

What is essential in the Christian Religion? Is Protestantism a Positive Principle?

by
Ted Peters

Seventy-five years ago, in 1939, at an early meeting of the Pacific Coast Theological Society, Professor A.J. Ungersma delivered a paper, "What is Essential in the Christian Religion? Is Protestantism a Positive Principle?" This is the title of my paper. In what follows I will attempt to restate Professor Ungersma's central thesis, elaborate on it, and then provide my own answer to the questions he raised.

It will be my thesis that the essence of the Christian religion is pointed to by the doctrine we have come to know as *justification-by-faith*, which is itself an interpretation of the gospel which comes prior. The gospel is the telling of Jesus' story with its significance. One item of definitive significance is that, according to the gospel, the resurrected and living Christ is present--mystically present--in the faith of the believer. This is a Reformation insight; but as a reforming insight it emphasizes a truth that has inspired Christians for two millennia in the Latin, Greek, and Syriac traditions.

Ungersma's Thesis

The answer to the question--what is essential in the Christian religion?--is this: "immediate access of the soul to God" (p.2) Ungersma finds this answer in the discovery of Protestant Reformer Martin Luther accompanied by the interpretation of Luther by Adolf Harnack. Luther tells us, in Ungersma's words, "that man [we] stood to infinite Deity in the closest and most endearing relationship" (p.3). Modified by Harnack, "a new principle of theology has been introduced, viz; that truth revealed in Christ admits of no external proof, but is made the inward possession of the believing mind by the convincing power of the Holy Spirit" (p.3). If you would like to know the essence of the Christian religion, here it is.

Although Luther comes off as a hero, Ungersma does have a complaint to register against Luther's followers. The Wittenberg reformer, unfortunately, affirmed our immediate relation to God by relying upon a theological abstraction, namely, *justification-by-faith*. *Justification-by-faith* is a figure of speech. It is not a theological doctrine or dogma. "Instead of a figure of speech, an adaptation of language for a special end," complains Ungersma, "it was made the

cornerstone of a system of theology by the successors of Luther, and its very significance perverted and lost in the effort to follow out the figure to its logical results" (p.3). In short, Luther himself correctly saw fit to use this figure of speech but subsequent Lutheran orthodoxy codified it into a dogma and drained it of its spiritually nourishing nectar. The post-Reformation period of orthodoxy relied upon the abstract doctrine of justification-by-faith and sacrificed the deep personal experience of realizing the inner relationship of our soul with the divine life.

This to my reading is the thesis advanced at a meeting such as ours three quarters of a century ago. Perhaps we should re-think this thesis as we gather together to remember and renew the work of previous scholars in our society, persons whom we have not met but might benefit from getting to know.

The Protestant Principle: A Path Only Partially Taken

I find it interesting that Ungersma would ask whether or not the Protestant insight might become a "positive principle." This is interesting to me because less than a decade later Paul Tillich would answer *no*, because the Protestant Principle is strictly a negative principle.

Tillich worked with a dialectic between Catholic substance and the Protestant principle. The symbols and practices and beliefs and impact of the Roman Catholic tradition provides the content of the Christian religion. But, as Ungersma fears, in any generation the content of the Christian religion tempts us to one or another form of idolatry--that is, idolatrizing our church or our beliefs or our Bible or whatever and falling short of worshipping the true God. Church products are penultimate, whereas the true God who transcends the church is ultimate.

Similarly aware of the pitfalls within the Christian religion, Tillich appeals to the Protestant principle to render judgment against our idolatry. The Protestants do not bring new content to the Christian religion. Rather, the Protestants bring transcendent judgment against the idolatrous tendencies within the Christian religion. As a critical principle internal to faith, the Protestant principle is reminiscent of the prophets in ancient Israel.

Tillich reminds us that "creedal expressions of the ultimate concern of the community must include their own criticism. It must become obvious in all of them--be they liturgical, doctrinal or ethical expressions of the faith of the community--that they are not ultimate. Rather, their function is to point to the ultimate which is beyond all of them. This is what I call the 'Protestant Principle', the critical element in the expression of the community of faith and consequently the element of doubt in the act of faith."¹ Or, "the Protestant principle...[protests] against the identification of our ultimate concern with any creation of the church."²

A giant step forward taken by Tillich, in my opinion, is his incorporation of doubt into Christian faith proper. He credits the Protestant principle when applying justification-by-faith to the dynamics of faith. "The principle of justification by faith refers not only to the religious-ethical but also to the religious-intellectual life. Not only he who is in sin but also he who is in

¹ Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper, 1957) 29.

² Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (3 Volumes: Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951-1963) 1:37.

doubt is justified through faith. The situation of doubt, even of doubt about God, need not separate us from God. There is faith in every serious doubt, namely, the faith in the truth as such, even if the only truth we can express is our lack of truth."³ What we see here is that Tillich calls justification-by-faith "the Protestant principle," and by this principle he incorporates doubt into the Christian faith in two ways. First, we doubt the finality or ultimacy of the church's products because the truth of God lies transcendent to the church's products. Second, at the level of personal or individual faith, our willingness to doubt the veracity of even our own faith demonstrates a second or underlying faith in the form trust in the truth; and God is truth. In sum, the role of doubt in the Protestant principle denies while affirming our relationship to ultimate reality, the reality of God.

Whereas Tillich writes in the decades following World War II, Ungersma who writes in the pre-war environment simply did not place this self-critical or negative role for the Protestant insight on his agenda. Nevertheless, we find a modest or nascent anticipation of the critical role for the Protestant principle when Ungersma uses it as ammunition against the rigidity of orthodoxy. "The liberal spirit can never die as long as men [we] are born who love Truth and tolerance" (p.5). His "liberal spirit" may reflect more Harnack than Luther, yet Luther would certainly concur. In brief, Ungersma follows this critical path for only a short distance. We must await Tillich to blaze the trail and open it for the rest of us to follow.

Now, I would like to leave the discussion of Tillich and turn toward the essence or core of the Christian faith, namely, the gospel.

The Gospel as Christianity's Essence

The essence of the Christian faith is found in the gospel. I define the *gospel* succinctly as the story of Jesus told with its significance. Without the gospel, there is no church. Telling the story of Jesus is the minimum criterion. The church may not be the only one to tell Jesus' story, to be sure; one could imagine someone outside the church telling the story of Jesus in such a way that the church is bypassed. But, the church must tell Jesus' story or it is not the church.⁴

What is the significance of the story of Jesus? On this matter, rival Christians might differ. I draw out the significance in three ways: new creation, justification, and proclamation. First, the Easter resurrection of Jesus is significant because it constitutes God's promise of an eschatological redemption of all things in the new creation. Second, the atoning work of Jesus is significant because each of us becomes justified when our sins are forgiven and we are personally invited into God's promised new creation. Third, the story of Jesus is good news, so to speak, and this inspires if not mandates proclamation, mission. When we in the church tell the story of Jesus we draw out these three dimensions of significance, and perhaps many more.

³ Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948) x.

⁴ When I use the term *gospel* in the lower case, I refer to the essential message of scripture and tradition. When I use the term *Gospel* in the upper case, I refer to one or more of the four New Testament books: Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John.

The second of these three is justification-by-faith. Because this is what Ungersma centered on and because Luther declared that this doctrine is the one by which the church rises or falls, perhaps we should make this the focus of our continued quest for the essence of the Christian religion. More. Because of Ungersma's positing that the immediate connection between the human soul and God is the essence of the Christian experience, I will turn to an examination of justification-by-faith with this in mind. This takes us to an important theological concept, namely, the indwelling of the living Jesus Christ within the faith of the Christian believer.

Oh! You might object. The doctrine of justification-by-faith is one of those cold tests of orthodoxy with all that forensic language about sin, forgiveness, rightwising, justifying, and stuff that presumes we're in a courtroom with God as the judge. Yuck. Well, it is the case that some in fact use the courtroom image to explicate the significance of Jesus' gospel story. However, justification-by-faith ought not be reduced to the forensic or courtroom metaphor.

The post-Reformation history of justification-by-faith relies on two extended metaphors or models, the forensic or courtroom model and the indwelling of Christ model. The indwelling model relies upon a theological affirmation, namely, the God of grace is present within the soul as the presence of the living Christ in our faith. The doctrine of justification-by-faith may be as abstract as every other theological doctrine, to be sure; yet it points to an existential and ontological reality that makes the difference between being alone and being at one with God, between despair and joy, between death and eternal life.

The Indwelling Presence of Christ in the Person of Faith

Let's start with the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (abbreviated JDDJ).⁵ It began as a joint effort between Lutherans and Roman Catholics, but since its publication in 1999 Presbyterians and Methodists have signed on. If we look at JDDJ §26 we find this: "The justification of sinners is forgiveness of sins and being made righteous by justifying grace, which makes us children of God. In justification the righteous receive from Christ faith, hope, and love and are thereby taken into communion with him." Communion? Yes, communion. This relationship between the person of faith and the indwelling Christ is frequently overlooked in discussions of justification. Yet, it is decisive. "Christ is not outside but dwells within us," says John Calvin.⁶ This is not figurative language. It is literal. If one must appeal to mysticism to make the indwelling model coherent, then so be it.

Let's go back behind JDDJ to Martin Luther for an additional moment. Faith is not simply an act of belief. Rather, it is a grasping of the indwelling Christ itself; or, in reverse, faith

⁵ The *Joint Document on the Doctrine of Justification* by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church, 1999. See web version:

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html.

⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), edited by John T. McNeill, *Library of Christian Classics* XX, XXI (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960) III:24, 1:570.

is being grasped by Christ. Luther likens Christ's presence to paint on a wall. "Faith takes hold of Christ...He is the form that adorns and informs faith as color does a wall." Luther stumbles for words. Faith "takes hold of Christ in such a way that Christ is the object of faith, or rather not the object but, so to speak, the One who is present in the faith itself."⁷

Luther then turns mystical: "Therefore, faith justifies because it takes hold of and possesses this treasure, the present Christ. But how He is present--this is beyond our thought; for there is darkness...Where the confidence of the heart is present, therefore, there Christ is present, in that very cloud of faith."⁸ This allusion to the *Cloud of Unknowing* does not in itself place Luther into the same camp with garden variety medieval mystics. Luther is not joining a club or a school of mystical thought. Rather, he is struggling to make the point that "the Holy Spirit places the resurrected Christ into the life of the person of faith. Luther's view differs radically from the mystics in that the recovery of true humanity is attained *not through the deification of man, but through the humanity of God.*"⁹

If Ungersma is looking for a formulation of the soul's immediate relation to God, here it is. The Holy Spirit places the resurrected Christ in the faith of the believer. No longer do we walk alone. We walk daily with Christ present in our faith, with the risen and eternal and ever living Christ present in our faith. This is certainly not new with the Reformation; rather, it is a reiteration of the ancient biblical gospel with a renewed emphasis, namely, this is the center of the Christian faith.

The Non-Mystical Forensic Model vs. the Mystical Indwelling Model

Luther appreciated the mystical tradition he inherited, but his theology of indwelling depends more upon his own particular experience than it does generic mysticism. "Luther's reflections on the condition of a justified sinner reckon with a world beyond the historical and the objective, experiences as the Presence of the mystical Christ," writes Bengt Hoffman. "Through the mystical experience--prayer included--the non-rational is infused into the rational....The inspiration for such reflection is mystical and therefore trans-logical. In this sense the criteria of scientific knowledge must be inadequate for theological reflection."¹⁰ Third person abstract discourse at the level of theology must be founded on first person internal experience or second person I-Thou experience.

Regen Prenter proffered that divine presence in faith explains how justification-by-faith is effective. Without Christ's indwelling, the forensic model becomes nothing more than an

⁷ Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians* of 1535, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, Vols. 1-30, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing Company, 1955-1967; Vols. 31-55, edited by Helmut T. Lehmann, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1955-1986; W, 26: 129.

⁸ Ibid., 26: 130.

⁹ Hans Joachim Iwand, "The Righteousness of Faith According to Luther," *Lutheran Quarterly*, XXI: 1 (Spring 2007) 50, author's italics.

¹⁰ Bengt R. Hoffman, *Luther and the Mystics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976) 220.

abstract idea, a nice theological thought. "The doctrine of justification in its extreme forensic form threatened to become an abstract doctrine, which operated by the weight of the law, and which made Christ a mere idea."¹¹ But, in faith, Christ is more than an idea, more than a theological doctrine. Christ is a living presence. "For Luther the work of the Holy Spirit always means a relationship to the truly present crucified and risen Christ."¹² Before the indwelling Christ can become an abstract theological model, it is an I-Thou relationship.

Prenter's agenda is taken up and expanded by the New School of Luther Research at the University of Helsinki in Finland. The Finns stress the importance of Christ dwelling within the person of faith. "Faith means the presence of Christ and thus participation in the divine life," writes Tuomo Mannermaa. "Christ 'is in us' and 'remains in us'. The life that the Christian now lives is, in an ontologically real manner, Christ himself."¹³ Our heart invites the living Christ into our soul; and, curiously, we then discover Christ has already been there.

Wolfhart Pannenberg, among others, elects to join the indwelling caucus. He complains that the forensic model is much weaker than the real-presence model. Whereas the indwelling of Christ--sealed for eternity in us by baptism--is secure, the external forensic judgment must logically be repeated again and again. This repetitive requirement leaves the sinner insecure in God's grace. "If the forensic justification is separated from the basic intuition of 'mystical' participation in Christ by faith, then a peculiar *actualism* (or *extrinsicism*) results: We must accept the promise of divine forgiveness again and again, because we slide back into sin again and again. The shift toward such actualism occurred as early as in Melancthon, whose rational sobriety had little access to the more profound mystical roots of Luther's thought. It vitiated the function of baptism (as constituting a continuous new life in Christ), because in spite of baptism sinfulness remains and divine forgiveness is needed again and again."¹⁴ The indwelling model relies upon mystical presence, whereas the forensic model does not.

In defense of advocates of forensic justification, they do not intend to leave the person of faith in the insecure position described by Pannenberg. Pannenberg's criticism of the forensic position may be excessive. Nevertheless, Pannenberg is correct in showing how the forensic model fails to embrace all that can be found in the indwelling model. Might we be able to interpret the forensic model as a once for all occurrence that provides comfort for the sinner before God? God's Word is eternal, so God's pronouncement of our forgiveness is an eternal pronouncement. If this is what the forensicist intends, then Pannenberg's criticism of actualism would miss the mark.

¹¹ Regin Prenter, *Spiritus Creator* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1944, 1953), 63.

¹² *Ibid.*, 28.

¹³ Tuomo Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith: Luther's View of Justification* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2005) 39. At least one critic says "the key problem in the Finnish interpretation...is that of being and act, or essence and attributes." Duncan Reid, "Luther's *Finnlandisierung*: A Recent Debate about Salvation in Reformation Thought," *Sin and Salvation*, ed. by Duncan Reid and Mark Worthing (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2003) 200. For the Finnish position on real presence to succeed, says Reid, the essence of God must be isomorphic with the Trinity; because Christ is present to the person of faith by the Holy Spirit. There must be an "identity of God's inner Trinitarian being with God's Trinitarian actions *ad extra*," 201.

¹⁴ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Christian Spirituality* (Louisville KY: Westminster Press, 1983) 21, Pannenberg's italics.

We ask: is the forensic model compatible with what Luther himself says? No, and yes. On the one hand, because Christ is actually present in the person of faith, it would not be accurate to describe the event of justification as strictly *extra nos*, as outside of us. Christ is inside, not outside. On the other hand, it is the righteousness of Christ and not ours that defines us as justified; so speaking of *iustitia aliena* or alien justice fits Luther.

Could we combine the two models? Suppose we draw a mental picture that looks like the following. In the divine courtroom, you and I as the sinner serve as the defendant. The evidence of our injustice is presented. The case is clear: we are guilty. At the moment the judge is ready to lower the gavel, however, the judge looks at the defendant's box. What the judge sees is the innocent Christ, not us. When the gavel comes down, we are declared innocent, acquitted. Our innocence is the gift of the present Christ. This declaration is final. We cannot be tried a second time.

Because the person of Christ is present in the person of faith, the so-called *Happy Exchange* takes place. "By this fortunate exchange with us He took upon Himself our sinful person and granted us His innocent and victorious Person."¹⁵ Or, in Calvin's words, the "indwelling of Christ in our hearts--in short, that mystical union--...so that Christ, having been made ours, makes us sharers with him in the gifts with which he has been endowed."¹⁶ Within the human soul an exchange takes place: Christ's salvation replaces our condemnation. Christ's innocence becomes our innocence. Christ's resurrection unto everlasting life becomes our resurrection to eternal life.

One more thought. Does justification-by-faith apply solely to the individual baptized person? Or, does it apply communally to the Church as well? The phrase justification-by-faith, according to Michael Welker, applies to both. "God gives human beings faith, in which they--both individually and communally--enter into relationship with God."¹⁷ Both as individuals and as a church we enjoy a close relationship with God, the God who transcends our human productions yet abides with us. It takes doubt; it takes the Protestant principle; it takes self-criticism to realize that the true God who is present transcends our images, practices, and even our theological concepts including justification-by-faith itself.

The Indwelling Christ and Love of Neighbor

Not everyone within Christendom is going to agree with Luther that justification-by-faith is the essence of the Christian religion. Justification-by-faith must be included in the essence, to be sure; yet there is more. In addition to justification, we must include sanctification. In addition to the presence of the living Christ in faith, the sinner must be transformed, sanctified, made holy. This is what Luther's critics say. Let's look at this dispute for a moment.

¹⁵ Luther, LW, 26: 284.

¹⁶ Calvin, *Inst.*, III:10, 1:737.

¹⁷ Michael Welker, *What Happens in Holy Communion?* (Grand Rapids MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000) 173.

In "The Decree on Justification" issued on January 13, 1547, the Council of Trent described justification as both an event and a process: believers are both declared righteous due to the work of Christ and also engage in the process of actually becoming righteous through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. However, for Trent, the latter comes before the former. Regeneration along with sanctification precede justification, so to speak. "Justification of the sinner may be briefly defined as a translation from that state to which a human being is born a child of the first Adam, to the state of grace and of the adoption of the sons of God through the second Adam, Jesus Christ our Savior." This means we as sinners actually become just before we can be declared just. In order to avoid ambiguity, in Canon 11 Trent makes clear what is being rejected. Trent condemns anyone who teaches that justification takes place "either by the sole imputation of the righteousness of Christ or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of grace and charity...or that the grace by which we are justified is only the goodwill of God." For Tridentine Catholics, the term *justification* includes what Protestants think of as both justification and sanctification.

As we saw above, Calvin, like Luther, joined the indweller caucus. Christ is actually present in the faith of the believer. However, Calvin thought of this a bit differently from Luther let alone Philip Melancthon. Christ's indwelling emits a "double grace," Calvin claimed. In addition to a declaration of justification *coram Deo*, Christ's presence becomes the power of the Holy Spirit for transformation. The first grace leads to a forensic declaration of justification. The second grace leads to a renewing or transforming work of sanctification. Reformed theologians, following Calvin, place both justification and sanctification as sub-doctrines under the more inclusive doctrine of reconciliation. Reconciliation includes both justification and sanctification. For a sinner to be reconciled with God, both declarative justification and effective sanctification are required.

Following Trent and accompanied by sympathies with Calvin, Alister McGrath objects to the Lutheran party on the grounds that this sixteenth century position deviates from the classical Christian commitment. According to Augustine and the tradition, argues McGrath, *justification* means that the sinful person becomes transformed, turned from being sinful into being righteous. But, to McGrath's chagrin, Luther's followers apparently deny this classical commitment. The Lutheran position "marks a complete break with the teaching of the church up to that point. From the time of Augustine onward, justification had been understood to refer to both the event of being declared righteous and the process of being made righteous. Melancthon's concept of forensic justification diverged radically from this understanding."¹⁸ Now, let us ask: does this

¹⁸ McGrath, "Justification," OER, 4:364. Alister McGrath contends that the Reformation truncated the Pauline meaning of 'justification' and, thereby, left out much that is important in the Christian message. "The *concept of justification* and the *doctrine of justification* must be carefully distinguished," writes McGrath. "The *concept of justification* is one of many employed within the Old and New Testaments, particularly the Pauline corpus, to describe God's saving action toward his people. It cannot lay claim to exhaust, nor adequately characterize in itself, the richness of the biblical understanding of salvation in Christ." Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification from 1500 to the Present Day* (2 Volumes: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 1:2, McGrath's italics.

critique elicit fear and trembling among Lutherans? No, not at all. Neither the forensicist nor the indwelling caucuses within the Lutheran party are intimidated by the complaints of Trent, Calvinists, or McGrath. Lutherans, no less than other Christians, press the believer forward toward works of love.

Even though justification is for sinners, sinners respond in love. JDDJ §37. "We confess together that good works -- a Christian life lived in faith, hope and love -- follow justification and are its fruits. When the justified live in Christ and act in the grace they receive, they bring forth, in biblical terms, good fruit. Since Christians struggle against sin their entire lives, this consequence of justification is also for them an obligation they must fulfill. Thus both Jesus and the apostolic Scriptures admonish Christians to bring forth the works of love." Yes, indeed, both Lutherans and Catholics along with Calvinists and Methodists too will together stress that the justified believer should embody St. Paul's "faith active in Love" (Galatians 5:1).

The life of love links justification with sanctification. "Justification and sanctification differ insofar as Paul develops the idea of justification in the context of conversion and the genesis of faith, while, when speaking about sanctification, he directs his attention to leading a Christian life."¹⁹ Here, the Lutherans add a slight cynical accent, distinguishing between sanctification for the lover and authentic love aimed at the beloved. Love, by Christian definition, is not self-serving. Love orients itself to the needs of the neighbor, not the lover. Jesus' own self-sacrifice and even self-emptying (kenosis in Philippians 2) becomes the model for the follower of Jesus. If this is the nature of love, then a true disciple ought not march on a path toward self-improvement, self-sanctification, self-perfection. A selfless orientation in love contradicts a purposeful attempt to make oneself holy. Although Lutherans use the word *sanctification*, they don't mean it. What Lutherans emphasize is love of neighbor for the sake of the neighbor, not for their own purification or moral self-improvement.

This is subtle, but more than any other point it distinguishes the Lutheran position from all others, Roman Catholic as well as Reformed. For the Lutheran, love of neighbor is for the sake of the neighbor and solely for the sake of the neighbor. Loving the neighbor does not have as its purpose defining the person doing the loving as a loving person. To press neighbor love (*Nächstenliebe*) into the service of sanctifying the person of faith prostitutes otherwise disinterested love. It makes love of neighbor into a means for a selfish spiritual end rather than an end in itself. The neighbor, as the beneficiary of the Christian's love, is the moral end. There is no further end. The Christian's sanctification cannot in itself be the moral end that makes neighbor love a means. This would be contradictory. If a Christian believer is already justified-by-faith, then he or she does not need sanctification to enjoy a blessed relationship with the God of grace. To my reading, no other Christian sub-tradition gets this.

¹⁹ *The Biblical Foundations of the Doctrine of Justification: An Ecumenical Follow-Up to the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justificatio,"* presented by a task force from the Lutheran World Federation, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, the World Communion of Reformed Churches, and the World Methodist Council (New York: Paulist Press, 2012) 75.

Lutherans did not discover this tension between sanctification and disinterested love for the first time, to be sure. They inherited it from insightful ascetics in medieval Europe. For faith to be active in love, the benefits are for those who are loved, not the lovers.

Conclusion

So far we have polled, so to speak, the Latin tradition within the Christian religion: Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and non-Lutheran Protestants on the essence of the Christian faith. What might happen if we include the other two grand traditions of the Christian religion, the Orthodox and Syriac? If we would confront a worldwide ecumenical assembly of Christian representatives with the challenge to agree on the essence of the Christian religion, we could safely forecast a chaotic cacophony of diverse emphases. At least at first. But, if the Holy Spirit would visit with a moment of unifying grace, perhaps a single strong witness to the God of grace revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ might become the church's product.