or, rather, the ways in which church and state have grown together historically. (63) This process also extends into the present, where the political powers that be sometimes need to be opposed, given that the faith calls for “critically analyzing and exposing unjust structures, and working for their transformation.” *The Church* notes that this can involve a high prize, c.q. of one’s life, and associates this with Christ’s death, and the nature of Christian *martyria*.

In the document’s conclusion, the interrelationship between what was discussed in the sections of *The Church* on the church’s “internal affairs” is connected to what was said about the churches “external affairs” (i.e. the church in/for the world) with the words of a church father:

“St. John Chrysostom spoke about two altars: one in the Church and the other among the poor, the suffering and those in distress. Strengthened and nourished by the liturgy, the Church must continue the life-giving mission of Christ in prophetic and compassionate ministry to the world and in struggle against every form of injustice and oppression, mistrust and conflict created by human beings.” (67)

In this work of the church, the renewed creation is already present (69).

Having thus outlined the various instances in which hermeneutics plays a role in *The Church*, some comments may be offered.

### Critical Observations

The following observations are critical in a double sense of the word, they are analytical, and they will ask some questions. The analytical part will focus on systematizing the way in which hermeneutical questions play a role in *The Church*, the questioning part will raise issues regarding particular emphases in *The Church*, the absence of some topics, or unclarities.

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When attempting to systematize the way in which hermeneutical questions surface in *The Church*, the following three aspects come to mind: 1) Hermeneutics in relation to the Christian tradition with an eye to (re) discovering a common faith and order; 2) Hermeneutics in relation to one another, with an eye to discovering in one another the Church of Christ; 3) Hermeneutics in relation to the interface between Church and world, i.e. the interpretation of the world from the perspective of the faith. Each of these three can be considered in somewhat more detail now.

### **Hermeneutics in Relation to the Christian tradition**

First, concerning the issue of the common discernment of a joint faith and order, a topic that may seem to dominate in the earlier parts of *The Church* (i.e. 1-57), but that factually surfaces whenever the question of a concrete joint position of the churches is mentioned, the following may be noted. To some extent, some questions that have preoccupied the ecumenical movement since its inception, specifically concerning the relationship between Scripture and Tradition, as well as the question of ecclesial ministry, specifically in relation to the discernment of the faith, occupy prominent places in the document.

Concerning the first of these two topics, it may be noted that *The Church* places much emphasis on the fact that it is characteristic of the Christian faith to be “incarnated” in different contexts and with some diversity arising from this (a fact that is already attested in Scripture), this is even understood as part of the catholicity of the church; at the same time *The Church* uses language that indicates that there are limits to legitimate diversity. Specifically, it also notes that there are substantial problems with this topic, as the text after section 30 notes:

Though all churches have their own procedures for distinguishing legitimate from illegitimate diversity, it is clear that two things are lacking: (a) common criteria, or means of discernment, and (b) such mutually recognized structures as are needed to use these effectively. All churches seek to follow the will of the Lord yet they continue to disagree on some aspects of faith and order and, moreover, on whether such disagreements are Church-divisive or, instead, part of legitimate diversity. We invite the churches to consider: what positive steps can be taken to make common discernment possible?

This comes after sections in which some criteria are offered, however, even if the question is left open for the discernment of the churches in the end. Section 28 states, for example, that “Legitimate diversity is compromised whenever Christians consider their own cultural expressions of the gospel as the only authentic ones, to be imposed upon Christians of other cultures.” Section 30 notes that

“There are limits to legitimate diversity; when it goes beyond acceptable limits it can be destructive of the gift of unity. Within the Church, heresies and schisms, along with political conflicts and expressions of hatred, have threatened God’s gift of communion.”

Footnote 24, clarifying this section adds the following:

“Diversities which are rooted in theological traditions, various cultural, ethnic or historical contacts are integral to the nature of communion; yet there are limits to diversity. Diversity is illegitimate when, for instance, it makes impossible the common confession of Jesus Christ as God and Saviour the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb. 13:8).”<sup>6</sup>

Section 37 claims that

“The ecclesial elements required for full communion within a visibly united church – the goal of the ecumenical movement – are communion in the fullness of apostolic faith; in sacramental life; in a truly one and mutually recognized ministry; in structures of conciliar relations and decision-making; and in common witness and service in the world.”

And that “These attributes serve as a necessary framework for maintaining unity in legitimate diversity.” Negatively, therefore, diversity is illegitimate when it disrupts the communion of the church and/or makes a common confession impossible; positively, diversity can be managed when taking into account the framework outlined in section 37. Still, the questions raised in the text before section 31 remain and the churches are presented with a hermeneutical task, which, in *The Church*, is clearly identified, rather than solved.

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<sup>6</sup> Quoted from the “Canberra Statement - The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling” (1991), republished in: Gassmann, Günther (ed.) *Documentary History of Faith and Order 1963-1993* (Geneva: WCC, 1993), p. 4.

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With regard to the second topic, the somewhat reluctant statement that “The great importance of Tradition has been acknowledged by most communities, but they vary in assessing how its authority relates to that of Scripture” is, however true, somewhat surprising in its formulation. To begin with, the use of the “Tradition” in this way can well be taken to indicate that *The Church* has left the heritage of Montreal 1963 with its distinction between Tradition, tradition, and the traditions, behind and is now largely back to terminology that was used before that. I doubt that that is progress, given that so much speaks in favor of a more dynamic interrelationship between the different witnesses to what Montreal 1963 understood to mean Christian Tradition (i.e. the Scriptures, confessional traditions, etc.) and given that the definitions that Montreal 1963 offered, even if they were with their own problems, offered so much potential to transcend a fairly typically post-Reformation issue in confessional theology.

Concerning the third topic, the ecclesial ministry in relation to authority in the church and hence in relation to a hermeneutically vital issue, it may be noted that it receives a considerable amount of attention, more than in, for example, *A Treasure*.<sup>7</sup> The hermeneutical relevance of the ministry (sc. of episkopé) is a twofold one as the following quotation from section 52 makes clear:

In addition to preaching the Word and celebrating the Sacraments, a principal purpose of this ministry is faithfully to safeguard and hand on revealed truth, to hold the local congregations in communion, to give mutual support and to lead in witnessing to the Gospel.

The ministry of episkopé is thus both related to the renewed interpretation of the faith (“proclamation”) and to its preservation.<sup>8</sup> This sounds

<sup>7</sup> Equally striking, sections 46-47 give the strong impression that the threefold pattern of ministry is held by most churches and not a matter of much debate. – At least the question of apostolic succession, as is indeed noted, but nothing more than that, continues to preoccupy churches. On the other hand, reference to bilateral dialogues, in which this question has been solved, could also have helped to strengthen to the text (e.g. the ECUSA-ELCA agreement and the Porvoo-agreement come to mind).

<sup>8</sup> A related query could be to what extent the sacramental life of the church is not also, or even just as much as verbal proclamation and service, an interpretative enterprise. That is to say: through Christian initiation (baptism, chrismation, first Eucharist) a person is reinterpreted, also in relation to the world, while the Eucharist (and the other sacraments) can well be seen as continual reinterpretation of human beings and the world from the perspective of the Kingdom. It would seem that these aspects of sacramental theology would have something to offer as well. (See, e.g., *The Church*, pp. 14, 21, 41-43, and especially p. 67)

like a tension and it certainly can be one; I am not sure that *The Church* addresses in more details, even though it could be a productive tension, especially in relation to the emphasis that *The Church* places on the need for common discernment. What I mean with this is that it is well possible to think together “proclamation” (in the sense of renewed interpretation and formulation of the faith in new contexts, both in terms of time and of culture) and the “preservation” (in the sense of safeguarding the faith, a “depositum fidei”, of yesterday for today) when it is taking into account that true preservation can only take place through renewed proclamation (with its inherent elements of interpretation), given that what was formulated in one way for yesterday’s context, needs to be formulated in a way that matches today’s context; should this not happen, then the faith is changed.<sup>9</sup> Such an attempt to think these two together could have profited from the insights into the dynamism of tradition as it had been formulated by the 1963 World Conference on Faith and Order in Montreal, of course. In fact, *The Church* points precisely to such a kind of process in the text between sections 51 and 52:

Significant steps towards convergence on authority and its exercise have been recorded in various bilateral dialogues. Differences continue to exist between churches, however, as to the relative weight to be accorded to the different sources of authority, as to how far and in what ways the Church has the means to arrive at a normative expression of its faith, and as to the role of ordained ministers in providing an authoritative interpretation of revelation. Yet all churches share the urgent concern that the Gospel be preached, interpreted and lived out in the world humbly, but with compelling authority. May not the seeking of ecumenical convergence on the way in which authority is recognized and exercised play a creative role in this missionary endeavour of the churches?

In this context, also something else may be noted: generally, the term episkopé is translated as “oversight,” this is also the case in *The Church*, albeit with one exception that may be highlighted here, given that it points to a characteristic of this ministry that is less concerned with the preservation of the faith or its proclamation, but with its joint discernment, an aspect of the ministry of episkopé that receives considerable attention elsewhere in the document. What I mean is the translation of episkopé

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<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Edward Schillebeeckx, *Menschen – Die Offenbarung von Gott* (trans. Hugo Zulauf, Freiburg: Herder, 1990), pp. 67-71, esp. p. 68.

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“ministry of coordination” in 52, which is not repeated elsewhere in *The Church*, but which may, other than the somewhat etymologizing translation “oversight”, well help to overcome the (apparent) tension between “proclamation” and “preservation” of the faith associated with this ministry.<sup>10</sup> Seeking a way to overcome the (apparent) tension between “preservation” and “proclamation” might be helpful to further the ecumenical hermeneutical project, it seems.

Finally, by way of an aside, it can also be retained that the notion of ‘life-givingness’ that was so central to *A Treasure*, occupies a place of much lesser prominence (see only: 64, 67, compare: 1, 22, 60); the same is true for the notion of “reception” that was more prominent in the earlier document – and continues to enjoy prominence in bilateral dialogues.<sup>11</sup>

**Hermeneutics in Relation to One Another**

The second way in which questions of hermeneutics appear in *The Church* concerns the interpretation of churches of one another. A hermeneutical approach to interchurch relations is, different from a hermeneutical approach to the sources of the faith and to the common discernment of the faith today, which has accompanied the ecumenical movement since its inception, a relatively new development and stems, it seems, from the 80s and 90s of the past century. When it was developed and introduced, its aim was to develop ways for churches to understand one another’s differences. “Understanding one another” is the best description of this approach, or one may call it, with Rudolf von Sinner, a “hermeneutics of acceptance.”<sup>12</sup> Von Sinner refers to past World Council of Churches general secretary Konrad Raiser as a prominent spokesperson of this kind of hermeneutics, quoting him as follows: “The legitimacy of inculturation or contextualiza-

<sup>10</sup> One aside: to what extent something might not be gained by skipping the etymologizing translation of “episkopé” as “oversight” and to replace it with the responsibility for the first initiative. See e.g. Urs von Arx, ‘Was macht die Kirche katholisch? Perspektiven einer christkatholischen Antwort,’ in: Wolfgang W. Müller (ed.), *Katholizität – Eine ökumenische Chance* (Zürich: NZN/TVZ, 2006), pp. 147-186.

<sup>11</sup> See on this two topics: Smit, ‘Meaning,’ and Idem, *Tradition*.

<sup>12</sup> Rudolf von Sinner, *Reden vom dreieinigen Gott in Brasilien und Indien*, Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie 43 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), p. 15, “Hermeneutik der Anerkennung.”

tion is not a matter of debate any longer. Today's pressing question is: How can communication be achieved between theologies, confessions, and spiritualities that are all contextualized differently?"<sup>13</sup> In documents such as *A* and responses to it, the older<sup>14</sup> and the newer<sup>15</sup> approaches both are present prominently, however. It even might seem that the older approach was getting more attention again. If this analysis is correct, *The Church*, certainly continues this development, given that in this document the question of hermeneutics in relation to the mutual interpretation of churches does not surface often. In fact, it mainly surfaces in section 9, where it is noted briefly that it is a prerequisite for visible unity that churches are "able to recognize in one another the authentic presence of what the Creed of Nicea-Constantinople (381) calls - the - one, holy, catholic, apostolic church." Section 51, when it indeed speaks about communication between the Church's constituent parts, states that "Decision-making in the Church seeks and elicits the consensus of all and depends upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit, discerned in attentive listening to God's Word and to one another." Finally, section 62 takes note of the mutual accountability of churches when it comes to decision-making. Compared to the attention that, for example, *A Treasure* (sections 28-31), has for this issue, I find this, with all due respect, somewhat meagre; at least remarks such as those in *A Treasure*, section 28, could have been incorporated. There, it is acknowledged that when it comes to recognizing the contextuality of all expression of the faith – and to an according interpretation and reception of them –, it would be good to:

"to investigate the location from which the text is being interpreted; the choice of a specific text for interpretation; the involvement of power structures in the interpretation process; prejudices and presuppositions brought to bear on the interpretation process."

Even if the latter two issues may be sensitive, given that *A Treasure* has no trouble in identifying (and critiquing) such developments when they concern the past (see e.g. sections 6 and 65), it would have made excellent sense to include them into the process of discernment and reception

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<sup>13</sup> Konrad Raiser, *Wir stehen noch am Anfang: Ökumene in einer veränderten Welt* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1994), p. 162; quoted in Von Sinner, *Reden*, p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> See *Treasure*, sections 11-20 and 21-27.

<sup>15</sup> Accentuated in *Treasure*, sections 28-31 and 38-48.

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of churches of one another in the present. In such a discussion, also the question could be raised, to what extent a ministry of “universal” (i.e.: “global”) primacy could facilitate processes of mutual discernment and recognition. (see section 57). In general, however, it seems that this second area and kind of ecumenical hermeneutics has retreated somewhat into the background in *A Church* and one wonders whether this is a helpful development.

### **Hermeneutics in Relation to the Interface between Church and World**

The final area of hermeneutical thinking in *The Church* concerns the relationship of the church to the world. This topic is addressed in the final part of *The Church*, as it was surveyed above. Questions of interpretation that dominate here are related to the church’s interpretation of the world and according attitude of service in it (and resistance against aspects of it). As was noted above, aspects of this include the careful interpretation of other religious traditions and the own heritage in relation to it, as well as the interpretation of social and political situations and the development of an appropriate response. In the latter process, a double hermeneutical step needs to be made: on the one hand, the world needs to be interpreted, on the other hand, this needs to be done by the churches together, who therefore need to discern their faith together as well. That this is easier said than done may be illustrated by referring to section 63 again where a list of hallmarks is mentioned, but where it is also registered that mutual accountability and mutual questioning, i.e. dialogue, are of the essence when it comes to responding to new situations; also the section on the “Church in society” does outline a program, but does not always fill the terms that it uses with meaning, which leaves considerable room for interpretation - a task left to the churches (se 64-66). This interrelationship is, as was underlined already, restated in the conclusion of *The Church*, where John Chrysostom’s dictum about the two altars is used to conceptualize it.

### **Conclusions**

Having thus surveyed, systematized, and to some extent analyzed the hermeneutical lines of thought and indicated potential problems and potential

ways of developing aspects of these lines further, some general remarks can be formulated to conclude this essay. These can be relatively brief, given that the more detailed comments made above do not need to be repeated here. First, it has become clear how hermeneutics in *The Church* is related to the tradition (faith and order) of the church itself and its common discernment with an eye to unity, to the churches' discernment of one another, and to the church's/churches' interpretation of the world. In all of these cases, various principles could be formulated by the document, while, presumably given the contextuality of each concrete interpretation of the faith, the actual act of interpretation is left to the churches themselves (a good example of this is the use of the term 'authentic' to qualify things in *The Church*, although it has a good ring to it, it is not immediately clear what it means for the Gospel to be lived or interpreted "authentically" [28, 51], or "the authentic realization of the human person" [62]). The document, therefore, formulates, *in hermeneuticis*, more principles, or hallmarks, than offering concrete interpretations of concrete situations (it would have been interesting to include some case studies). It is to be hoped that the reception of this document will help to fill the various terms and concepts used in *The Church* with such meaning that the discernment of the church's unity in all the churches is furthered by means of it and that the risk of the filling of the various concepts and terms with conflicting meanings is avoided.