Jakob Karl Rinderknecht


In the quest for Christian unity, remarkable convergence has been achieved through bilateral and multilateral theological dialogue. But beyond convergence, *consensus* (general agreement) has been more elusive. A form of agreement that has proved to be of great heuristic value in recent ecumenical dialogue is that of ‘differentiated consensus’ (sometimes called ‘differentiating consensus’). The role of ‘differentiated consensus’ is to enable structured exploration of agreement and of difference and of the relation between the two. Differentiated consensus can point beyond convergence to a kind of consensus, but one that is acknowledged to be incomplete. A differentiated consensus makes a positive statement about the reality of agreement, while acknowledging that it falls short of a comprehensive accord. Differentiated consensus, as it operates in ecumenical dialogue, is a consensus that recognises and includes difference, allowing for unresolved issues that require further joint study. It is a notion that is counter-intuitive; it stretches our minds, if not our credulity. But differentiated consensus can help us to take a ‘The glass is half full’, rather than a ‘The glass is half empty’ approach to problems of unity and agreement in the Christian Church. The differences that remain unresolved at any stage are regarded not as alien obstructions, serving to veto further progress, but as signs of beliefs and practices that have been held dear within a tradition over time and still play a role in the making of its identity. So they are not there to be smoothed over by a form of words that can be interpreted by the two sides in incompatible ways, but rather to be respected, understood and discussed in a measured way, when both partners are ready, precisely within the new context created by the basic consensus on essential truths. There is a new framework, a new horizon for addressing them.

The concept of differentiated consensus reflects ecumenical realism. Can there ever be complete agreement between churches whose traditions, languages, teachings and practices have been formed over the centuries in a state of separation from each other? All agreement will inevitably be qualified in some way. The fact is that *undifferentiated* consensus is almost impossible to achieve; the only kind of consensus normally available to us is a differentiated one. It is unrealistic to hope to achieve an exact correspondence between two different positions in ecumenical formulations. The absorption of the vernacular doctrinal language of one tradition – which is merely the tip of the iceberg of its religious life – into that of another tradition is never going to happen. But what is possible is an emergent differentiated consensus, composed of
discourses which can be said to be complementary – not in any complacent sense, but to the extent that, in a dialogue marked by trust and goodwill, they have a common intention and they focus on a common object, though they come at it from different directions. They are not the same, but they roughly match up. They can be placed side-by-side; they can talk to each other; they are not utterly incommensurable. And the realization of that fact should be sufficient for an incremental step in Christian unity, as growth in theological agreement goes hand in hand with growth in lived (partial) communion. The method of differentiated consensus, in a broad sense, has been widely used in ecumenical dialogue in a tacit and implicit way, but without being held up to critical scrutiny until recently. However, it is further step to name ‘differentiated consensus’ and to reflect systematically on its meaning, uses and limitations.

The paradigm of differentiated consensus and the jewel in the crown of ecumenical agreement is the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (*JDDJ*), signed by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church on Reformation Day, 31 October 1999 in Augsburg. The *JDDJ* goes a long way (if not all the way) to laying to rest a particular issue that has been the cause of bitter distrust, division and hostility between Lutherans and Roman Catholics since the sixteenth century. But the *JDDJ* has not convinced everyone; hundreds of German Protestant theology professors protested against it. It needs explaining and – if we are persuaded of its merits – defending. This what Jakob Karl Rinderknecht does in this very able study. Rinderknecht tells us that he is not a Lutheran, but not what he is. However, we know that he teaches at the private Roman Catholic University of the Incarnate Word, Texas. His discussion sheds light on several aspects of the history and composition of the *JDDJ* and qualifies as a useful addition to the literature, to be taken into account by all who debate the validity of differentiated consensus and its exemplification in the *JDDJ*. His central section – and he seems to regard this as his particular contribution – is a rather technical exposition of the role of ‘cognitive linguistics’, which brings out the different structures of thought that are typical of diverse cultures. The human brain is wired differently in different cultures. Rinderknecht takes the *JDDJ* as a test case and, within the *JDDJ*, the question of sin remaining in the believer. The argument stakes much on recognizing the role of metaphor in constituting meaning. I am second to none in affirming the metaphorical texture of significant speech, but I have to confess that the cognitive-linguistic approach did not help me. My own preferred