

RESOLUTION OF INTENT: A CASE STUDY IN LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

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At 9:21 a.m. on Friday, May 12, 2000, the General Conference of The United Methodist Church, by a vote of 846 yes and 14 no, supported and adopted "A Resolution of Intent: With a View to Unity." The Resolution, Calendar Item 1442-R241, Petition Number 30433-1C-R241-U, had been considered and amended by the Legislative Committee on Independent Commissions, having been submitted by the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns, and had been placed on Consent Calendar 1306 without a Minority Report.¹ As adopted, it is included in *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church, 2000* (241).

The history and development of this resolution, however, is much more rich and extensive than can be captured on a single web site page. The following article is a case study in legislative process, with specific reference to the Resolution of Intent.

In January 1999, Dr. Bruce W. Robbins, General Secretary of the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns, received a letter from Dr. A. W. Martin, Jr., Professor of Religion, Emeritus, Oklahoma City University, and a retired clergy member of the North Arkansas Annual Conference. In his communication, Dr. Martin raised a number of issues with reference to the Resolution, "Ecumenical Interpretations of Doctrinal Standards," found in the then current *Book of Resolutions*, 1996, pages 241–242. Specifically, "the suggestion is that the scope of the resolution be expanded to include all of our doctrinal standards and not just the specified Articles of Religion."² The following rationale for this proposed revision is offered in its entirety:

1. The original "Resolution of Intent" [as adopted by the 1970 General Conference but mistakenly deleted from the *Book of Resolutions*, 1970], although dealing primarily with the Articles of Religion specified in "Ecumenical Interpretations. . ." applied, if I remember correctly, to all doctrinal standards. I

¹Calendar Item Text: "Text of: 1442-R241" (Cleveland, Ohio: United Methodist Communications, for General Conference 2000, accessed May 15, 2000); available from <http://www.gc2000.org/PETS/CAL/INFO/c.1442.asp>; p.1 of 2; Internet.

²A. W. Martin, Jr., 1821 NW 22nd Street, Oklahoma City, OK 73106, to Bruce W. Robbins, 475 Riverside Drive, New York, NY 10115, letter dated January 14, 2000, p. 1.

am not sure if "Ecumenical Interpretations. . ." completely replaces the "Resolution of Intent". . . and for all practical purposes the broader coverage of "Resolution" is in danger of being lost.

2. Since the "Resolution of Intent" was approved, the General Conference has specified beyond any doubt that *Wesley's Standard Sermons* and *Explanatory Notes* are doctrinal standards of the denomination. There is thus now a much wider collection of authoritative material whose direct relevance to the twenty-first century is sometimes not clearly discernible than there was when "doctrinal standards" could be understood as the Articles, the EUB Confession, and maybe some other things.

3. Specifically in relation to Roman Catholicism, the clear designation of the *Sermons* and *Notes* as doctrinal standards would apparently mean that they "trump" the "Letter to a Roman Catholic" in trying to determine how Wesley can speak to us today in a more or less normative fashion. Two examples about the Pope from the *Notes* will serve to illustrate that a serious problem exists:

a. II Thessalonians 2:3. Wesley identifies the Pope as "the man of sin, the son of perdition," alleging, among other things, that "he has caused the death of numberless multitudes both of his opposers and followers, destroyed innumerable souls, and will himself perish everlastingly."

b. Revelation 13. On verse 1 Wesley states, "This beast is the Romish Papacy, as it came to a point six hundred years since, stands now, and will for some time longer." And on verse 15, "the pope manifests that he is antichrist, directly contrary to Christ." (Even if Wesley is quoting Bengel, he has made the German scholar's words his own.)³

Prompted by this letter and the valid concerns it raised, Bruce Robbins asked me, a member of the General Commission's Legislative and Polity Committee, to establish and convene a small working group, consisting of Ruth A. Daugherty, Secretary of the Commission, and Bishop William Boyd Grove, Ecumenical Officer of The United Methodist Church, to review Dr. Martin's letter and to make appropriate recommendations. The question before us was, in light of our ongoing need for guidance in this matter, and our Commission's long history of dialogue with our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers, does "Ecumenical Interpretations" warrant our reconsideration?⁴ Responses were soon received. Bishop Grove wrote,

I think that Mr. Martin has rendered a service to our church and to our ecumenical mission by drawing our attention to this resolution which to me is clearly inadequate. I do agree with him that it should be redone and should probably apply to our Doctrinal Standards in their entirety and not just to the Articles of Religion. Wesley's Sermons and Notes are clearly Doctrinal Standards.⁵

With the gracious assistance of Clare J. Chapman, Associate General Secretary for the General Commission, John Schreiber of the General Council on Finance and Administration, and Charles Yrigoyen, Jr., General Secretary of the General Commission on Archives and History, the text of

³Martin to Robbins, January 14, 2000, pp. 1-2.

⁴Fax memorandum, Bruce W. Robbins to John L. Topolewski, March 3, 1999.

⁵E-mail, William Boyd Grove to John L. Topolewski and Ruth Daugherty, Wednesday, March 3, 1999, RE: Ecumenical Interpretation of Doctrinal Standards.

the 1970 Resolution and the debate preceding its adoption were located.⁶ Following a review of these materials, as well as building upon earlier suggestions, a draft resolution was prepared, which contained three basic components: (1) a positive statement from Wesley's sermon, "Catholic Spirit," with reference to our ecumenical understandings; (2) a brief history of the resolution; and (3) a re-submission of the original resolution. With some minor alteration, the working group reached consensus on the following statement:⁷

RESOLUTION OF INTENT: WITH A VIEW TO UNITY

In 1750, John Wesley published the sermon, "Catholic Spirit," in which he presented his views on mutual tolerance among those seeking to unite in love:

... And 'tis certain, so long as 'we know' but 'in part,' that all men will not see all things alike. It is an unavoidable consequence of the present weakness and shortness of human understanding that several men will be of several minds, in religion as well as in common life. So it has been from the beginning of the world, and so it will be 'till the restitution of all things.'

Nay farther: although every man necessarily believes that every particular opinion which he holds is true (for to believe any opinion is not true is the same thing as not to hold it) yet can no man be assured that all his own opinions taken together are true. Nay, every thinking man is assured they are not, seeing *humanum est errare et nescire*—to be ignorant of many things, and to mistake in some, is the necessary condition of humanity. This therefore, he is sensible, is his own case. He knows in the general that he himself is not mistaken; although in what particulars he mistakes he does not, perhaps cannot, know.

I say, perhaps he cannot know. For who can tell how far invincible ignorance may extend? Or (what comes to the same thing) invincible prejudice; which is often so fixed in tender minds that it is afterwards impossible to tear up what has taken so deep a root. And who can say, unless he knew every circumstance attending it, how far any mistake is culpable? Seeing all guilt must suppose some concurrence of the will—of which he only can judge who searcheth the heart.

Every wise man therefore will allow others the same liberty of thinking which he desires they should allow him; and will no more insist on their embracing his opinions than he would have them to insist on his embracing theirs. He bears with those who differ from him, and only asks him with whom he desires to

⁶Resolution of Intent, presented by Dr. Albert C. Outler to the 1970 General Conference, text printed in *The Daily Christian Advocate* (1970), 72, with reference to: Report No. 21 of the Committee on Interdenominational Relations and Activities to the General Conference of 1968 (*The Daily Christian Advocate* [1968], 764, 1526). Material included in a fax memorandum, Clare J. Chapman to Bishop William Boyd Grove, John L. Topolewski, and Ruth A. Daugherty, March 4, 1999.

⁷Fax memoranda: William Boyd Grove to John L. Topolewski, Saturday, March 27, 1999, 7:25 PM; William Boyd Grove to Bruce Robbins, Tuesday, March 30, 1999, 9:12 AM. Ruth Daugherty to John L. Topolewski, Tuesday, March 30, 1999, 2:26 PM; all in support of this consensus.

unite in love that single question, 'Is thine heart, as my heart is with thy heart?'
 (*The Works of John Wesley*, Volume 2, Sermons II, "Catholic Spirit," 83-85).

Unfortunately in Wesley's 1784 abridgement of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England, and not in keeping with the tone of "Catholic Spirit," a number of strong statements against the Roman Catholic Church were included.

In 1970 the General Conference adopted a Resolution of Intent. It was offered to the conference by Albert Outler on behalf of the Theological Study Commission on Doctrine and Doctrinal Standards. Engaged in the debate, among others, were Harold A. Bosley, Robert E. Cushman, and Georgia Harkness. The Resolution was adopted as presented (*Journal of the 1970 General Conference, The United Methodist Church*, 255). However, the Resolution was not included in, or was mistakenly deleted from, *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church, 1970*.

At the General Conference of 1992, a new Resolution, "Ecumenical Interpretations of Doctrinal Standards," offered by the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns, was received, adopted, and subsequently printed in *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church, 1992* (245-46). Although grounded in the Study Commission's Resolution of Intent, this document is not as comprehensive in its scope as was the original, with specific reference to our current understanding of the composition of our Doctrinal Standards.

The original Resolution of Intent is re-submitted as a substitute for "Ecumenical Interpretations of Doctrinal Standards."

WHEREAS, it is common knowledge that the content of the original Thirty-Nine Articles (1563)—and specifically Articles XIV, XIX, XXI, XXII, XXIV, XXV, XXVIII, XXX, XXXI, XXXIV—was bitterly polemical, it is of prime importance in an ecumenical age that they should be reconsidered and reassessed. They were aimed, deliberately, at the Roman Catholic Church in a time of reckless strife and were a mix of the theological and non-theological convictions of embattled schismatics, fighting as they believed for national survival and evangelical truth. John Wesley's hasty abridgement (1784) of the original Thirty-Nine Articles (down to twenty-four) retained seven out of the ten of these anti-Roman references XIV, XV, XVI, XVII, XIX, XX, XXI in his enumeration. This reflects his conviction as to their applicability to the Roman Catholic Church as he perceived it at the time. This much must be recognized and acknowledged as belonging to our inheritance from our Anglican-Wesleyan past. It is, however, one of the virtues of historical insight that it enables persons in a later age to recognize the circumstances of earlier events and documents without being slavishly bound to their historical evaluation, especially in a subsequent epoch when relationships have been radically altered. Such a transvaluation will enable us freely to relegate the polemics in these articles (and the anathemas of Trent as well) to our memories

Of old, unhappy, far-off tales
 And battles long ago

and to rejoice in the positive contemporary relationships that are being developed between The United Methodist Church and the Roman Catholic Church, at levels both official and unofficial.

THEREFORE, be it hereby resolved that we declare it our official intent henceforth to interpret *all* our Articles, Confession, and other “standards of doctrine” in consonance with our best ecumenical insights and judgment, as these develop in the light of the Resolution of 1968 General Conference on “The Methodist Church and the Cause of Christian Unity” (*The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church, 1968*, pages 65–72.) [See *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church, 1992*, “Ecumenical Interpretations of Doctrinal Standards,” 245–46.] This implies, at the very least, our heartiest offer of goodwill and Christian community to all our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters, in the avowed hope of the day when all bitter memories (ours and theirs) will have been redeemed by the gift of the fullness of Christian unity, from the God and Father of our common Lord, Jesus Christ (*Journal of The 1970 General Conference, The United Methodist Church*, 255).⁸

On April 8, 1999 in plenary session in Denver, Colorado, the General Commission adopted the Resolution cited above and instructed that it be sent on to the General Conference for its consideration.⁹

Our story, however, is not complete. As referenced above, the Calendar Item 1442-R241 was reported as adopted by the General Conference, as amended. A close review of the amended text revealed that in the document’s transmission, three errors had been made: (1) some Roman numerals within the body of the Resolution were duplicated; (2) one incorrect numeral had been added; and (3) some well-intended scribe had substituted the word “Creator” for “Father.” A sharp eye within the Legislative Committee, or one of its working sections, caught the errors and made the appropriate amendments, returning the document to the form and content approved by the Commission.

A second issue, of far greater consequence, also had to be addressed. Up to the time of writing this report, a visit to the web site found in footnote 1 reveals only the last third of the Resolution as submitted and acted upon. With Clare Chapman’s intervention, the draft of *The Book of Resolutions, 2000*, which reflected the same omission, was corrected, and the entire Resolution as amended and adopted is included in the published text.¹⁰ Had these errors and omission not been noted and corrected, it would have been necessary for the Commission to revisit the Resolution again prior to the next General Conference.

There is also a brief epilogue to our story. Early in October 2000, Bishop Roy I. Sano, then President of the General Commission, received the following letter from Walter Kasper, Secretary, Pontificium Consilium ad Christianorum Unitatem Fovendam, Vatican City. In its own way the communication completes the cycle and reunites us with our own past.

⁸And subsequently reported in *The Book of Resolutions, 1996*, 241–42.

⁹Minutes of the General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns, April 8, 1999.

¹⁰E-mail, Clare Chapman to John L. Topolewski, Monday, August 28, 2000, 10:04 AM.

Dear Bishop Sano,

The United States Catholic Bishops' Conference has forwarded to this Pontifical Council a copy of your letter of 31 July 2000 to Bishop Fiorenza, together with the accompanying Resolution of Intent adopted at the United Methodist General Conference 2000.

When the original Resolution of Intent was adopted at the April 1970 General Conference of the United Methodist Church the text, together with letters to Cardinal Willebrands from Professor Outler and from the Secretary of the General Conference, was presented in a bound volume to Pope Paul VI through the then Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity. This fraternal ecumenical gesture was greatly valued both at the time and since. Its significance, indicating as it did the spirit in which Methodist Doctrinal Standards were to be interpreted, was much appreciated. I have no doubt that its effect has been felt in our international dialogue with the World Methodist Council as well as in those countries where the United Methodist Church is present.

The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity was not aware of the omission from the 1970 Book of Resolutions. However, I would like to thank you for not only noting that fact but re-presenting the matter to this year's General Conference.

May I thank the members of the Conference through you for the spirit which motivated this year's discussion just as it lay behind the original pioneering work of Professor Outler and others. I will draw the Holy Father's attention to this renewed Resolution of Intent through the Holy See's Secretariat of State.

With every fraternal good wish,

Yours sincerely in Christ,

+Walter Kasper, Secretary.¹¹

Generating proposed legislation and resolutions for consideration by the General Conference is often not as unencumbered or simple as one might first assume. The entire process, right up to the time prior to the publication and distribution of the decisions reached, must be given careful oversight. Questioning the adequacy of the existing Resolution, researching its history, crafting a renewed Resolution, and monitoring its progress were all part of the task.

¹¹Walter Kasper, Secretary, Pontificium Consilium ad Christianorum Unitatem Fovendam, Vatican City, September 28, 2000, to Bishop Roy I. Sano, Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns, United Methodist Church, 475 Riverside Drive, Room 1300, New York, NY 10115 USA. The letter is quoted in its entirety.