

COPY OF LETTER RECEIVED BY BISHOP CLARK FROM THE REV. G. TAVARD, AA
METHODIST THEOLOGICAL SCHOOL, DELAWARE, OHIO 43015, USA, DATED 26th
FEBRUARY 1976.

Dear Bishop Clark,

I have read with great attention the Poringland document. And, frankly, I do not find it very distinguished. I regret that the work done by the Truth subcommission, which was much more complete and whose contents were infinitely more substantial, has been, for all practical purposes, discarded. Was it really necessary to start a novo?

I see two main problems. One you indicate when you point out the difficulty of passing from historical description to theological considerations. I do not see that the passage has been negotiated. The advantage of the Truth-subcommission approach was that it started immediately with theological propositions. But without some theological considerations of a somewhat progressive nature, we will only state banalities, as we did in a good part of the Canterbury statement (which I find a little less satisfying every time I read it ...).

The other problem is that this text could well have been written by Cardinal Ottaviani or a similar character. Its understanding of authority and of the use of formulations of faith is completely out of step with contemporary theology. To say that (n.14) "the Holy Spirit constrains the people of God ... to discover the language that will effectively convey its meaning today," is utterly preposterous, and it fits neither the proper function of the Holy Spirit nor the nature of language.

In n.15, how does the affirmation of the "necessary expressions" of its witness square with the affirmation that these are not the only possible ones? Necessity does exclude other possibilities ...

N.16 gives a pentecostal-charismatic account of the formation of the canon of the NT which seems to me historically false. How does this number pass from the formation of the canon to the councils?

N.17 exaggerates the importance of endorsement of a council by the bishop of Rome. At least the Easterners did not usually wait for this endorsement.

N.18 raises a major question concerning discernment of what is of permanent value and what is not. But the only clue to a solution that it gives is in the last few lines, where there is a considerable overstatement of the preservation of the councils from error in faith.

I am afraid the Hengrave hall meeting will have a lot to do. For the Poringland text leaves us further from a final statement than the Oxford meeting. I cannot imagine how this text can lead to some even mildly positive statement about the infallibility of the pope.

I would have liked to be more positive, but honesty has a certain value ...

Very sincerely,

(signed) G. Tavard