David du Plessis and the Challenge of Dialogue

Dialogue on issues which divide the Church involves confrontation. The questions it raises are both ultimate and determinative. Who are we in relation to God? Who are we in relation to all others who claim a similar relationship with God? What is the Body of Christ? What does it mean for us to express our unity in the Body of Christ together, so that others will believe?

Such dialogue is biblical, for it pursues the foundational issues of unity; one Gospel (Galatians 1:6-9), one Body, one Spirit, one hope, one faith, one baptism, and one God (Ephesians 4:4-6). Total submission is to the one head, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit is assumed to act creatively to place all “believers” into a unique relationship (koinônia) with one another (1 Corinthians 1:9). The questions encountered through dialogue require answers which deal with definitions of who we are as the universal Church, but they also anticipate our mission together, forcing new understandings of how best to bear witness of God’s reconciling activity before a non-Christian world.

An uncompromising personal and corporate integrity is required of each individual or group who chooses to commit to an honest pursuit of Truth which recognizes only one Body of Christ. To achieve this aim, all who enter into dialogue must be certain of their own identity and be able to articulate clearly who they are, what they believe, and how they live it out. The dialogical process only has as much value as the consistency of integrity which each party is able to bring to the table. It is this integrity which disallows compromise, and concessions made for the sake of acceptability or respectability. In order to succeed in dialogue, each participant must be committed to the discovery of the Truth with their dialogue partner, and be willing to be measured against the Truth once it has been clearly identified.

Vulnerability, then, becomes the “occupational hazard” of successful dialogue, and with it must come the willingness to violate long-standing pain thresholds, treasured boundaries, or sacred shibboleths. Genuine ecumenical dialogue requires voluntary participation in a “soul-searching” adventure in which all parties must be engaged. Vulnerability presupposes the possibility that the perceptions, practices, traditions, and “truths” dearly held by a group may prove to be less than adequate. The keynote of every venture in dialogue is the truth of Paul’s assertion that all of us see in a mirror only dimly (1 Corinthians 13:12). This means that even our best confessional formulations of the Truth and the praxis of our churches which we often guard jealously, are in some ways ultimately marred or distorted. Herein lies the potential for pain.
Those who engage in dialogue, must be willing to confess the imperfections of their own faith and those of their own group, first to themselves, and then to those with whom they are in dialogue. They may need to challenge themselves or their group to reevaluate, and at times even reinterpret some of their perceptions, practices, traditions, and "truths" in order to maintain the integrity so essential to their existence before the One who is Truth. Yet, taking this step to measure up is difficult and it is possible only when all of us are willing to risk ourselves and be vulnerable. Through this process we often find ourselves moved from the security of our dogmas, the comfortabilities of our *praxeis*, and the familiarities of our traditions, to a position which is not only unfamiliar and therein uncomfortable, but also to one which reveals our previously unacknowledged or masked insecurities. But inherent in this, is the admission that we can not and do not possess the source of our own security. Our security lies outside of us, in God.

Sometimes in a dialogue, certain people or groups, blinded by their own *apparent* success, will assume that they should argue from a position of "strength" or that they must have the upper hand. They may seat themselves at the head of the dialogue table, thereby exhibiting an air of superiority. They may attempt to manipulate the agenda to serve their own exclusivist ecclesiastical interests, oppose the Truth rather than submit to it, engage in arrogant or triumphalistic behavior which consummates in a form of theological imperialism or practical tyranny, or demand changes in the actions of their dialogue partners before dialogue has even begun. This behavior ignores the teachings of Jesus (Luke 14:7-11) who rightfully sits at the head of the table. Vulnerability of one dialogue partner without a similar openness and respect by the other actually nullifies the dialogue process, sabotages genuine communication, and dampens any authentic quest for Truth.

An early revelation of the dialogue process is that most of us work with relatively exclusive definitions of the Church. We standardize our experiences of God and make them normative. We then judge the experiences of others according to those norms. Our creeds, our traditions, and our practices all tend to support, even underscore our exclusive nature. Our commitment to Jesus Christ in fact encourages exclusivity since it separates us, like sheep from goats, from those who do not share this same commitment to him as Saviour and Lord. But one might ask, how do our exclusive definitions help us relate to those who *do* share a commitment to Jesus Christ, yet express it in ways which are different from our own?

Jesus modeled a more inclusive understanding of the Church than we are usually willing to acknowledge. Luke recorded that Jesus'