

# REFORMED WORLD

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## Unity of the Spirit in the Bond of Peace

The Uniting General  
Council of the  
World Communion of  
Reformed Churches

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## Editorial

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It was not an easy thing to find a theme for the Uniting General Council in 2010, when WARC and REC will form a new body the World Communion of Reformed Churches. The two core callings of the WCRC had to be expressed in the theme: the call to be a communion and the call to covenant for justice.

After a long process of searching the theme was found in Ephesians 4: “Unity of the Spirit in the bond of Peace”. This theme will be the guideline in the preparation for the Council in 2010 and during the gathering itself.

The context of the theme, Ephesians 4, is rich in explaining the meaning of the words of the theme itself. It will help in developing further the two core callings communion and justice.

This issue of Reformed World is centred on this theme “Unity of the Spirit in the bond of Peace”. In eleven articles the theme will be exposed in exegetical, theological, ethical and practical ways. The authors together give a thorough commentary on the theme in all its implications. Critical comments on the theme and its choice will also be found. As well as a careful understanding of the meaning of unity. In that sense it will be a background for the process of unification itself. The World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Reformed Ecumenical Council are both aware of the benefits the formation of the new body will bring but also of the risk such a merger could imply.

The authors of the articles do come from the networks of the two organisations. So they give the rich variety of both constituencies. That variety will be part of the World Communion of Reformed Churches itself. Out of the traditions of two organisations a new communion will take shape. For this the two words of the theme, unity and peace, should be in balance. The diversity of opinions will enrich the communion.

We hope that with this issue about the theme of the Uniting General Council the preparation for that meeting will receive good inspiration but that this issue will also contribute to the challenging formation of the World Communion of Reformed Churches.

**Douwe Visser**



# Ephesians 4, the context of a Theme

Douwe Visser\*

*The theme for the Uniting Council of WARC and REC has its context in Ephesians 4. Douwe Visser explains how the two keywords of the theme, unity and peace, are also the keywords of Ephesians 4. His article makes clear how the two core callings of the WCRC - communion and justice - have a biblical background in this passage.*

New Testament scholars are not of common opinion, that Paul is the author of the epistle to the Ephesians. That is however of no importance for us at our level of working with a theme and with sub themes from Ephesians 4, as we will do at the General Council in 2010, where WARC and REC will unite to form the World Communion of Reformed Churches.

Ephesians 4 is a rich passage. Full of themes and sub themes, full of biblical references, full of theological and ethical insights. It is not difficult to have this passage as a good background for working out the core themes of the coming General Council: Communion and Justice. Chapter 4 is built up with four paragraphs:

- a. Unity of the church and its ground (vs. 1-6)
- b. The gift of grace (vs. 7-16)
- c. To be renewed in the Spirit and the clothing with the new self (vs. 17-24)
- d. Consequences of the renewal in the Spirit (vs. 25-31)

In the first paragraph (1-6) Paul starts with calling himself a prisoner in the Lord<sup>1</sup>. This is not only a reference to the actual situation of being imprisoned; it also carries weight

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<sup>1</sup> I use the New Revised Standard Version.

since the apostle shares the suffering of Christ. It is a basis for his authority. His plea for unity begins with begging to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called. This makes the following plea for unity more than something specific for an actual situation of an individual congregation. The plea for unity has to do with something the church is *called* to do. And if we regard unity as one of the basic elements of communion we could say, that the church is *called* to be a communion.

The life worthy of the calling Paul specifies in several ways. The first is to lead a life with all *humility*. For this in Greek a word is used which has in classical Greek literature a negative meaning. It is regarded as a soft word, not advisable for self-conscious citizens. However, already in Jewish tradition, especially Qumran, this word gets a positive understanding as expressing the specific piety of the poor, which sets an example for all. Christian tradition takes over this positive connotation. It becomes a word earmarking the specific attitude of serving one another, as Christ has served us.

All words, from 'humility' to 'bearing with one another in love' have to do with Paul's plea to lead a life worthy of the calling. The climax of that comes in vs. 3 with his final and inclusive plea to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. So these words first of all are a call for the church. Three words are very essential: unity, Spirit, peace. It is also very essential to keep them together. If we see our call as a call to be a communion we will have a thorough understanding of what it is to be a communion if we see it - as expressed by our theme - as unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. In this the 'unity of the Spirit' expresses itself as unity in diversity. Paul explains that in what follows after the centrepiece in vs. 3. He does that in various ways but very important is vs. 5 where he speaks of 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism'. In Greek the three 'ones' are male, female and neutral. The whole (grammatical) gender perspective! Another beautiful expression of the rich diversity of the unity is found when Paul says, that we have unity since we have 'one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all'. The so often used word 'all' is of course very inclusive. It seems to exclude no one. It even surpasses the limits of the church (or the churches). And the words 'above, through, in' do express the rich diversity of how God acts. No one, at least not in the communion, is excluded from making God present.

In our theme 'Unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace' the first part, 'unity of the Spirit', plays the prominent role in our first calling to be a communion. The second part, 'in the bond of peace', has a more prominent role in our second calling to be committed to justice. We can see this when we look at the second and following paragraphs of Ephesians 4. The second paragraph starts with the word 'grace' and the 'gift of grace'. The gift of grace to us was given to us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Who are the 'us' to who grace is given? There is discussion whether all or just specific office bearers are meant, since Paul

speaks in vs. 11 of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers who are given to equip the saints for the work of ministry. However the explanatory quotation from Psalm 68:18 in vs. 8 speaks of 'gifts to his people'. So the gift of grace is a general gift. It is given to the measure of Christ's gift. In the communion to which we are called men and women have the gift of grace and it is Christ who is the giver and so with our gifts of grace we are *together in Christ*. Vs. 8 explains more about this. It is a quotation from Psalm 68:18 but not a strict literal one. However Paul speaks with this quotation about the victory of Christ over the destructive powers which means there is no obstacle anymore for handing out the gifts of grace so that there can be a communion through the gifts of grace. And out of these general gifts of grace there are the specific gifts of apostles etc. as we find in vs. 11.

The objective of the gift of Christ is first of all to build up the body of Christ even up to 'the measure of the full stature of Christ'. To be a communion is an ongoing process, which both in quantity and in quality does not come to an end before the measure of the full stature of Christ has been reached. Here the link comes with the second part of the theme 'Unity of the Spirit *in the bond of peace*' because it speaks about the peace of Christ which is also a dynamic process leading to a full stature. For the peace of Christ only comes to its full stature when it has brought full reconciliation and an end to all hostility (see Ephesians 2 vs. 16).

However in this ongoing process we are called to work in our actual context of life. Paul explains what we should not do and what we should do. We must no longer be children tossed to and fro by people's trickery (4:14). For 'trickery' in Greek a word is used which means 'playing dice'. Paul may have in mind in vs. 14 that we should stay firm in doctrine but it doesn't go too far if for example we say, that we should also stand firm in opposition towards modern speculative global economy which brings profit to some and loss to many. That also is dice play (trickery) by which we should not be blown about. And of course the 'craftiness in deceitful scheming' of which the end of vs. 14 speaks is also not difficult to apply in the call to justice!

The often-used metaphor of the *body* of Christ with him as the head has been worked out in Ephesians 4 in a new way when Paul (vs. 16) speaks about this body 'joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped'. This makes it very dynamic since in a body the ligaments are there to make and keep the body moving. The movement of this body lies in what Paul calls speaking the truth in love. These last words can also be applied to one of the dynamics of the call to justice: let it also be speaking the truth in love. And of course a bond of peace also means speaking the truth in love.

The third paragraph (vs. 17-24) speaks of a confrontation with the world of the Gentiles. Today we cannot simply apply this to the context we live in. We should not think of a simple

confrontation between Christians and Gentiles. The communion we are called to be, should be open for seeking allies as wide as the world is. However as open as the communion should be, there can be no misunderstanding that there are ways of living so alienated from the life of God (vs. 18) that we should speak out against this alienation. The positive side of this confrontation is what Paul calls clothing ourselves with the new self (vs. 24). These cloths are true righteousness and holiness<sup>2</sup> and they are created according to the likeness of God. What it means we see in the fourth and final paragraph where there is a sort of a catalogue of what has to be put away and what has to be done. Remarkable is vs. 28 where it is said, that thieves must give up stealing; rather they should labour and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have to share something with the needy. Justice means: to earn and to share!

Finally Paul makes it clear that unity in the Spirit in the bond of peace also implies a communion of forgiveness both in forgiving and being forgiven. Right then we are also together in Christ as God in Christ has forgiven us. It is a joy to be a communion in Christ

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<sup>2</sup> For righteousness Greek has *dikaïosunè* which is the common word for justice.



# Making every effort to maintain the Unity

Mary Mikhael\*

*Reading Ephesians 4 it becomes clear, that every effort must be made to maintain the unity. Mary Mikhael makes clear, that God has entrusted the church with a mission of reconciliation. There may be no barriers that separate us.*

The theme “Unity of the Spirit in the Bond of Peace” for the General Council of the World Communion of Reformed Churches in 2010 is timely and very appropriate. Like Paul who uses it as an appeal to the church in Ephesus, this must be a renewed call to the reformed churches in the world, and also to the church of God in general. The church today must indeed make every effort to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. Not only because the church is in the world to make a difference, and to provide it with a more humane alternative, but also to be in accordance with the will of its Lord Jesus the Christ.

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## Jesus' prayer for unity

No Bible reader, who cares to discover the will of God for the life of the church in the world, can for a moment forget the prayer of Jesus when he was on his way to the cross. Obviously Jesus wanted to disclose to his disciples the mystery of his mission in creating for them a new community. It is essential to John that the disciples comprehend the will of their master, not only for their immediate life but also for this ever-growing community.

Jesus prayed for the disciples: "Holy Father, keep them in thy name, which thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are one." (John 17:11)<sup>1</sup> And for the church to come, Jesus prayed: "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their words, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one." (John 17:20-22).

The unity of the church is desired by Jesus and prayed for. The model of this unity has its archetype in the unity of the Son with the Father. The purpose of it is that the world would believe in Christ through the church. But also witness to the fact that Jesus was sent by the Father. It is surely based on their being in Christ and the Father.

John seems to place such a great responsibility on the shoulders of the church. The world has to and needs to believe in Christ - the words of the church must be convincing to the non-believers, and such conviction is witnessed through the church being in Christ and also being united.

## The purpose for the church

Reading the Epistle where the theme is taken from, one cannot help but be overwhelmed by the same marvel that grips the author's mind and heart, that is the mystery of "God's purpose in Christ for the church". In Christ, God has disclosed his eternal and ultimate purpose in creation and the significance of the church in that purpose. Indeed the church is present for a purpose that is to be the agent by which God brings his purpose to realization.

After having written the first three chapters, the author could urge the believers to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. The author writes to a community, which brings together two different extremes that originally go in the opposite directions and have no

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<sup>1</sup> Scripture quotations from Revised Standard Version.

meeting point: the Jews and the Gentiles. There always was a division of humanity between Jews and Gentiles. Now they are being made into one body: how marvellous; how strange; what a miracle? All of this!

Paul, the author of Ephesians, who was grounded in the traditions of his fathers, fanatic to death in protecting the purity of the faith of his Fathers, stands in amazement. He looks at the barrier of the dividing wall being broken down, the enmity being abolished, and the two groups being made into one community. This is incomprehensible to Paul, beyond his ability to assimilate. However, Paul was able to create this amazing reality with joy once to him was made known in all wisdom and insight the mystery of God's will, according to God's purpose which God set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him. (Ephesians 1:9) "That is how the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel." (Ephesians 3:6) "For he is our peace who made us both one..." (Ephesians 2:14). For this reason Paul "bows his knees before the Father, and has never ceased being astonished, and in utter amazement at the purpose of God, not only for the whole creation but particularly for the church. Indeed one cannot read Ephesians and not feel gripped, like Paul, by the mystery of God's purpose for all creation. Max Turner comments on this: "Ephesians is breathtaking in its theological grasp of the scope of God's purpose in Christ for the church."<sup>2</sup>

What God has done in Christ surpasses all human understanding: a reconciliation with double faces. Firstly, through the cross of Jesus, Jews and Gentiles were reconciled, the old division of humanity into Jew and Gentile has been overcome, and thus God created "one new man in place of the two" (Ephesians 2:15). Secondly, the older alienation of humankind from God surmounted too<sup>3</sup>. In Christ now, the universe is able to be refreshed, and enjoys a reconciled relationship with its creator.

### **Every effort to maintain the unity**

In Christ the church is being made to be the agent of this reconciliation to come to completion. This is a very awesome and majestic vision for the church. What a wonderful state of being! What a great responsibility the church is entrusted with. For Paul himself to be included in the plan of God was a miracle beyond comprehension, but also "that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities

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<sup>2</sup> Max Turner, *New Bible Commentary, Twenty-first Century Edition, Ephesians*, 1222.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

and powers in heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose which he has realized in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 3:10-11). If we have such a God, who has given himself for our life and for the life of the world, what good reasons ever good enough to us apart, divided and separated from each other.

Ephesians Chapter 4 is quite a significant admonition to the church of all ages. Paul who has been made “to know the mystery of the will of God” (Ephesians 1:9): that those who were aliens, strangers to the covenants of promise, without hope, without Christ, without God in the world, have been brought near by the blood of Christ, for he is their peace, and in his flesh they have been made with the people of the covenants into one.

The believers, the church must grow together into maturity, “until all... come to the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God... to the measure of the full structure of Christ”.

The call of the church according to Paul is that, in the light of the oneness of the spirit which created this community, its response is to work hard, and make every effort to maintain this unity in the bond of peace. The church must watch out, keep guard, resolve difficulties, and remove away anything that may threaten its unity of the spirit that has created us.

So then, for us being the church is a call from God and our unity is a gift of the spirit of God - being made what we are was possible because there is *one* body, *one* spirit, *one* hope, *one* Lord, *one* faith, *one* Baptism, *one* God and Father of all.

Paul has been consistent in his understanding of the nature of the church - a body with many members all united in the one spirit. And thus the task of the church is to guard this unity imparted into it by the spirit. And the means, by which the unity is preserved, is surely the bond of peace, which was proclaimed through the reconciliation made through the cross of Jesus. Peace now is available as the cross destroyed the enmity that got us out of Eden from the presence of God.

The Epistle to the Ephesians is a Christian document that challenges the church of today to examine its faithfulness and obedience to the will of God made clear in Jesus the Christ. “Unity of the spirit in the bond of peace” is the call of the church and its vocation as well. Indeed it must be worked for, promoted, protected, and maintained. Our unity is the gift of the Holy Spirit - the basis of our being a community. The Holy Spirit works in us, and through us, but never despite us. This is the reason why the author of Ephesians begs his readers to be eager and to make every effort to maintain this unity. So it is obvious that we can lose our sense of unity when we deviate our focus away from Jesus. And when we think that we contain the truth of God rather than being contained by the truth of God. Indeed we

lose our sense of unity when we build barriers that separate us from our brothers and sisters rather than erect bridges that connect us to each other in the one faith, in the one God who redeemed and restored our humanity to his own image. If our minds are not shaped by the truth of the word of God, it is a sign of our immaturity and of us being infants rather than grown ups and mature in the Lord. Our sin keeps us apart, but our love brings us together. Our love motivates us to stretch our hand out to all those who share in our one faith.

## **A mission of reconciliation**

Surely the church of the Reformed traditions knows that God's call for unity does not mean uniformity but creativity and variety of gifts. The church is a living organism continuously growing - a rainbow of harmonious colours. All start at one point of the horizon and reach the same point at the other end. We are made into a community by the spirit of God and we look up to the one who is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith Jesus the Christ (Hebrews 12:2).

So we must work hard to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. "Bond of Peace", peace in us, peace in our churches, peace with other churches, all is done in peace because "He is our Peace". And Christ who is our peace urges us to work for peace in a world broken by arrogance, violence, and excessive use of power, poverty, oppression, and lack of justice. This reality must move our hearts to do everything possible to correct such situation - if we are united we can make a difference.

Indeed the church of Christ is to provide the world with more humane alternative to its chaos. The church may not be able to change the world but it must challenge it. A divided church, a self-righteous church, a fragmented church can never challenge the world. A church that lacks peace can never be an instrument of peace.

The church of the reformed traditions in particular, being a body that experienced reformation is required to challenge the world. Can the church remain silent watching the violence against humanity and our environment? Can we keep silent watching the excessive use of power against the powerless and the marginalized in our world? Can we keep silent when oppression and poverty seem to overwhelm the majority of people in our world? Can we be silent watching the injustice ruling the world? Surely we can but we must not be silent. To make our voice be heard we better be in unity of the spirit.

Indeed the church is entrusted with the mission of reconciliation. It is sent with the good news for all people. It must be an instrument to help break down every barrier of race,

culture, social status, colour, language, and help make the rainbow of all God's people. When united it can provide the model.

But the church that is united with the bond of peace must also be an instrument of peace in the world. Peace which is much more than the absence of war. The peace which is the well being of all human beings. The church must work for and pursue the peace, which is associated with righteousness. The peace which is all good. This peace is surely made by God as it embraces justice and righteousness and connects us all to the heart of God.

The call of the church is to maintain its unity in the bond of peace and always keep in mind that the perfect bond is that of love.

# Rejection of Division

Dr Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Van Huffel\*

*Christians should experience unity through sharing the mind of Christ. Mary-Anne Plaatjies-van Huffel reflects on the sevenfold unity of the church: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. Christians should be peacemakers. Because they believe in the Sovereignty of God over the whole creation Christians should reject division.*

“Eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”  
*Ephesians 4:3 (Revised Standard Version)*

“Do your best to preserve the unity which the Spirit gives by means of the peace that binds you together.”  
*Ephesians 4: 3 (Good News Bible)*

“Be eager and strive to earnestly to guard and keep the harmony and oneness of (and produced by) the Spirit in the binding power of peace.”  
*Ephesians 4:3 (Amplified Bible)*

“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”  
*Ephesians 4:3 (New International Version)*

## The evidence of unity

Paul as “prisoner of the Lord” (2 Timothy 1:8, Ephesians 3:1, Philemon 1:9,) entreated his readers to live lives “worthy of their calling”: (Philemon 1:27, Colossians 1:10, 1 Thessalonians 2:12, 3 John 6).<sup>1</sup> The date of Ephesians belongs to the apostle’s imprisonment

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<sup>1</sup> RW Dale, *Lectures on the Ephesians* (Hodde and Stoughton, London 1897), 261-270.

in Rome, AD 60-61. Paul was imprisoned for the sake of Christ. The apostle does not dwell in his suffering, but rather urge his readers to maintain the *unity of the spirit in the bond of peace*. This *unity of the spirit in the bond of peace* is accessible only to those who have believed in Jesus Christ. Paul stresses that his apostleship is by the will of God.<sup>2</sup> His message comes with divine authority.

In Ephesians 4:3 Paul exhorted his readers to preserve the ecclesiastical concord through a *bond of peace*. The concord to be preserved is *the unity of the Spirit* (1 Peter 3:8). “*Unity in the spirit*” means literally to be of the same mind and refers to the unity which Christians should experience through sharing the mind of Christ. This unity is not mere external uniformity, but is rather an inward agreement. This unity is to be maintained by a bond, which consists of peace. Paul entreated his readers on God’s behaviour to live in a way befitting their calling. There is no distinction between those who are Jews or Gentiles. This unity is exemplified in the unity of the Father and the Son. The purpose of the maintenance of the *unity of the spirit in the bond of peace* is to lead others to faith. Unity must be evident to the world so that the world can recognize it as a source.

Paul is writing to the *saints and believers* in Christ who are in Ephesus (Ephesians 2:11-12). The word *saint* is not a description of what they are like but of what God has done to them.<sup>3</sup> It indicates that they have been set apart for God and made pure and holy for his service. He marvels at the grace of God who brought into being a united church consisting of people from different cultural backgrounds. The Gentiles were classed by the Jews as “uncircumcised”. “Uncircumcised” was in the Old Testament the equivalent of being outside God’s covenant with Israel (Isaiah 9:28). The Jews behave with a conscious superiority over other races which were regarded as lesser breeds without law. Paul therefore appealed to them to maintain the *unity of the spirit in the bond of peace*. In Christ both Jews and Gentiles lost their ethnic and cultural identity and are exhorted in Ephesians 4:3 to maintain the *unity of the spirit in the bond of peace*. Both Jews and Gentiles received in Christ a place in the body of Christ. The idea of the church as body of Christ has parallels elsewhere (Ephesians 1:22-23, Ephesians 4:15). Christ as Prince of Peace is the head of the body. God’s righteousness is provided in Christ through faith and is available for all (including the Jews and Gentiles) who believe through faith in Jesus Christ. The blood of Christ was for the Gentiles as well as for the Jews.

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<sup>2</sup> T. Abeyemo (ed) *African Bible Commentary A one volume Commentary* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids), 1426.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 1426.



## Reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles

In Christ Jews and Gentiles form a new race that has access to God. The Jewish Christians had often been loath to admit Gentiles into the church except via Judaism. Paul therefore stressed that salvation in Christ is freely given to all those - whether Jew or Gentile - who accept Christ. Jews regarded Gentiles as dogs. Christ reconciled both Gentile and Jew to God through His suffering on the cross. All inequality between the two groups, between races, classes, cultures, sexes, as far as their standing before God is concerned, has ceased. The believers from the Gentiles for the greater part, had been strangers and aliens in Ephesus (Ephesians 2:19). Paul declared that they were no longer to be considered mere foreigners, aliens or sojourners. They were no longer regarded as people without full citizen rights. On the contrary they were according to Paul fellow-citizens. The church is not to be divided into classes, racial groups and cultures. The terms of admission to the church are the same: faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul declares that these former Gentiles are now members of the household of the Lord (Ephesians 2:19)<sup>4</sup>. The theme of the church's oneness in spite of barriers of race, culture, class should be emphasized. The church should strive to maintain the *unity of the spirit in the bond of peace*. The Gentiles position changed from underprivileged to heirs of the kingdom of God. It changed from aliens to maintainers of the *unity of the spirit in the bond of peace*.

In Ephesians 4: 3 Paul discusses the unity of all believers in Christ. Both Jews and Gentiles were saved through the blood of Christ and through Him have their access to one Spirit and to the Father (Ephesians 2:13, 18). Through Christ's reconciling work on the cross He brought both Jews and Gentiles into God's family (Ephesians 4:6). In this family of God all barriers of race, culture and social status are broken down. (Ephesians 4, Galatians 3:28-29).

The *unity of the spirit* is to be maintained in a *bond of peace*. The Spirit produces a certain oneness in faith, in repentance, in knowledge, in worldview. The bond is a peace-loving spirit. The spirit lays more stress on those points upon which Christians agree than on those in which they differ.<sup>5</sup> The barriers have been broken down and there was now one household of God in which they were all children. There was now one body of Christ. This body of Christ is according to Paul "one" and the Spirit, which dwells in it, is "one".

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 1430.

<sup>5</sup> J. Exell, *The pulpit Commentary Vol. 20 Galatians, Ephesians, Phillipians, Colossians* (Eerdmans Publishing Company, Michigan, 1950).

## The church is one

Ephesians 4:1-16 emphasizes organic unity amid diversity and growth in Christ. The unity of the body of Christ cannot be restricted to the sphere of what is invisible and hidden. Paul emphasized in Ephesians 4 the necessity of a visible, outward manifestation of unity as the body of Christ.<sup>6</sup> This unity is not external and mechanical, but is internal and organic. It is not superimposed. Unity does not mean uniformity. Disunity is nothing more than a rejection of His will and purpose for the church. Unity amongst the various churches in the New Testament was not constituted by an external organisation. The church is an organism pulsating with life. The church is calling into the light of this unity. Christians have a responsibility to cherish unity created by the Holy Spirit by their harmonious relationships (“in the bond of peace”). Their possession of the spirit of God is called by the apostle the unity of the spirit. The exclusion of the Gentiles from the commonwealth of Israel had ceased. The middle wall of partition which separated them from the sacred court falls apart. God is for both the Jew and the Gentile. God looks past circumcision to faith in the Jew and in the Gentile

Christ broke down the dividing wall of hostility between Jews and Gentiles as two rival groups in the first century. The dividing wall refers to the Mosaic Law and its scribal interpretation. The Mosaic Law was a system of separation. It was like wall shutting off the Gentiles and enclosing the Jews. Jesus as Israel’s Messiah abolishes the law by fulfilling it (Matthew 5:17). The Gentiles as such are as much beneficiaries of the kingdom of God as the covenant people of God. The admission of the Gentiles to the body of Christ implies no second-class status, but full membership as fellow citizens with the believers. Jews and Gentiles have, as members of the household of God, equal rights and privileges. In Christ all human differences, hostility and barriers are resolved.<sup>7</sup> In Christ both Jews and Gentiles become a new community, a church (*ecclesia*).

The unity of the spirit is to be maintained in a bond of peace. Peace recalls the description of Messiah as the “Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6). The Hebrew word for peace “shalom” means more than simply an absence of hostility. Peace denotes well being and security at every level. Christ’s kingdom is characterized by peace, both between God and believers and among believers.<sup>8</sup> This unity is promoted by peace (1 Corinthians 13:33, 2 Corinthians 13:11, Philippians 4:7, Colossians 3:15, 2 Timothy 2:22). Peace promotes the perpetuation

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<sup>6</sup> H. Ridderbos, *Paul an outline of His Theology* (Eerdmans Publishing Company, Michigan, 1975), 376-395.

<sup>7</sup> T. Abeyemo, *African Bible Commentary*, 1430.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 1426.

of unity. This bond which ties believers together in peace is the spirit.<sup>9</sup> Peace in the Lord is one of the benefits of justification. Justification and sanctification are for Paul inseparably connected. Those justified by faith secure peace with God. As people of faith, both Jew and Gentile enjoy peace with God. In the new life all ethnic, caste and other distinctions are destroyed, in favour of complete equality within union with Christ. Christ is this peace personified. In Him there is neither Jew nor Gentile. His work is described as making one from both.

In this connection, the apostle shows what the unity of the spirit consists of and what is to be preserved (Ephesians 4:4). This is a sevenfold unity. True believers are one in Christ; this unity consists of seven particulars. These seven elements constitute the identity of the true church. The church is an organic society. There is one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.<sup>10</sup>

*One Spirit* - The Holy Spirit is very different from the spirits that are worshipped in or traditional religion.<sup>11</sup> He is a person, not an influence or a force and cannot be manipulated. There is a unity that the Spirit creates and Christians have a responsibility to cherish their harmonious relationships (in the bond of peace).<sup>12</sup> All have the same Spirit and belong together as one. The unity of the Spirit should be understood as unity, which the Holy Spirit makes possible. The Holy Spirit alone enables us to understand and interprets the Word and uses it properly.<sup>13</sup>

*One Lord* - *The young convert Paul renounced from polytheism of the pagan world and emphasized Jesus as the one Lord of both Jew and Gentile. The one Lord is best understood as a reference to Christ. Christ is the Prince and the Saviour of all. Christ is the foundation of the church (1 Corinthians 3:11). In Christ the believers received every spiritual blessing. Christ broke down the barrier of hostility amongst Jews and Gentiles by abolishing in His own flesh the law of commandments and its requirements. Christ by means of His substitutionary suffering merits peace for his people. This peace is the inner assurance that all is well because the curse of the law has been removed and both Jew and Gentile had obtained peace. Through Christ's suffering on the cross, all Christians have access to one Spirit, to the one Father.*

*One faith* - *This refers not to a common creed, but rather to a common trust in Christ*

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<sup>9</sup> F.W. Grosheide, *Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament* (Kok, Kampen, 1960), 62.

<sup>10</sup> W. Hendriksen, *Ephesians* (WJ Mackay Limited, Chatham 1976), 182-187.

<sup>11</sup> T. Abeyemo, *African Bible Commentary*, 1428.

<sup>12</sup> D. Guthrie (ed), *The New Bible Commentary Revised* (Inter-varsity Press, London), 1114.

*for external righteousness and external glory.*

One baptism - *This one baptism stands in contrast with the pagan mystery religions or Jewish proselyte baptism. The same rite is administered to all. The rite of baptism is one and the same for all professing Christians, from whatever cultural background. National and social distinction disappears in Christ.*

## **The bond of peace**

As Christians we should have a peace-loving and peace-seeking spirit. We should be peacemakers, actively working towards peace. We should be aware not to break the unity of the spirit, but should rather tend to preserve the unity of the Spirit. We are endeavouring to keep the *unity of the spirit in the bond of peace*. God reveals Himself as the Prince of Peace. He Himself is our peace (*shalom* as cosmic peace). God wants to establish justice and peace among all peace in a world. A manifestation of this unity in the *bond of peace* would make a great impression in the world. Economic globalization challenges Christian mission and the integrity of the church. We need to draw a clear distinction between Christian mission and the forces of domination, patriarchy, racism and institutional injustice that are associated with empire. This will involve a new apostolic faith, that stands for the fullness of life in a world of worsening poverty, environmental degradation, the HIV and Aids pandemic, terrorism and war, migration and xenophobia and tribalism. The Word teaches us that we should have respect for outsiders.

The church should criticize economic injustices and advocate for fundamental political and economic reforms and works towards the building of just, participatory and sustainable global political-economic systems that serve life for all.

The triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit gathers, protects and cares for his Church by his Word and his Spirit. The believer's unity is based on the Trinity.<sup>13</sup> God's sovereignty is absolute and supreme. God has revealed Himself to us in the Bible as Creator, Redeemer and Holy Spirit. It is clearly confirmed in verses such as Ephesians 4:1-4. We believe in one holy, universal Christian Church, the communion of saints called from the entire human family. Christ's work of reconciliation is made manifest in the church as the community of believers who have been reconciled with God and with one another. Unity is gift and an

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<sup>13</sup> D.M. Lloyd-Jones, *The Christian soldier - Ephesians 6:10-20* (Morrison & Gibb Ltd, London, 1977), 327-336.

<sup>14</sup> Abeyemo, *African Bible Commentary*, 1433.

obligation for the church of Jesus Christ. Unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups are sin which Christ has already conquered. Anything, which threatens this unity, has no place in the church and must be resisted. Unity however can be established only in freedom and not under constraint. True faith in Jesus Christ is the only condition for membership of this church. The church should therefore reject any doctrine which restricts either natural diversity or the sinful separation of people in such a way that this restriction hinders or breaks the visible and active unity of the church, or even leads to the establishment of a separate church formation. The church should reject any doctrine which professes that this spiritual unity is truly being maintained in the bond of peace whilst believers of the same confession are in effect alienated from one another for the sake of diversity. The church should reject any doctrine, which explicitly or implicitly maintains that descent or any other human or social factor should be a consideration in determining membership of the Church.

God has entrusted to his church the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ. Ephesians 4:3 is concerned with keeping peace within the church. Because the body is one, there can only be one Spirit. In principle the Spirit presupposes the body, and not the reverse. The church is called to keep the unity of the Spirit. The Son of God from the beginning to the end of the world, gathers, defends, and preserves for Himself by His Spirit and Word. The bond between the Triune God and all believers runs like a golden thread right through the entire Bible. This bond between God and the church is also present in the creeds of the early church. Church unification is definitely not the work of humans. God defends and preserves his church. Obedience to the gospel results in struggle and suffering in many places in the world. The church is called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

The Church is called blessed because it is a peacemaker. Enforced separation of people on a racial basis promotes and perpetuates alienation, hatred and enmity. Any teaching which attempts to legitimate such forced separation by appeal to the gospel and is not prepared to venture on the road of obedience and reconciliation, but rather, out of prejudice, fear, selfishness and unbelief, denies in advance the reconciling power of the gospel, must be considered ideology and false doctrine. The church should therefore reject any doctrine that in such a situation sanctions in the name of the gospel or of the will of God the forced separation of people on the grounds of race and colour. Ephesians 4:1-4 emphasizes the visible unity of the church. The visible unity does not depend on the work of the people of God, but rather flows from the work of Christ who reconciles people with God and with each other. According to Ephesians 4:1-16 believers from different cultural, racial backgrounds are now “reconciled in one body” through the cross of Jesus Christ. Unity is,

therefore, both a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ. The church should unite in the bond of peace. This visible unity has two sides. On the one side it is a gift of the Holy Spirit, and built on the unity of and in God (Ephesians 4: 4-6). Yet at the same time it is a mission (Ephesians 4:4) and a task to the church (Ephesians 4:3). Unity is not an optional extra on the agenda of the church that people could attend only now and then. It belongs to the very nature and core of the church's commission. A disunited church is in conflict with what God intended for the church. Unity cannot be enforced upon people by impressing it as a political or cultural ideal. In Christ we are all children of God. A doctrine that implies that the church should not seek earnestly visible unity stands in opposition to the message of Ephesians 4:1-4.

God has revealed himself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace amongst all. In a world full of injustice and enmity the Lord is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged and that He calls his Church to follow Him in this. The Lord brings justice to the oppressed and urges that the Church should strive against any form of injustice and maintain unity in a bond of peace. The church should therefore reject any ideology which would legitimate all forms of injustice and any doctrine which is unwilling to resist such an ideology in the name of the gospel.

## **Rejection of division**

Jesus Christ is the only Head of the church. The church is called to confess and to do all these things, even though the authorities and human laws might forbid them and punishment and suffering be the consequence. Jesus is Lord. To the one and only God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be the honour and the glory for ever and ever. This unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted. This unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways. That we love one another; that we experience, practise and pursue community with one another. That we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another. That we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and one mind; have one God and Father, are filled with one Spirit, are baptized with one baptism. That we eat from one bread and drink from one cup, confess one Name, are obedient to one Lord, work for one cause, and share one hope. That together we come to know the height and the breadth and the depth of the love of Christ. That we build up together to the stature of Christ, to the new humanity. That together we know and bear one another's burdens, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ that we need one another and build one another, admonishing and comforting

one another. That we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness; pray together; together serve God in this world; and together fight against all which may threaten or hinder this unity. That this unity can be established only in freedom and not under constraint. That the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the various languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God. We believe that God has entrusted his church with the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ. That the church is called to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. That the church is called blessed because it is a peacemaker, that the Church is witness both by word and by deed to the new heaven and the new earth in which righteousness dwells. Christ's work of reconciliation manifests itself in the fellowship of believers, who are reconciled with God and with one another. Also, that the unity of this fellowship is a gift as well as a command, which must earnestly be pursued, sought and made visible. Therefore, *we should reject any doctrine*, which absolutizes the natural or sinful division in church and society (apartheid, xenophobia, Dalit system, new Nazism). God entrusted his church the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ and, that through his life-giving Word and Spirit, He conquered the powers of sin and death and, therefore, also the evils of irreconcilability, hatred, bitterness and animosity. The church should therefore *reject* any doctrine that in the name of the gospel or the will of God sanctions the forced separation of people, caste system, races, classes, sexes. Jesus abolished the enmity between races, cultures, class, sexes, and castes.

## **The sovereignty of God**

Reformed Christians believe in the sovereignty of God over the whole created order. We cannot leave these questions to the politicians or the government. It is the political and economic powers that are the major instruments in sustaining inequalities. Active commitment to justice for the whole creation is a fundamental demand of our Reformed faith. Nothing in creation is independent of God. All of God's creation therefore deserves to be treated with appropriate care and concern. All humans are entitled to basic human rights. These rights include food security, environmental safety. The church is called to be a sign of the Reign of God, on earth as it is in heaven, to reflect the Reign of God. God's sovereignty over all creation should be proclaimed.

The church has a vocation in the world as Christ's body. A new understanding of humanity is needed where diversity is acknowledged, but within which diversity is not exalted to universal truths. Racism cannot be challenged simply by changing laws and creating policies on gender equity and race relations. We should rather accentuate the complete humanity

of all people, regardless of race, culture, colour, origin, status or class, free from patriarchal bonds, and where people, men and women, are jointly agents for God. Our approach to hermeneutics should, amongst others, show that theological notions on anthropology are nothing more than human projections and that a new and inclusive metaphor for God and man is needed. We should guard from the usage of sexist and class images of God. The complete humanity of all people created in the image of God must be accentuated in doing theology. Privatization is eroding the bargaining power of the poor and leads to a growing gap between income of the rich and poor. Economic globalization more and more affects our people, communities, and the church at large. We should therefore reject the new liberal ideology of global capitalism, empire, genetically modified biotechnology and genetic engineering. We have to stand where God stands on the side of the poor, the powerless, and the marginalized the voiceless, the vulnerable. The church has a preferential option for the poor and the powerless. Power relationship should be deconstructed and replaced by egalitarian relationships. Therefore the church should embark on a total deconstruction of economic injustice. The poor are all around us. Economic injustice challenges our integrity as followers of Jesus Christ. We cannot leave these questions to the politicians or the government. It is the political and economic powers that are the major instruments in sustaining the inequalities and social distress. Poverty cannot be eradicated by superficial changes. We need a radical redistribution of wealth. Active commitment to justice for the whole creation is a fundamental demand of our Reformed faith. The church is called to be a sign of the Reign of God, on earth as it is in heaven, to reflect the Reign of God. God revealed Himself as the One who wishes to bring justice and peace amongst all people, and that He is in a special way the God of the needy, the poor and destitute. The church should therefore *reject* any doctrine that legitimizes forms of injustice in the name of the gospel.

God has entrusted to his church the message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ as the Prince of Peace. Therefore Paul urges us to maintain the unity *of the spirit in the bond of peace*. The triune God has revealed himself as the One who wishes to bring about justice and true peace among men and that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.



# The unity of the spirit in the bond of peace

## An established reality

“... making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”.  
(Ephesians 4:3 - NRSV)

Joy Mohan\*

*We live in a world that is so divided. Are we not out of touch with reality when we talk of unity and peace? Joy Mohan however makes clear in her article, that the Unity of the Spirit is an accomplished fact. Therefore we must let go the old creation and embrace God's new creation.*

### Introduction

When I think about the world in which we all live, the one descriptive word that may leap forth in my mind is the word division. Nations are divided against nations. It's East versus West; Communism versus Capitalism; the 'haves' versus the 'have-nots'. And in recent times my own nation is split into hundreds of shattered fragments due to the political climate and an escalation in crime and violence.

As I write this article someone else is kidnapped and murdered not only in my county of Trinidad and Tobago, but also in other parts of the Caribbean and the world. Terrorists, some motivated by religious extremism are exploding bombs in many places in the world. The number of persons affected by the HIV/ Aids is on the rise and the health care systems

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are becoming increasingly inadequate. Poverty, incest, drug abuse, rape and other violent crimes continue to play havoc in the society, home and family life. The world, even the church, seems no closer to unity and peace than they have been for many years.

Just one quick glance at the local newspaper reveals the rift that greed has brought between labour and management. And there seems to be a kind of anger and mistrust developing between the two major races in my country, even though we as citizens have pledged our lives to God to create and practise equality for every creed and race.

The fundamental question is: “How do these concepts of unity and peace resonate with the realities of the present state of affairs in the world and in the lives of women, children and men?” I suppose it is not too shocking to see all the division in our world and within nations. I have come to expect it as a part of the secular life. But it becomes even more disturbing and shocking when I think about the division, separation and strife that exist in the church, universally and locally.

Today, the universal church is divided. ‘Fundamentalists’ have nothing to do with the ‘liberals’. There are ‘charismatics’ who think they are spiritually superior to other Christians who do not speak in tongues. And there are some Christian denominations, which actually believe that if one does not belong to their church, one can never get to heaven. Because of this spiritual snobbery, many Christians will have little to do with the likes of each other.

This brings to mind some of the discussions at the first Global Christian Forum held in Limuru, Kenya in November 2007. For some participants the ecumenical process was flawed in its goals and methods. For others, engaging in ecumenical dialogue meant a conflict with their own ecclesial identity. Nevertheless, most participants “acknowledged that we have often allowed prejudices to shape our understanding of different Christian traditions and welcomed the opportunity as God’s adopted children to encounter one another and to explore together the forgiveness and redemption found in Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

The issue of church or Christian disunity is a complex one. I have come to realize that one cannot develop any grandiose plan for bringing about unity of all Christians. The only effort that the ecumenical movement can make is to seek out those who are willing to be healed of the disease of divisiveness. Hence, the theme of the next General Council of the WARC “Unity of the Spirit in the Bond of Peace” represents an effort to encourage some basic theological discussions on the unity of the Spirit becoming realized in the lives of

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpt taken from: *A Message From The Global Christian Forum* (Limuru, Kenya, 2007). This message was sent to all churches represented at the Forum.

women and men within the Reformed Tradition, as well as the universal church. However, it is necessary to take a brief look at the scriptural text upon which the General Council's theme is based, Ephesians 4:3 "... making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace".

## The Unity of the Spirit – An Accomplished Fact

When Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus about the unity of the Spirit, he spoke of this unity as being an accomplished fact in the spiritual realm. With fear of sounding 'other worldly' this unity already exists. "It is a gift of God which is committed to men [women] to keep intact. But the unity must be maintained in the process, if it is to be attained in the result."<sup>2</sup>

It is evident that disunity is a reality wherever we look in the world today. Even within the Body of Christ to which Paul speaks, there is a lack of unity that is appalling. The church needs to develop a greater urgency about it and at the same time, do more about it than most of us are doing.

It is commendable that several persons have attempted to produce unity through seminars, conventions and negotiations. It would seem that they are reaching out from the secular world for something which we feel, must exist somewhere in the universe. Though they never succeed completely, they never fail completely if, among them, there are even some persons who seek the good of humanity above the interests of a few.

However, the unity of which Paul writes cannot be manufactured as would products or commodities. Instead, it is the unity which is produced by the Holy Spirit and is characteristic of the Spirit's distinctive mission in God's redemptive plan. This is the oneness which, God has been working to make actual and permanent since the inception of creation. Maybe, if the church comes to a realization that genuine unity of the Spirit is already "an established reality and can progressively be realized and brought into the actualities of life"<sup>3</sup>, perhaps then Christians would strive harder to create and maintain a sustainable unity.

It is important to note, however, "that the Spirit does not act in the church or through the church alone. While the world produces works of self-aggrandisement that have nothing to do with the power of the Spirit, it also contains forces working to build up humanity and

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<sup>2</sup> J. Armitage Robinson, *St Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians* (John Knox Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition), 177.

<sup>3</sup> Stuart R. Oglesby, *You and the Holy Spirit: A Neglected New Testament Doctrine Made Personal and Practical For Everyday Life* (John Knox Press, 1952), 76.

restore it: everything that works for salvation and liberation in the world is also inspired by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>4</sup> As Vatican II said: “The Holy Spirit ... gives life to the people of God ...impels all men [women] to God as well as the world and [human] mankind in him” (AA 29c).

As we experience the power and work of the Spirit we sometimes feel a bond of unity with all of humankind. Very often, we experience this bond of unity with those who are closest to us, or who share with us a commonality. The most refreshing and fulfilling experience a person may ever have “is that of coming so close to another spirit that the two seem to understand each other without conscious effort, to love each without thought of self, and to grow in spiritual stature while in each other’s company.”<sup>5</sup>

Paul emphasizes that the church must strive earnestly, at all times, to live worthy of its high calling in order to keep the unity of the Spirit and make it effective for the peace of the world. Paul does not leave anyone in doubt as to what kind of life one should live. It is a life of humility, gentleness, longsuffering and unconditional love. These are the characteristic qualities, which Paul lifted out of the life of Jesus. From the very inception of his life to the very end, Jesus always reflected in his ministry the unity of the Spirit. As a result Jesus demonstrated an inner peace at every point of his life, and especially during his trial and crucifixion.

Paul, in dealing with the issue of the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, does not seem to be so much concerned with what a person does in his or her life as how he or she does it. In other words, Paul is suggesting that the question of keeping the unity of the Spirit depends more on how life is lived than on what it accomplishes. As Paul wrote in Romans 12:18, “If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” Living peaceably with all people is as a result of the unity of the Spirit.

## **Peace – The Deepest Longing and Need of Humanity**

Living in and with peace, is the deepest longing and need of humanity. If this is true then “the way of peace lies in the progressive actualization in life of the unity of the Spirit.”<sup>6</sup> But how do we define this peace that is dependent on the unity of the Spirit? The word ‘peace’ as found in the Oxford dictionary means, ‘a state of quiet or tranquility’ or freedom from

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<sup>4</sup> Jose Comblin, *The Holy Spirit and Liberation*, translated from Portuguese by Paul Burns (Theology and Liberation Series, Orbis Books, 1989), 71.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

disturbance or agitation. It also means, ‘an absence of war, a state of calmness and silence’. The word ‘peace’ in the English Bible translates the Hebrew word *shalom* and refers to the absence of conflict and also the presence of harmony, wholeness and reconciliation. The prophet Isaiah prophesied the coming of a new day when the “wolf shall live with the lambs, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them” (Isaiah 11:6). The New Testament points to Jesus as the one who will bring about peace.

However, peace is much more than what the dictionary states. It has a deeper meaning. Peace is a virtue, a state of mind. It is a value which humanity has always sought in the world. Peace among nations, peace among people, but most of all peace of mind. While many people have sought peace externally they may have overlooked the fact that the peace which will influence all living things will be the peace that is first discovered internally. The Bible has much to say about peace within the souls of human beings, peace in the depth of suffering, peace in the midst of tribulation, peace in the valley of the shadow of death. But it does not say there will be worldwide peace in our time or even within the whole realm of time. Peace comes, not from the absence of trouble, but from the presence of God.

The question is: “Can humans achieve that inner peace?” What are some of the tools for peacemaking? The New Testament teaches us about tolerance, hope, faith and the fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22). There is an implicit basis for peace in the Golden rule: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you” (Matthew 7:12). This means that true peace should be based on justice and equality for all, regardless of ethnicity, intellect, educational qualifications, social status, age, or gender. It means an acknowledgement and recognition of not only our own worth, but also that of others.”<sup>7</sup>

The search for true peace begins with each individual. When such peace dwells within the life of each individual, there can still be hope for peace among all people in the world, especially among those who are marginalized, demoralized and denied the basic rights to live productive lives.

## **Sin and The Problem of Evil - A barrier**

Sin has always created a distinct barrier between God and us *and* us and others. It is not

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<sup>7</sup> *Preaching with her on life in fullness* (Publication of WARC, Geneva 2003), 11-13.

the case of two friends or a husband and wife sitting down to work out a problem by mutual confession of fault, because God is not the guilty partner. Humanity is guilty of jeopardizing that relationship. Thus, there can be no unity of the Spirit, without an acknowledgement of one's sinful nature.

As Romans 3:23 tells us: "since all have sinned and fall short of God's glory." It goes without saying that human beings fall short when they adopt the thoughts, ways and attitudes that are unacceptable to God. Thus, many become alienated and estranged from God. Humanity has failed miserably to live up to God's expectations. Social status, intellectual interests, nationality, race or mere sentiments can create no genuine community, oneness or unity. A community united by any one of these factors may appear strong, but it is subject to the disintegrating power of sin, particularly of pride and hatred.

However, we must recognize that the problem of unity is really part of a greater problem, the *problem of evil*. We are coerced to ask why persons engage in fighting and quarrelling incessantly, even to their own destruction and the answer is not only because of the sinfulness of the human heart, but the evil with which we are faced. We are brought face to face not only with divisions and anti-social behaviour but also with such common facts as pride, selfishness, cruelty, lust, and a desire to dominate and destroy lives at one's whims and fancy.

It is the feeling of many that a Third World war is threatening humanity and those who believe in and accept the gospel message need to remember the teachings and example of Jesus Christ. Pride and arrogance, the opposites of humility and gentleness, may enforce an outward unity and peace for a while, but they weaken the unity of the Spirit, without which there can be no lasting peace in the heart of men and women, or in the world. However, let us understand, that this does not mean that Christian people should passively submit to evil in the events of life whether good or bad. Hence, the need for a *ministry of reconciliation*.

## **A Ministry of Reconciliation**

In my opinion, to experience genuine unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, it is necessary to understand and embrace a ministry of reconciliation. There is a need to heal that which is broken and to reunite that, which is separated and estranged. There is a need to be reconciled with God and to be reconciled with others, which is no easy task. Nevertheless, "reconciliation to God does have a cooperate character in which those who are reconciled with God are united one with another. Men and women are not angels; therefore their communal life has to be concerned with structures, with bureaucracy, with the visibility of unity in worship, in action and in fellowship".<sup>8</sup>

Both Jesus and Paul tried to get the message of reconciliation across to the people of their time. And that problem somehow still exists today. Many in the church and the world have failed to recognize that the ministry of reconciliation has been entrusted to us as reconcilers of Christ. In 2 Corinthians 5:17-18, the Apostle Paul sets forth the heart of the gospel. He asserts that reconciliation is made real by the activity of God in Christ and the justification God offers to sinful people is a gracious gift that they do not deserve. Women and men owe their salvation solely to the grace of God. This insight is basic to the Christian faith, which is necessary for the sustainable existence of the church in the twenty-first century.

Reconciliation has been defined as “the activity whereby the disorders of existence are healed, its imbalances redressed, its alienation bridged over. Reconciliation stands at the centre of Christian faith. It is said to be related to redemption, justification, peace, forgiveness. Yet reconciliation has its own nuances, and without it, the New Testament statement for the gospel would be impoverished”.<sup>9</sup>

It is safe to say, therefore, that “Reconciliation is for Christian faith both a divine act and a human responsibility. For the Church it is both a gift (the gospel) and a task (her mission in behalf of the gospel). Thus, reconciliation defines the entire existence of the Church in the world: her origin in the saving work of Jesus Christ and her calling both as witness of God and as servant to humankind”.<sup>10</sup>

We need to move beyond selfish personal reactions that may hamper reconciliation. Our task for Christ is that of building the bridge between others and us, through genuine love and forgiveness. In our relationships, we need to demonstrate a love that is unconditional and liberating, not a love that is confining. The way we relate and treat each other in love and forgiveness will say more to the world at large than any project or activity the church can ever have. As one Professor of Theology, the Rev. Dr. Thomas G. Long, puts it, “Without love and forgiveness we are locked into our mental selves with no give and take, no true picture of how we measure up against others. Without them there is no true reconciliation.”<sup>11</sup> Additionally, the concept of forgiveness needs to be connected to the concept of repentance if it is to reflect biblical teaching. The church must repent of its own sins against individuals and society as a precondition to unity, peace and reconciliation.

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<sup>8</sup> Allen O Miller (ed.), *Reconciliation in Today's World* (Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), 7.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*; quotation from Dr. John H. Leith, Part I, Chapter 3 - Reconciliation and Ecumenism, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Professor Thomas G. Long (Professor of Theology, Princeton Theological Seminary); excerpt taken from sermon preached in chapel worship 1993.

In her illuminating discussion on being church in post-genocide Rwanda, Anne Kubai observes that “forgiveness presents a tremendous challenge not only to the church, but also to the course of justice... Forgiveness, as a human action, precedes reconciliation.”<sup>12</sup>

It may become necessary for each person to evaluate herself or himself by asking whatever I do or say - Is it true? Is it necessary or is it kind? As Jesus said in Matthew 5:23, “So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first and be reconciled with your brother or sister and then come and offer your gift.”

The purpose of reconciliation is common commitment to God’s purpose. When we seek that purpose, we are lifted to a level beyond ourselves. Selfishness is no longer the basic motivation.

## **Conclusion**

Presently, the world in which we live is a world of great darkness, where weapons are unbelievably destructive and hatred is unmistakably strong. I believe, it is not an idle dream or a fallacy to think of a day when wars shall end, when nations shall dwell together in unity, when justice and freedom will prevail. To think of a day when persons will respect the sanctity of the home, the quality of human life and the whole creation; to think of the day when governments will rule with integrity, honesty and justice.

As a Reformed family, we believe in the creative and redemptive activity of God, inaugurated in Jesus Christ but not yet completed. The Kingdom of God is a present reality, which will be expressed anew in all its fullness. This is our Christian hope, which is fundamental to our Christian faith, and Christian faith is expectant faith. The unity of the Spirit is a gift from God and the only power that can create true unity and peace is God’s. The actualization of the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace requires letting go of the old creation and embracing the new creation.

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<sup>12</sup> *On being Church: African Women’s Voices and Visions* (Pu



# United in Search for a Fair Peace

Ofelia Ortega / Marcos G. Cruz\*

*Unity in the bond of peace is a commitment of all. In their article Ofelia Ortega and Marco G. Cruz explain how the peace Paul refers to in Ephesians 4 is contrary to the peace of the Pax Romana, the last being only the result of military force exhaustion. Because for real peace virtues of humility, gentleness and patience are needed.*

"I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."  
Ephesians 4:1-3(NRSV)

## Introduction

In his book "The Pressure of our Common Calling", W.A. Visser 't Hooft asked the question "How does Christian unity grow?" The answer is given in the key word of the classical passage on unity, Ephesians 4 and that key word is: calling. The unity of the church is the necessary corollary to its calling. The church is the community of those who are called (1 Corinthians 1:23). It can simply be described as "the called" (Jude 1). And the word *ekklesia* means the body of those who are called out.

Though the word "church" is not used in Ephesians 4:1-16, this whole passage deals with its life, order and purpose. In the form of imperatives and of confession, exegetical,

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narrative, eschatological, and polemical statements, the constitution of the church is described under diverse aspects. Ecclesiology and ethics are so completely identified that they can neither be separated nor distinguished.

Ethics, ecclesiology and eschatology are so intimately combined and melted into one whole that it is practically impossible to discern where one begins and the other ends.

It is no wonder that *the author begins his exhortation with the theme of ecclesial life*. The church is the central theme around which all his thoughts develop. In this connection, ecclesial behaviour is, of course, his primary concern. This is the reason for his insistent call to the unity of the church. This exhortation to unity demands a better identification of the church with Christ. The first demand for every Christian is to respond to that call of belonging to the church, before any other particular issue. There is no reason whatsoever to hinder or harm the unity of the church.

Christians are called to make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3). This verse is inspired by Colossians 3:14-15<sup>1</sup>. The author wants to make clear that the unity comes, above all, from the Holy Spirit. The formula “one body - one Spirit” has its antecedents in 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body - Jews or Greeks, slaves or free - and we were all made to drink of one Spirit”. And the formula “one body - one Spirit” was already present in the hymn of Ephesians 2: 16-18, “...and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father”. The concept of unity of the Church is summarized in this text. The unity comes from Christ, who is the head. Alongside the unity that comes from Christ, we find the unity that comes from the Spirit. The church is one through Christ and through the Spirit.

## **The atmosphere of the letter**

The first century was running, military legions were everywhere, the world lived under the protection of the empire that had risen upon the Tiber banks. The apostle Paul was confined in the bowels of the city of Rome (*Radix Omnia Malorum Avaritia*). Being under

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<sup>1</sup> “Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body”, Colossians 3:14-15.

house arrest enabled him to have contact with those who approached him. This condition would not only allow him to know the fate of the empire, but also gave him the opportunity to evaluate the situation and needs of Christian communities, settled along the lands bathed by the Mediterranean Sea. On this occasion the epistle is addressed to the Ephesian community, although there may be doubts about the precise community addressed. It is a plausible approach that it had been addressed to the wide community of Asia Minor, Ephesus being the political and commercial capital of the Roman province in that same region.

The letter has two main parts. The first part ends with a doxology, crowning a text characterized by its spirit of thanksgiving and oration. The second part adopts a practical character, aimed at exhorting the Christian community towards a common experience vested in peace and dignity. The message of the letter attenuates the concern for its addressee community, as it adapts to the challenges for any Christian community, differently located in terms of time and geographical space.

The church is presented as a unique body integrating Jews and Gentiles. For that reason, unity is mentioned as the medullary topic of the epistle. The unity needed is not only an answer to internal situations, since the church is immersed in a world modelled according to the Roman domain interests; therefore the church must look for its own existential space amid a world that proclaims a different *ethos*.

Paying attention to one of José Comblin's statements, we found that:

"It is a Church that needs to survive and keep the legacy received intact. It suffers the pressure of the Roman Empire's relaxed atmosphere. To save Christianity, the Church must save its identity, affirm its separation from the world rather than insisting on its internal divisions. The fight against the Empire is not a fight against persecution, but a fight against the permanent pressure from a decadent world."<sup>2</sup>

Obviously there is no sign of any persecution like the one that would take place in a somewhat immediate future. That does not mean absence of conflicts. The Christian message or paradigm contravenes the way in which the Empire irradiates its purposes. As a side effect this situation brings about difficulties, for the Christian proposal does not follow either the same path or the logic of the mentioned Empire. An attitude of resistance will confront the hegemonic behaviour that does not pursue common well being. As it is expected, the yearned peace will oppose the Empire's lifestyle because it will bring about a *new* lifestyle,

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<sup>2</sup> Taken and translated into English from José Comblin, *Epístolas aos Efésios* (Vozes, Petrópolis, 1987), 23.

amid a context plagued by growing ambitions. This is the spirit of the letter; this is the spirit of the Christian community, at a time when it would be considered as the dawn of a new era.

## **The Pauline Legacy in Action**

We shall address the question of the transcendence of the message contained in the letter to the Ephesians as it relates to our ecumenical and ecclesiological concerns today. We live in a church which, just as our world, has to find the ways to unity out of diversity.

Differences have been misunderstood and misused, thereby bringing about prejudice, discrimination, divisions, injustice, war and death. It is of extraordinary importance, therefore, to revise and re-create our approach towards diversity and unity within and outside the church while following the best of our theological-biblical traditions.

Our witness needs unity, as it is the way in which it can be truly fruitful. Behind this truth, however, lies an even deeper truth. If we are not capable of giving a witness of peace among us - one in which the walls separating us crumble down and the prejudices keeping us aloof are overcome - then we are not fully living our own reconciliation with God.

Although being imprisoned Paul is still moved to continue exhorting Christian brothers and sisters. He is identified as prisoner of the Lord, an antecedent of the imperial events regarding the Christian community. About Paul's condition, theologian Letty M. Russell tells us:

“Here in this book the reader is reminded about the price of Paul's call to preach unity among Jews and Gentiles and these, in turn, are called to live this unity”<sup>3</sup>

The Pauline exhortation naturally has a double intention. On one hand, he insists on behaving with dignity, when living revealed virtues. On the other hand, he lets us see that Christian faith is not ironic in any way, so he demands a consistent attitude between behaviour and the faith professed. In the text conducting is a synonym for behaving, for maintaining a conduct coherent with the Christian message when guiding our lives. This way of behaving does not always offer fair situations. It is so that Paul suffers

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<sup>3</sup> Taken and translated from Letty M Russell, *Imitadores de Dios: Un libro de Estudios sobre Efesios* (Departamento de Educación y Cultivo de Programas Misionales para la División de Mujeres, Ministerios Globales, Iglesia Metodista Unida, Cincinnati, OH, 1984), 39.

prison, waits for the dictate of the Empire's *justice*.

This should not discourage the Christian community for justice will not always have a fatalistic expression. For the Christian community, justice will be based on hope. Above all, it is a challenge. It implies the accumulation of personal and community efforts. This is the vocation shown to us as a reference. Today, we think of our vocation as the personal orientation towards possible fields of action that can respond to our professional or working concerns and demands. Without rescinding what was mentioned earlier, one can say that Christian vocation goes beyond all this, because it is the call to a higher dignity. It is God who is calling; therefore this call demands our most authentic response.

This vocation contrasts with that of the Empire. The Christian community assumes an ethics based on experience, thus reducing individual pretensions, incorporating the value of accepting a new project whose purpose is divergent from the imperial ones. The Christian ethics is a community ethics. It originates from a communion spirit that becomes latent when showing mutual solidarity. The Empire embraces many different places and cultures. It is true that it integrates them, but not all of them have the same opportunity. The Empire guarantees the way for some but is a barrier for others from emerging.

The Christian ideal is guided towards a communion bearing in mind the desires and needs of all and proving itself capable of providing answers to situations of crises. In fact, this way of showing is a guarantee for a common route design, as a guide towards a full life, where every one is taken into consideration, with his aspirations, dreams and desires, for a new situation of coexistence. This is what enables Paul to keep in close contact with the community of the faithful. No misfortune justifies the lack of solidarity, and it is in fact the sense the first Christians find in the practice of love without barriers.

## **Virtues required for unity**

To tread the path leading to unity, the virtues pointed out by the letter to the Ephesians must be followed. It is necessary to *refrain from pride, aggressiveness and impatience*.

In order to encourage people to keep the discipline that unity calls for, the author of the letter includes all the fundamentals of the unity of the Church. Vocation implies calling and demanding. God comes to us gratuitously, but demands collaboration with what has been generously given to us.

What are then the virtues needed to achieve this unity?

## Humility

First, humility. The use of this word is closely associated with the spirituality of “the poor of Yahweh” (Luke 1:48-52; Matthew 5:3-5; 1 Peter 5:5). Matthew applies the term to Jesus himself (11:29)

## Gentleness

The second virtue is also related to Jesus in the same context of Matthew 11:29. It is also part of the beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-5). Paul mentions it frequently (1 Corinthians 4:21; 2 Corinthians 10:1; Galatians 6:1). It is translated most of the times as *gentleness*. An alternative designation for it is *meekness*. It corresponds to the concept to which we refer today as “non violence”.

## Patience

The third virtue appears frequently in connection with the other two, and it is also typically Pauline (Romans 2:4; 9:22; 2 Corinthians 6:6; Galatians 5:22; Colossians 3:12). It is translated as “patience”. However, it is not a passive but an active virtue.

In a decadent world, the practice of virtue becomes necessary, this keeps Christianity farther from the most extended practices in a world where the church must proclaim and make the new Christian paradigm feasible. It would be daring to enumerate the virtues that can emanate from the life of faith of a community. Those virtues that appear in the text, without any doubt, are aimed at preserving the unity of the Church, in contrast with internal conflicts and the hostility found externally, when proclaiming a message of peace, which at the same time is a subversive one.

None of these virtues was very well considered in the pagan world. When they respond to the unity announced, they become an encouragement, definitively impelling to build harmony. The first two virtues are fully found in the figure of Jesus: humility and meekness (Matthew 11:9). The first means the disposition of the people of God and it contrasts with the Empire imposition. Meekness, in turn, contradicts the militaristic desires found around, as well as the gladiator bloody shows at the arena. Patience frequently appears in connection with the other two and it is typically Pauline. It is an incentive within a context filled with impatience, in the task of resisting the ravages of legions and governors. The Christian community, by means of patience, is called to resist. Therefore, they speak of mutual support among the community of believers, in the face of internal difficulties; but even more, in the face of the environment that invariably encloses and surrounds them. This message is a

breath within a suffocating world.

About these virtues Charles R. Erdman says:

“The practice of such virtues and the consequent keeping of Christian unity demands a conscious effort. The church is formed of Jews and Gentiles, of wise and ignorant, of rich and poor, of men and women of all races and classes. When so many dispositions, likes and different personalities are at stake, it is evident that preservation of harmony is not an easy achievement.”<sup>4</sup>

Certainly, integrating this diversity is only possible based on the virtues mentioned before. These virtues have a deep sense for the community. Christian life is a consequence of the faith received. In this way, Christians are moved to offer a new reality of relations in the community environment, which would be above ethnic, intellectual, economic and gender breaches. It is an attempt to carry out a more horizontal world, far from the class society that operates in the whole wide Empire. These virtues born from faith and Christian practice are materialized in ordinary life; they are not exclusive of the religious space, they are evident in the wide world where Christians live. There is no Christian virtue without social and community dimension. Although the Christianity-Empire dichotomy exists, Christians are called to persevere in the first, within the area of operation of the latter. It is not to live separately; it is to live Christian virtues intensely, amid the flow of displeasures offered by the Empire. Perhaps these virtues can inspire us now to look for roads ahead leading us to unity and peace in the twenty-first century.

### **Humility, gentleness and patience for unity today**

How much could we attain today in all fields of world politics and negotiations and in all spheres of human activity by refraining from pride, aggressiveness and impatience? Ever since the times in which Paul took care of the Christian communities, these three virtues were associated with the attainment of unity and peace. How is humility to be interpreted in this globalizing and excluding world? A possible answer is that we are to set ourselves free from pride and arrogance, which create distances and divisions. Humility means the end of discriminatory attitudes of different forms. Outside the church, it contributes to bridge the gap not only between the poor and the rich, but also between North and South, women and men, black and white. It is present in all forms of struggle

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<sup>4</sup> Taken and translated from Talk R. Erdman, *La Epistola a los Efesios* (T.E.L.L. Jenison, MI, 1975), 84.

against discrimination, whether religious, political, social or economic. Concerning the life and work of the church, humility lays the groundwork for its growth, paves the way for all forms of cooperation, and makes possible its spiritual wealth.

How is gentleness to be interpreted in connection with the reality of the world today? A possible answer is that we are to look for forgiveness and peaceful resolution of conflicts that will set us free from wars. Within and outside the church, we deal with diversity, and diversity is made up of differences. These differences may coalesce into rich and powerful forms of co-operation, but they may also enter into conflict due to wrong decisions or polarized situations in the past or in the present. In such cases, forgiveness and the search for non-violent, peaceful resolution of conflicts are the only way to guarantee unity while preserving diversity. We would not have such attitude unless we are “meek” and “gentle”.

How is patience to be interpreted in connection with the reality of the world today? It is to be understood as our capacity to resist firmly and bear all provocations without yielding. It is not simply a matter of being patient in suffering. It is chiefly a question of not being overcome by evil, but overcoming evil with good. Patience is thus linked specially with humility and meekness. We will not show humility and meekness in the face of critical events, unless we are capable of being patient. Conversely, humility and meekness will broaden our minds and spirit, and give us the wisdom of being patient not only for suffering without yielding to violent reactions, but also to work out solutions wisely, persistently and creatively for our numerous afflictions.

The social attitude is meant, as shown by the following words: “bear one another in love”. Chrysostom’s etymological interpretation is beautiful: “have a wide and big soul”. These virtues inspired the three principal movements of the twentieth century – human rights, the ecological movement and the women’s movement. Perhaps they can serve now for us to move forward along the ways to unity and peace in the twenty-first century.

## **Discerning peace and unity**

Peace is the fundamental pillar of unity. However, peace in the Pauline speech does not stop being proclaimed in the populated world, but that does not mean it is an echo. Years before, *Pax Romana* had begun. It was a time of splendor and prosperity, when changes that took place could be seen, marble covered the buildings of Rome, Romans did not lack food and amusement, law and order were



established in the lands inside the Empire bounds; but *Pax Romana* was the peace for the Romans.

Something that can help us characterize this stage is what a Caledonian chief says to Tacitus:

“Romans steal, murder, plunder, and they call the result ‘Empire’; and where they bring about desolation, they name it ‘peace’.”<sup>5</sup>

*Pax Romana* had been the result of the military force exhaustion in the Italian Peninsula. It had also been the result of the vast chaotic effect caused by a long season of conquests, subduing peoples and regions. The so-called *Pax Romana* was imposed by armed force; it was a peace that tasted like war. It is worth recalling that the Altar of Augustan Peace had been erected on Mars Hill, the god of the military arts.

Although this period meant the end of the bloodiest wars, peace not only means absence of the weapons thunder. Peace can also be verified through the living conditions that the peoples enjoy, through the dignity and decency they show, through the freedom to act in favour of projects aimed at common well being. *Pax Romana* was the duality of coexisting realities: domain and servitude, wealth accumulation and excessive tax payment, exaltation and degradation. In spite of what was previously warned, Augustus appeared as a peacemaker; his statues were reproduced and many sanctuaries were dedicated to him. The Ephesus Higher Square was remodelled in his time, granting a special place to Augustus’ figure. This ideal of peace, which in no way would be the ideal peace, will continue to guarantee unity and cohesion in the Roman principality.

The peace that the Apostle proclaims is not the one mentioned before. Peace is the bond that guarantees and preserves unity in the body of believers. Without unity there is no community. Far from the outrages modelling the first century, Christians converge in the search for and safeguard of unity, an alternative unity of course, but a unity that also finds another artisan. In his comments on the letters, Calvin points out:

“Unity of Spirit means that spiritual unity produced inside us by the Spirit of God.”<sup>6</sup>

It is so this spiritual unity needs to be assumed by the whole Christian community, as a testimony of a different vocation that faces attitudes of its context; and that at the same time, comes from the Lord and not from any other authority. This project is to live according

<sup>5</sup> Klaus Wengst, *Pax Romana and the peace of Jesus Christ* (Fortress, Philadelphia, 1987), 52.

<sup>6</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the letters of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1948).268.

to God's plans; but they are plans that speak also of the divine artisan, in which Christians find inspiration to behave successfully.

## **Unity in the bond of peace, a commitment of all**

The purpose of unity based on peace goes beyond times and becomes a challenge for our current world, as Nestor Míguez points out:

“In a world ... where we are warned that competition is the solution for all evils, where arms production is the most lucrative industry in the world, to proclaim the end of all prejudice, proclaim solidarity, fraternity, and proclaim that this is the time for peace, is to show that this world is the new creation of God. This is a creation that was not conquered by armed Roman legions. This came from a crucified Jew, whose side was pierced with a spear by a Roman soldier. With this new creation, he was giving reason for the fall of the walls between Gentiles and Jews.”<sup>7</sup>

In this way, we try to be active subjects in building an order that guarantees a bigger number of possibilities regarding human dignity. The effort for peace looking for unity must be a conscious effort involving us completely, with a peaceful attitude but not a passive one.

Peace also has a space today in global speech. They speak of peace to us from different perspectives, even from almost completely divergent perspectives. We can question real possibilities. On one hand, the consent to peace; on the other hand, the face of war, poverty and marginalization, continuously show up. It so happens that we are all speaking of peace, but not speaking of the same thing. It is our turn to be deeply critical when it comes to thinking about the kind of peace we want. Many speak of peace, but political and economic interests that respond to small sectors permeate these ideas.

The peace we need is a peace embracing the whole human community, a peace guaranteeing comprehensive well being. There can be no peace based on indifference. Beyond this, they cannot call peace a social project demanding and supposing a desert of peace for others. Thinking about peace for a few is the equivalent of the appearance of conflicts generated by marginal situations. Peace is a task and a responsibility concerning all.

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<sup>7</sup> Néstor Míguez, *Cristo Nuestra Paz* (CLAI. Quito, 2000), 10.

As Benito Juárez said: “Respect for someone else’s right is peace”. But it is no longer respect only for someone else’s things. The imperative of peace takes us to break borders and limits of what we have insisted on qualifying someone else’s. Lukas Vischer mentions the words Calvin bequeathed us: “If we want to prove obedience to our Lord and Teacher Jesus Christ, then we need to join in a holy conspiracy and cultivate peace among us.”<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, an alternative peace demands to think not only of our own benefit, but also of common benefit. Peace is a commitment of all and for all. When we are able to accept this commitment, the unity mentioned becomes a communion that looks for building and preserving justice, as well as examining and implementing decisions aimed at the reign of common good. True peace presupposes justice. Both are completely inherent. Beginning peace is only possible when we exercise justice, because peace is a fair order. There can be no peace if there are remarkable differences.

The word peace even flows from the lips of those who do not have the sense of taste, of those who do not know how to write it, of those who have hopes and have witnessed only a landscape of violence, of those who are considered as someone else’s business. Assuming a solidarity stand leading to unity means to be the echo of the genuine clamour for peace. Our duty is to make feasible what, without any doubt, is more than desirable.

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<sup>8</sup> Taken and translated from what Lukas Vischer quoted in: *Santa Conspiración, Calvino y la unidad de la Iglesia de Cristo* (Editora Pendão Real, São Paulo, 2000), 16.



# The Relevance of Ephesians 4:3 to the Unification of REC and WARC

Arnau van Wyngaard\*

*We should be aware, that unification could cause feelings of concern. Something has to be given up in the process of unification. Especially small churches can feel lost in the bigger unified body. Speaking from a small church Arnau van Wyngaard reflects upon Ephesians 4:3 as a passage helpful for unification without fear.*

Two men meet each other for the first time. After some time, the one man asks the other: "What did you do before you got married?" To which the second man replies: "Whatever I wanted to!"

## Introduction

"Unification" is a term that often arouses mixed feelings amongst Christians. On the one hand most Christians agree in principle that there should be unity within and amongst churches, but on the other hand, when it comes to the practical implementation of the unification process, many Christians refuse to be part of this. The main reason could probably be attributed to fear of the unknown. In the process of unification, something will have to be sacrificed by all parties involved. No longer will they be able to do whatever they want to do.

When I was asked to write about my impressions of the *Reformed Ecumenical Council* (REC) meeting held in Indonesia in 2000, where the *Swaziland Reformed Church* had at that time been approved as the latest (and smallest) member of the council, I expressed my feelings in the words taught to us by our geography teacher in primary school: *Giant Italy*

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*kicks little Sicily into the sea* (Van Wyngaard 2000:25). At that time I felt that this sentence expressed the fear that I had had before the meeting that we, as the smallest member church of the REC, would eventually just disappear amongst the larger churches. I'm glad to say that the love and concern shown by the larger member churches since that assembly, has taken my fear away.

The ongoing process whereby the REC and the *World Alliance of Reformed Churches* (WARC) intend to form a new organisation, the *World Communion of Reformed Churches*, may evoke the same type of emotions, especially from member churches of the smaller REC, and probably with good reasons. According to WARC's website, it has 214 member churches from 107 countries, representing more than 75 million Christians. Compared to this, the REC has only 39 member churches in 25 countries, representing approximately 12 million Christians. It is therefore not unrealistic to believe that many of the member churches belonging to the REC may feel threatened by the planned unification of the two organisations. History has taught us, through cases such as the eventual integration in 1961 of the *International Missionary Council* (IMC) and the *World Council of Churches* (WCC) that mere conviction about the theological basis of unification is seldom enough to eliminate all fear of going through with the process (World Council of Churches, [s.a.]; Saayman, W A 1984:17).

### **Ephesians 4:1-3**

I am of the opinion that Ephesians 4:1-3 can do much to create a climate in which these two organisations can unite, without fear that the process will develop at the cost of either one of the formerly independent organisations.

There seems to be consensus that Ephesians 4:1 introduces a second major part in the letter to the Ephesians. The first three chapters consist mainly of praise to God for including the heathens in His plan of salvation, while the last three chapters are more exhortative in nature to encourage the readers to live according to their Christian faith (Roberts 1984:140; Hendriksen 1976:63). However, the second part of the letter does not stand on its own. Ephesians 4:1 starts with the words: "I urge you, therefore...." (Greek: *parakalo óun*) which indicates that the following verses are to be read as the logical consequence of the good news which is given to us in the first three chapters of the epistle (Louw 1996:162). This may not seem to be important, but this one word, "therefore", makes the difference between a moralistic command to be humble and a loving call, taking into account all that God had done for us, to live humbly.

To "live a life worthy of the calling you have received" (Ephesians 4:1) is a direct result of

having heard “the gospel of your salvation” (1:13) and personally experiencing God’s “mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms” (1:19-20). The fact that there had been a break between the old life, set on “gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts” (2:3) and the new life “created in Christ Jesus to do good works” (2:10), can have no other logical result than to live according to God’s will (Louw 1996:162).

This “life worthy of the calling you have received” is then further explained in 4:2: “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.”

“Humility” (Greek: *tapeinofrosune*), according to Louw & Nida (1988:748) means to be “without arrogance”. Louw (1996:165) further explains the meaning of “humility” by looking at its opposite found in Romans 12:16: “Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.” Pride, conceit and arrogance describe an attitude whereby people are so totally focused on those things which will be to their own benefit, that it becomes virtually impossible for them to focus on the needs of others.

“Gentleness” (Greek: *prautes*) is described by Louw & Nida (749) as “gentleness of attitude and behaviour, in contrast with harshness in one’s dealings with others.” As with the previous word, Louw (1996:165) once again explains the word by referring to its opposite, “strife”, as found in James 3:13-14: “Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility (Greek: *prautes*) that comes from wisdom. But if you harbour bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth.” Gentleness, thus, stands in total contrast to bitter envy, selfish ambition and strife.

“Patience” or “longsuffering” as the *Authorised Version* translates the Greek *makrothumia*, is defined by Louw & Nida (307) as “a state of emotional calm in the face of provocation or misfortune and without complaint or irritation”. This is a word which is often used in the Bible to describe one of the characteristics of God, as in 2 Peter 3:9: “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient (*makrothumei*) with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” Furthermore, this is also one of the words used by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:4 to describe the essence of love.

Hendriksen (1976:184) explains this as “true and tender affection toward the brother, the neighbour, and even the enemy, the noble endeavour to benefit him and never to harm him in any way.” Wessels (1990:71) quotes M Barth who considered these virtues “peculiarly un-Greek”. Both humility and gentleness had a fairly negative meaning in pre-Christian and later Greek documents, referring to a lack of self-respect. According to Barth the background of Paul’s exhortation in verse should rather be found in the Hebrew word, *anah* which has

meanings such as “to humble oneself” or “to be afflicted by God or another human being”. The attitude of such a person is clearly illustrated in Zechariah 10:2: “... they were troubled, because there was no shepherd” (Koehler & Baumgartner 1958:718). “In the Bible a gentle or meek person has no one else to turn to except God or a faithful king” (Wessels 1990:71).

After having urged his readers to be humble, gentle and patient, Paul then continues with Ephesians 4:3: “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”

The Greek word, *henótes*, used only in Ephesians 4:3 and 4:13, has the meaning of “a state of oneness” (Louw & Nida 1988:748) and they suggest that 4:13, which reads in the NIV: “...until we all reach unity in the faith” should be translated with the words: “...we believe just as though we were all one person”, in other words, being in total harmony with each other.

This unity is a gift from the Holy Spirit and is not something that people can create (Naudé 1997:169-170; Wessels 1990:71). The task of the Christians is merely to *maintain* this unity which was created by the Spirit.

In the first three chapters of the epistle to the Ephesians, Paul had made a strong point that those who had been far away (the heathens) and those who had been close (the Jews) were united with each other through the blood of Christ. By destroying the dividing wall of hostility, God had reconciled these former enemies, thus making the two groups one and enabling those who had been heathens to become heirs of Jesus Christ together with the Jews (2:11-18; 3:6). Thus the body of Christ consisted of Christians from a heathen background, as well as Christians from a Jewish background. But in Christ they were united and they had become one. And it is this unity which the believers are called to maintain as they learn to accept each other through a humble, gentle and patient attitude.

### **Applying Ephesians 4:3 to the unification process**

The question remains how this passage can help ease the unification process between Christian groups, be it different churches or, as in this case, REC and WARC. In Greek, Ephesians 4:1-3 is one sentence. The readers are urged to live a life worthy of their calling, by living with humility, gentleness and patience, doing their best to maintain the unity created by the Spirit. Or put in another way, the virtues necessary in order to maintain the unity effectively are those found in verse 2: humility, gentleness and patience (Wessels 1990:71).

On 26 May 2006, Nico Smith published a letter in *Die Kerkbode*, official newspaper of



the *Dutch Reformed Church* in South Africa. The topic under discussion was the lack of enthusiasm amongst churches within the family of Dutch Reformed Churches to unite. He writes (my translation):

Taking everything into account, I have no other option than to believe that the family of Dutch Reformed Churches is not serious about uniting. This, as far as I am concerned, is true for all four of these churches. There are too many certainties, with the result that there is too much arrogance present in all of these churches. I am still of the opinion that certainties are the biggest enemy of humanity. It has been the certainties of peoples and nations and their leaders which drove them to war. And it's the certainties and consequential arrogance of world religions which are ravaging the world with acts of terrorism.

Arrogance, as we have seen, is in total contrast to an attitude of humility. And as Nico Smith argues, this attitude is probably the number one reason why unification within the family of Dutch Reformed Churches cannot be accomplished. Arrogance may well be the main reason why many other attempts of churches or church organisations to unite, have failed in the past.

## Conclusion

Unification calls for a special attitude if it is to be successful. The unification of REC and WARC has already been approved and will be accomplished once the formalities have been taken care of in 2010. But that does not necessarily mean that all member churches belonging to these organisations will have a feeling of “oneness” with each other. This can only happen if a new spirit is revealed in all those who are part of the World Communion of Reformed Churches - a spirit of humility, gentleness and patience. No longer will REC or WARC be able to do whatever they want to do. With humility, gentleness and patience they will need to bear with each other in love.

It is only when we truly live according to the virtues in Ephesians 4:2, that we are able to unite without fear, knowing that each will be focussing, not on their own needs and preferences, but on each other's needs. And this unification may then well be experienced as a marriage made in heaven.

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# What unity requires

## *On the road to “World Communion of Reformed Churches”*

Sabine Dressler-Kromminga\*

*Out of prison comes Paul’s call for unity. Sabine Dressler-Kromminga reflects upon today’s situations of incarceration from where we are reminded of being one in Christ. And as splitting up always has been a very painful process, so is the inability to come together.*

When the two bodies “World Alliance of Reformed Churches” (WARC) and “Reformed Ecumenical Council” (REC) will merge the theme of the uniting General Council in 2010 will be “Unity of the spirit in the bond of peace”. The choice of this motto is a programmatic and an ambitious one. Therefore it is worthwhile to examine carefully its background and its context as well as its message and meaning at present and for the future of “World Communion of Reformed Churches”.

The theme is taken from the letter to the Ephesians. This letter is understood to be a religious tract written in the first century by someone who claims the authority of St. Paul and whom, to simplify matters, we call Paul. Directed at various congregations it mainly deals with what the church is about, namely the body of Christ. Christ himself is seen as the head of the church: “And he (God) has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.” (Ephesians 1:22-23).

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Paul's explanations focus on what is called unity of the church and how such unity can be made visible, can be put into practice and can be lived fully by the congregants and within the congregations. In other words: we learn what unity requires from those who are part of and take part in exercised unity.

The following considerations concentrate on Ephesians 4:1-3:

(1) I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, (2) with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, (3) making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

### **Paul's imprisonment**

We hear of the imprisonment of the writer, knowing that Paul was kept in custody for a longer period in the city of Caesarea. It is noteworthy that this fact is mentioned while contrary to other letters no additional information about the personal situation of the apostle is given. So why is Paul's imprisonment mentioned here? Presumably the identification as prisoner stresses and underlines the authenticity, the authority and last but not least Paul's persevering commitment. His bond with Christ led to the apostle's incarceration. Calvin comments this consequence of discipleship or rather apostleship: “We must accept everything belonging to Christ with the greatest obeisance even if it occurs as a disgrace to the world, so that the apostle's confinement deserves more reverence than all triumphal processions of kings.”<sup>1</sup>

But given the fact that this letter focuses on unity of the church, there is more to that. The identification of Paul as “prisoner in the Lord” states and recalls the relatedness and solidarity between the captives and the free, between the secured and the suffering, between the forgotten and the prominent, and by doing so it expresses the unity of believers who are currently in rather differing and unequal situations. From inside the prison walls those who are outside are reminded that together they are *in* the Lord and therefore their lives are bound to one another.

Where do these calls come from nowadays? What are the prisons of our present time? What enchains and incarcerates people today? Where are the places from where we are reminded of this “being one” in Christ? How do we understand unity and what is it about

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<sup>1</sup> Johannes Calvin, *Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift - Die kleinen Paulinischen Briefe*, Ed. Otto Weber (Neukirchen 1963), 155; translated into English by SDK.

today? The Accra Confession declares: “We believe that God calls men, women and children from every place together, rich and poor, to uphold the unity of the church and its mission, so that the reconciliation to which Christ calls can become visible. Therefore we reject any attempt in the life of the church to separate justice and unity.”<sup>2</sup>

*Unity doesn't require equality in the sense of being in the same situation, living under the same circumstances, speaking the same language, sharing the same habits. Unity demands the awareness and understanding of belonging to each other and consequently it has to be materialized so that it can be experienced in its full sense.*

From inside the jail come the appeal and the call for a certain “lifestyle” of those who walk free, namely to live according to that initial call they received. It is the call of the one who announced the very first time he went public that he had come to demolish what kept humankind apart from a life in dignity and instead to grant space and life to people to become what they are meant to be. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free...” (Luke 4:18)

To lead a life worthy of this calling as the letter puts it means to be followers who are conscious of where the one whom they follow came from and went to while sharing human existence in this world. From heaven to underground, from the highest to grassroots, from the holiest to the place where the despised have been moved to. Unity through Christ and in Christ connects the extremes. It encloses and includes the most opposing counterparts. Therefore unity between churches, congregations and congregants is provided with the same ability. We are called to fill it with life, let it become visible, make it happen.

The challenge for the two bodies WARC and REC is not so much one of structural unity as to bring two bodies together, to become united as an ecumenical organization. The challenge for both of them and for all of us as the prospective “World Communion of Reformed Churches” will be to face, to accept and to deal with the call for unity that comes “out of prison”. Like the Ephesians and all the others who received this message at that time had to do.

“No unity without justice”, as we can read Accra, is the mission - and this means more than spiritual unity, even more than being together within the Church and as Church. “No

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<sup>2</sup> Accra confession, Paragraph 30-31, in: Reformed World, Vol 54, 2004, 173.

unity without justice” is the task for the Church facing today’s world, confronted with today’s modern prisons, with today’s world economics, with present divisions, separations and splits into those who have and the have-nots, into those who participate and those who are marginalized or even alienated. In this respect the call for unity is always as well a call for the common witness to solidarity with the captives, the poor, the blind, the oppressed as they are the first addressees of the good news of Jesus Christ.

## Humility, gentleness and patience

In Ephesians 4:2 we read: “...with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love...” What is listed here is more than a catalogue of virtues and covers more than the inner ethos or disposition of the addressed. What is meant by the lifestyle Paul is demanding is the behaviour, the manner wherewith a Christian meets with other people, the attitude whereby they relate to others, the way they respond to the call and how they act in daily life. Life worthy of the calling will circle around human dignity and how to protect it. What is needed then?

First, *humility* - that is the ability to demonstrate a higher respect for someone else than for oneself. For Christians Jesus is the role model of being humble, remembering that it is the meek who are especially blessed. But humility is neither promoting self-denial nor is it the agreement to be humiliated by someone else. Humility indicates the importance of being aware of someone else’s dignity - and by doing so to be conscious of one’s own - and about how easily human dignity can be affronted or even violated and indeed is. A world getting used to the violation of human beings and all creation as is the case in today’s world is urgently in need for a new culture and a new way of interaction amongst people. In particular the sectors of politics and economics are in need of a new performance and a way of acting that abstains from the debasement and the humiliation of others. Accra states: “We believe that any economy of the household of life, given to us by God’s covenant to sustain life, is accountable to God. We believe the economy exists to serve the dignity and wellbeing of people in community...”<sup>3</sup>

As next “code of conduct” there shall be *gentleness*, also known as an attribute of the Messiah (see Matthew 21:5). Swiss author Max Frisch once said analogously that one should not be content with just speaking out one’s mind but should do it in a way that helps rather than hurts the counterpart; that one has to proclaim the truth but it should be offered in such a way that the other person can slip into it like into a coat. If society followed this

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<sup>3</sup> Accra confession, 22, 172.



advice in dealing with one another numerous conflicts would be prevented. The apostle knows well enough that the church is no exception and, often enough, is in need for proper conflict management.

Part of this - and here we come to the third capacity Christians, according to Paul, are in need of - is to learn to be patient with one another as patience is a quality of God and can become the quality of humankind as well. *Patience* is bound to love and love is not only the inspiring source and accompanying power for those in the church and the congregation. Love is the condition for being able to bear with one another as well (see 1 Corinthians 13:4-13).

Here Paul is not asking for the loving affection of everybody for everybody around or for some kind of enforced fondness; his point is not even about mutual understanding or tolerance. Here we are confronted with the very realistic apostolic view on relationships within the church, let alone personal relations: there are times when we can hardly stand each other. Sometimes it does not seem to be possible to stay in the same congregation or church with certain sisters and brothers. Various reasons - and some good ones might be amongst them - can call for separation, for breaking up, for continuing without the other. Reformed churches have a long and in that sense an effective history in splitting up and founding new churches. Often it stemmed from different views on theological and/or confessional positions. Also the ecclesiastical understanding and the emphasis on the local church or congregation as being church in its full meaning contributed to having one's own way.

But our text admonishes us to do something different: to *bear with one another*, to stay instead of leaving, to work through all possible conflicts and to look at the counterpart through the eyes of God, trying to learn from Godly love for each creature. Calvin comments in a rather dry manner: "Where love reigns and is alive we can take a lot from each other."

<sup>4</sup> Even if we ourselves might become an imposition to others or vice versa - we are bound to each other.

Unity depends on the ability and the freedom to be critical but also self-critical. It requires generosity and courtesy, also persistence - and those who are willing to do so.

As splitting up is a painful process in reformed history so is the inability to come together,

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<sup>4</sup> Calvin, *Auslegung*, 156.

to cross bridges or, to use a biblical picture, to pass the ford of the Jabbok like Jacob did. I only need to look at my own background.

I am a pastor in a congregation founded more than 300 years ago by French Huguenots and Reformed Christians from various parts of Germany. Being the only reformed church in the region it forms a small synod together with a few others of comparable history and tradition, which we would call congregational. Through all the centuries my congregation has been an independent one as its sister congregations have been. These congregations are strong in the sense that they always carried a great responsibility for their work and mission for which a certain commitment of the congregants was needed and has always been given. So far, so good. But then there is the Evangelical Reformed Church, a much bigger church in Germany we are co-operating with. We are yet not part or member congregation of it. There is no theological reason for still being divided; we share the same confessions and basic principles. In contrast there are many reasons to become one, to unite. But until now all attempts to merge failed because of different structures which did not seem to be compatible and because of a certain kind of fear on both sides to compromise on what we are used to and what we want to preserve. If it were for personal interest it wouldn't matter. What matters is that we weaken our witness we are called to give as a church to the world - and this seemingly because we are afraid of belonging and having to bear distinctiveness and diversity.

Unity means the contrary of self-assertion: being part of, being next to someone, experiencing togetherness, being responsible, accountable and yet cared for.

### **“Making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”**

Unity is not made by us but is a gift. In God's Spirit we become one. And we are urged to treasure and to keep this unity, to live according to this togetherness, to live in reliance on our sisters and brothers. In so doing, we respond to the call received from Christ.

Nobody ever claimed this to be easy. The apostle knew well how vulnerable unity is, how endangered at times, how easily put at risk. And so did Calvin, lamenting that every day offences are given possibly resulting in quarrels because of the great stubbornness human beings suffer from. This is why Calvin underlines the importance of the unity of the Spirit.<sup>5</sup> To keep this unity by dealing peacefully with one another is the way we are to nurture what

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<sup>5</sup> Calvin, *Auslegung*, 156.

has already been granted to us by Christ.

These conclusions and convictions are summarized and culminate in the apostle's proclamation of one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. Along with this Paul stresses the variety of gifts and talents, the manifold equipment given to the believers in different services and ministries: "(7) But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. (11) The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, (12) to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ." Through different people and their various ways to serve God and the church of Christ unity is fostered and strengthened. We realize:

Unity does not demand uniformity but honours diversity, it respects tradition while encouraging individuality.

This insight can be a great chance for future work. When WARC was founded in 1875 one of the reasons was the concern about the many splits and disunity within the reformed family. This has been a permanent issue throughout WARC's history.<sup>6</sup> At present WARC and REC are prepared to abandon self-interest and historic separation for the sake of the common witness to the world. Yet this unification and its maintenance are not meant to be easy; the two bodies do have differing traditions by accentuating and emphasizing different theological foci and perspectives. There will be discussion and dispute - there has to be. We will learn from the debate as we join forces and we will benefit from clarifications as long as we take on our common responsibility in the struggle for justice in this world.

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<sup>6</sup> Lukas Vischer, *Die reformierten Kirchen - eine unheilbar zersplitterte Familie?* in: *Gottes Bund gemeinsam bezeugen* (Göttingen 1992), 41-42.



# Unity of the Spirit in the bond of Peace *Called to make every effort*

Roberto Jordan\*

*Striving for unity is an important call the church has to obey. But Roberto Jordan makes us aware, that there is also the call for faithfulness. We have to be careful in seeking the balance between unity and faithfulness.*

We believe the Spirit indicates the ways to reach truth,  
life in fullness, justice and peace.

We believe the Spirit teaches us to live in solidarity,  
to live in harmony, to forgive and receive forgiveness,  
to be part of a community of acceptance and respect, which  
grows towards maturity in faith.

This is why, we pray: Lord, renew us by  
the power of the Spirit.

*Gerardo Oberman<sup>1</sup>*

We are on the way towards a challenging and different General Council in 2010. God willing this Council will be a uniting one. The Reformed Ecumenical Council and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches who both, for many years, felt it was better to walk each their own different paths, have now come to the clear realization that they no longer wish to walk separately but rather want to walk together. This walking together even means a change of name. And although Shakespeare said, through Juliet on the balcony: "what is a name... a rose by any other name would smell as sweet"<sup>2</sup>, we can today really affirm that

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<sup>1</sup> Gerardo Oberman (Minister of the Reformed Churches in Argentina), *Credo del Espíritu Santo, Libres para construir la paz* (Recursos Litúrgicos, Consejo Latinoamericano de Iglesias (CLAI), 2001), 29.

<sup>2</sup> William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 2, Scene 2.

there is a great deal in a name. To the whole world a change of name does indicate a change in the life of two organizations, which are working towards coming together and hope to create something totally new.

The challenge has been put before us, not by what either the Reformed Ecumenical Council or the World Alliance of Reformed Churches wishes for, but clearly as a response to that which God wishes for and that which the Spirit had indicated, should be the way to follow. Do we really believe that we could have reached this far if it had not been the Spirit, which set the times and the way to follow? Did the decision to walk towards this new happening not surprise us all? Had we not imagined that the way forward would be a long and sometimes daunting process which eventually and after many ups and downs would lead us to the awakening of the need for a bold and long postponed decision?

We would not have even reached the place we are now if the Spirit had not played an active and disturbing role in the life of women and men who have proposed to us this vision. They pleaded with us to have the courage to begin a way, which we cannot even imagine where it will lead us.

None of this is new. It has happened before. There have been other name changes; there have been other *comings together*. But this is the time the Spirit has given us, and it is now in our hands to respond to the calling. This calling has been summed up in the theme for the next conference: "Making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (*Ephesians 4:3*)<sup>3</sup>. I will dwell on the call "to make every effort", because though the call is that of the Spirit, all of us - women and men of God - are called to play our role as well!

No text should be taken in isolation, out of its context. So it is important to read this call to the unity of the Spirit in the light of the whole chapter. Even further, to read this call in the light of the whole second part of the letter to the Ephesians. Because the challenge put before us is clearly not one we will be able to resolve without doing our best, invoking the Spirit as a constant guide and help. I begin this article the week after Pentecost, which *conditions* a certain interpretation of the text. It means to live out the active and transforming presence of the Spirit not only in the life of women and men but also in the life of the church beyond the celebration of Pentecost. And this in such a way that the Spirit is not a particular *once in a while* celebration but a constant companion on the every day path of life.

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<sup>3</sup> *Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version* (HarperCollins, London 1998).

I believe the text points in two directions. If we are honest to the text we have to look seriously at these two directions when considering the issue.

### **An invitation “towards”**

We first come across the calling, the invitation *towards*; the writer of the text uses such phrases as “I beg you” (Ephesians 4:1), “make every effort” (4:2), “maintain the unity” (4:3), “we must grow up” (4:15). No doubt the unity referred to is the result of the work of the Spirit, yet at the same time, each of us - women and men of faith - are expected to contribute to this unity, which will also be the result of our choosing, of our option. Do we really want the unity? What are we prepared to do or undo towards this unity? These are crucial questions that we will have to face along the way and respond to. Unity, even that of the Spirit, is never the result of goodwill only, there has to be a plus to it.

When the author of the text reminds each and all of us of the “calling to which you have been called”, nothing is taken for granted. This invitation to the unity of the Spirit is made because in actual fact such unity does not exist yet. If it did, then there would be no need to issue such a call.

Not only is unity *not* as such, but the author is fully aware that it does not come easily, in human terms. It is the result of effort and it responds to a plea: *I beg you*. This is not a command to unite, but a heartbreaking call. Unity does not exist as obedience to an order; that would not be the unity we search for. Unity of the church can never be seen as a military command. On the contrary, it must be the result of a deep wish - we must want it to happen, because we recognize that God has called us to unity. Yet we have failed to achieve it, so we have to walk that *extra mile*, we have to make the effort so that the work of the Spirit really bears fruit. The effort before us is that to “*maintain* the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (4:3).

Unity and peace come together, we cannot seek the one without the presence of the other, and this is similar to the closing words of Psalm 85:

“Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet, righteousness and peace will kiss each other... the Lord will give what is good” (10-12).

Unity and peace together are not necessarily the reality that human beings develop as a natural form of life. Sin, in its personal and social expression, so often takes charge and the result is that of disunity or absence of peace. So often unity does not include work for peace and the final result then is that it does not last too long. This is particularly the case in many

political and social conflicts the world has experienced over the last years and in which the church, local and/or national has been involved. With the issue of apartheid being a clear example, or confronting dictatorships in Latin America being another example.

When we seek peace isolated from others, or when we try to create *islands of peace* instead of holistic peace, it is usually because deep down there has been no true search for a unity which has come face to face with difficulties. Rather we have preferred to ignore such issues. What emerges is that we play the unity game without really seeking unity. This has often been the case when, as churches, we have played the painful and perverse game of ignoring issues such as those of human sexuality or gender, believing that we then have peace and unity, but finally realizing we have neither. How then can this call for the unity of the Spirit be so real as to incarnate in the life of the church?

The author of the text has set before us a path to follow (4:2), which includes humility, gentleness, patience and even bearing with one another in love. Each and every one of these concepts reminds us that neither unity nor peace comes easily! These concepts remind us of the fruits of the Spirit to which Paul refers in Galatians (5:22ff), and are a call for us to overcome the worst of our individualism and selfishness; of overcoming the entrenched concept that we hold the monopoly of truth. Humility, gentleness, patience and bearing with one another in love: how can all this happen if we only trust our own vision? We need to open out to the newness of the vision, which the Spirit has always given the church.

Unity is not something we seek on our own, or even for ourselves. Unity involves true *koinonia*, our coming together, seeing our differences and still wanting to be at the service of God. There is no *koinonia* in ignoring what we are and who we are in our differences. So when each of us sticks to our own personal views, to our own individual traditions, to our own set ways, unity of the Spirit will be hard to achieve.

The unity of the Spirit can only be the result of our working commitment to the call received - a call that God makes to us in God's sovereignty. This means that God well knows who we are, what we are, at our best and at our worst, and still God issues such a call because the vision includes all who have been called. Unity is not a *national team* of any popular sport, in which, as certain coaches believe, only some of the best are included. God's vision does not include only some. We then must overcome our tendencies of exclusion, of privilege, of believing we are the only ones called, and this can only be achieved through:

- humility
- gentleness
- patience



- and very specially: bearing with one another in love.

When all this comes together for each and all of us, *then and only then* will we be able to make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit.

That we are different is also very clear in the text itself (4:11-16) when it sets out before us that each of us has different gifts, and we are called to different tasks. These differences should be respected and even encouraged, we should not seek to unify these different callings and tasks, yet we should put these differences to the right purpose: *building up the body of Christ* (4:12). This means we must grow up, mature, and join together.

We cannot use history, tradition, custom, set ways - no matter how much we value them - as an excuse to escape the calling. Each one of us, as individuals and as part of a community, as churches, each of us *must want to work*, yes even if this means a great effort, *towards* the growth of the body, built up in love. It is a calling to go beyond nice words and good intentions, those that on paper all tend to agree with. It is a calling to be active, to be involved, and to be committed to a true and even sometimes disturbing unity, the unity of the Spirit.

Having said all this, we come to a true turning point, which brings us to the second direction indicated in the text.

### **A warning: “Be careful”**

The text we are considering includes a warning: be careful. This warning is there to help us from falling into what I would define as ‘mistaken unity’, if this idea can be used. When reading chapter 4 as from verse 17 the author refers to those whom we must be careful of, there is clear reference to what are described as Gentiles and their “futility of minds”. This does not sound too clear to me. I much prefer the translation into Spanish that refers to “mistaken criteria”<sup>4</sup> and continues with other clarifying concepts such as “darkened understanding”, “alienated from the life of God”, “ignorance”, “hardness of heart” (4:18), and adds “loss of sensitivity” “abandoned to licentiousness”, “greed”, “impurity” (4:19). When completing this list the author states: “This is not the way you learned in Christ” (4:20). In other words, there is a way that has been learnt in Christ and there is a way not from Christ.

I understand then that while there is a unity to strive for, at the same time there is a unity to walk away from. To one we have been called to, and from the other we have been warned

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<sup>4</sup> “Equivocados criterios”, *La Biblia de Estudio - Dios habla hoy* Sociedades (Biblicas Unidas 2000).

to reject.

To be able to take the correct decisions on this matter we really do need the guidance of the Spirit, because there is always the risk of going in the wrong direction or making the wrong decision. In a truly remarkable play by T. S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*, when the tempters have come to Thomas playing with his own desires, Thomas Becket realizes the danger of the moment and says: “The last temptation is the greatest treason: to do the right deed for the wrong reason”<sup>5</sup>. I often wonder about the reasons for some efforts towards unity particularly when the right deed of unity is pushed for the wrong reason, reasons that are not from the Spirit. I fear that we then face not unity but political, social, economical allies *and that is not unity*.

When as Christians called by God to live faithfully in our time and place, we read the signs of the times; we find that so much really goes against the will of God. To this the Accra Confession has spoken clearly. And even when there are many who would have preferred to be silent in this area we have the right to ask: “Why do they prefer silence?” Of course, there is as much an ideological stance when reading these signs of the times as there is when rejecting them, but so often there are those who deny any form of ideological expression. Was it not the famous theologian James Cone who once wrote: “Not to choose is to choose”? We can choose to speak up or we can choose to remain silent. These are the two options we can choose from.

The Accra Confession<sup>6</sup> speaks of the groan of creation, of bondage, of waiting for liberation; of the convergence between the suffering of the people and the damage done to the rest of creation. It states clearly that the “root causes of massive threats to life are above all the product of an unjust economic system defended and protected by political and military might. Economic systems are a matter of life and death”. It reminds us that the “crisis is directly related to the development of neoliberal economic globalization, ...an ideology that claims to be without alternative...”. Since 2004 matters have only been made worse as in the world today all this is still very much present. Even in the life of many of our churches such realities tear us apart. This is why the same Accra Confession calls us to repentance and to seek forgiveness (Accra Confession para 34).

The biblical text, which we have before us, refers to a “former life” and a “renewed life”

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<sup>5</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral* (Faber & Faber, London 1982), 47.

<sup>6</sup> WARC, *That all may have life in fullness, Proceedings of the 24<sup>th</sup> General Council* (Accra, Ghana, 2004, Geneva 2005), Report on Covenanting Section: Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth “Accra Confession”, Appendix 13, 153-160.

(4:22-24). On the one hand corruption and delusion, on the other hand “likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness”. I believe this is what the Accra Confession tried to convey in the section in which it expressed the double reality: *We reject* on the one hand, *We believe* on the other. I really believe the alternatives have to be set out in such a way: not all is right, not all is wrong. We believe and our belief leads us to reject. This is the way we walk in life, and most people would agree that this is not a situation to be achieved in a flash, but rather a life long process, in which both as individuals and as churches there have been the better moments and the worse moments. This again is addressed by the biblical text in the section of 4:25-5:20.

Truth and lies; anger, thieves and honesty; good words and bad words; bitterness and wrath on the one hand, love and forgiveness on the other. Impunity, greed and vulgarity. But there is also thanksgiving. There is disobedience to God’s word, which leads to darkness, and there are fruits of the light. Because all this was real in the first century and because it is real in the twenty-first century there is this warning: *Be careful!*

It is important to take this warning seriously if we really want the unity to be that of the Spirit. We know only too well that the tensions mentioned above are real ones, too real; close, too close. We should not be overconfident that these things cannot happen to us; we should not be that naïve as to believe that it is only *the others* who can do wrong. Such pride and such lack of humility only prove that all are vulnerable, all are capable of unity, and also all are capable of disunity.

I believe this is why the letter to the Ephesians concludes, just before the final benediction, with the somewhat militaristic vision of the right armour with which to face life. I call this the *wardrobe vision*, because it seems as if one opens the wardrobe door and hanging there are these articles which we are invited to put on (Ephesians 6:10-20). When we have the complete picture before us we can then relate to the building of unity in the Spirit in a bond of peace: belt of truth, breastplate of righteousness, shoes for proclamation of peace, shield of faith, sword of word of God. All this to confront the enemy, which are the powers of darkness, spirit forces of evil: these are the ones who work for disunity or for the wrong sort of unity.

It is only through thorough prayer and a firm grounding on the word of God that we will be able to leave behind all that anchors us to the past life the author of the letter speaks of, but we have not yet achieved this. We continue to experience economic injustice both in our churches and by our churches. There has been and continues to be silent complicity which allows for the imperialistic forces to destroy all forms of life in Creation. There continues to be oppression, by which women are victims of violence, hatred, discrimination, rejection

- and this sadly enough can also be found even in our churches.

In so many places, the pressure of cultural values and tradition continue to be stronger than the transforming effects of the Good News of life in fullness for all people, and this is particularly clear in all that relates to issues such as HIV/AIDS, gender and human sexuality.

The structures of power and dominion by which most Free Trade Agreements (FTA) are imposed by the political and economic *élites* of our countries and their leaders. Many of them are members of some of our churches, and the result of these FTA creates hunger and malnutrition that continue to kill so many people in this world and even the United Nations affirms the food crisis we face today is to continue for many years still. This has been clearly denounced by many of our churches over the years, the latest public declaration being the AIPRAL and CLAI (Caribbean Forum of Integration), which took place in Venezuela (May 15-17, 2008)<sup>7</sup>. Again the recent UN summit in Rome (early June): many clear words were spoken, some of them with a clear reference to biblical truth.

This analysis could go on forever, many other examples can be mentioned and in each region there are many other situations, which can be referred to. When faced with this there is so often silence, there are lies, there are false promises; yet at the same time there are calls for change and this has so often ended in exclusion and even expulsion from the church communion.

When all this and even more takes place, then we must beware. There is with no sort of doubt a unity of the Spirit in a bond of peace, *but* there is also a unity of the enemy of God in a bond of injustice and hatred. The first one is the result of humility, gentleness, truth, patience and love; the second one is the result of falsehood, bitterness, anger, slander, malice and hatred. The first one leads to fullness of life for all creation, it leads to inclusion and acceptance. The other one leads to exclusion, privilege for few and rejection.

The unity of the Spirit leads to life, the unity against the Spirit leads to death.

## **A way ahead in the midst of this tension**

We know well enough that the tension between one and the other expressions of unity is something present and real, a tension we live with on a regular basis. We have to work towards one and away from the other. With this on my mind I was really surprised when embarked on something quite different from this article, while reading Marcel Pradervand's

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<sup>7</sup> Document that can be found on AIPRAL webpage: <http://www.aipral.org/novedades.htm>

book “A Century of Service”. It gives us the history of the first century of the life of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. Towards the end of the first chapter, the author sums up the “situation of the Reformed Churches in the middle of the nineteenth century” indicating that “unity was not one of their most treasured possessions”<sup>8</sup>. This affirmation has been made even of the current situation of Reformed Churches in the late twentieth century and the beginning of our present century. The call to unity has been strong over the last few years and the work being carried out by WARC Mission Project is a clear reminder of the arduous task before us. The statement made in the book reminds us exactly of the tension we refer to: what we aspire to, what we don’t yet have, what we should be involved in.

Yet in Pradervand’s book there is a warning sentence, which we do well to take into account, particularly when unity becomes a focus. “We have to remember that division is not the greatest sin of the church; unfaithfulness is the greatest sin.”<sup>9</sup>. Again the tension put in the midst of the search for unity.

Could we today reaffirm such a warning as relevant to the present situation of our churches? I dare believe that unity is, without any shadow of doubt, a central issue in the life of churches who seek to be honest to God’s calling, be they Reformed churches or all other denominations part of the body of Christ. Yet with the same breath and conviction I would sustain that all effort towards unity which does not place faithfulness to the Good News of Jesus Christ at the top of the agenda is not church unity, it could simply be closeness of churches. I believe it is similar to what Jesus warns us about in the closing of the Sermon on the Mount: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven” (Matthew 7:21).

Jesus continues referring to all those people who claim entry to the kingdom of heaven because they have imagined that through prophecy, through exorcisms, through deeds of power all would be good enough. All this seems so worthy, so close to the kingdom values, so commendable, could anyone imagine that such claims would be rejected? Yet Jesus surprises these people by saying “NO”, this is not the case: “I never knew you; go away from me you evildoers” (Matthew 7:23). If we are not “known” by Jesus, all seems insufficient. It’s not a matter of merely proclaiming it must also involve living the will of God: “everyone who hears these words of mine *and* does not act on them will be like a foolish man...” (Matthew 7:26).

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<sup>8</sup> Marcel Pradervand, *A Century of Service, a history of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches 1875-1975*, (The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 1975) 10.

<sup>9</sup> Pradervand, *A century of service*, 11

Faithfulness can only be the result of hearing God's words and doing them, and we can only achieve this as part of life of prayer, hope, confidence, obedience, commitment to justice, truth and solidarity, a firm belief in the absolute sovereignty of God in all areas of life. When as churches we do our utmost to follow the path of faithfulness an agenda emerges, one we cannot and should not ignore. Yet if we choose to ignore it, we do so at our own peril: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him, for that means life to you and length of days..." (Deuteronomy 30: vss. 19-20).

If we are to be true to our calling we can only be Reformed if we claim the "*semper reformanda*" vision. This is the invitation to revise our ways in the light of the word of God, to make the right choices, to confess our complicities with the powers of our time, to repent from our mistakes and truly turn towards the ways God chooses and indicates. On this road we follow, we will find companions with whom we should develop in the firm links of faith and unity; women and men together recognizing the gifts received from God, which must be put to the service of the whole body. Companions in the sharing of the bread (*com panis*), in a world which is both hungry for the word of God and for bread and justice.

In faithfulness to God, the Spirit *will* show us all that we must turn away *from* and all we must turn *towards*. The Spirit then *will* open our eyes to recognize those we are called to walk with, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

I believe that our first calling on the way ahead is to faithfulness and that unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace will result.

### **Some final thoughts**

While writing this article I have often felt that it acquired a life of its own. The original plan is not very similar to the final format. And so I would like to end with something of my personal journey, which has opened my eyes to callings and warnings, and I am grateful to both of them.

For over half of my life I have been fully involved with ecumenical living; it began in the local congregation where we shared many activities with the local Roman Catholic Church, with the Anglican Church, with the Methodist, Waldensian, Lutheran Churches and with other churches' congregations. This later developed when the National Church asked me to be part of the Ecumenical Dialogue Team of the National Church, which met

with other national churches in the area. I was not yet sixteen when that happened and it was a wonderful learning experience. I was by far the youngest of the group and had a lot to learn. What continued was a long road, which included the broader ecumenical life. I have been involved in efforts for the unity of the church in dynamic and concrete terms for many years. I have often been part of ways, which have ended in frustration, and realized that we should have taken other paths. I have been part of efforts, which seemed successful yet time proved they were mistakes.

Currently the church of which I am president is involved in a process with a sister church and we hope this will conclude in full unity. We have sought the guidance of the Spirit and we hope we are contributing to the bond of peace. I have come to realize that the difference lies in *motivation*. Many times the energy behind the walk has been only too human, and faithfulness sometimes came in second place. I go back once more to T. S. Eliot's quote from *Murder in the Cathedral* "the right deed for the wrong reason". I have felt that too often unity was put too high up, as if it were an end in itself and not a means. I firmly believe that when unity is the call we must also consider many other issues if we are to be totally responsible to God's calling. The search for unity when it goes hand in hand with faithfulness will lead to a good direction.

I believe in unity - but not in unity at any cost. The unity of the Spirit should be the result of the matters the Spirit puts before us and expects us to respond to. This is what I understand as faithfulness and I believe this is what we read in Ephesians chapter 4. We must find that we have in common and share this (vss 4-5), and also be clear on what we believe is not from God and what we cannot share. Unity involves honesty, love and hope so the bond of peace will bring all efforts to maturity.

Unity of the Spirit does not fall from above, leaving out our human callings and efforts; it will be the result of us leaving behind what is not from God and bringing together all that is from God. And then allowing ourselves to be transformed by the love of God who wants us to respond to the call for unity of the Spirit - the real unity of renewed women and men who constantly reflect on what God will in the light of God's light. This is the challenge to "make every effort".

A whole new realm of possibilities is opening before both the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Reformed Ecumenical Council. It is a challenging time. A time, which calls for clarity and confidence so that, with the help of the Spirit, the true unity, which contributes the gift of each to the development of the body, may be a wonderful and fulfilling reality, based on faithfulness to the Good News of fullness of life for all people and creation. The new name should represent the new reality, a

reality founded by the Spirit and built on the rock of God's word and God's teaching. To this we are called to make every effort. This is why I would like to conclude with a prayer and a conviction:

We believe the Spirit provides grace, movement, and strength;  
the Spirit generates possibilities and opens perspectives,  
the Spirit motivates us and put before us challenges.  
We confess that the Spirit moves us to witness and that  
a community that does no proclaim  
is a community that is empty of the Spirit of God.  
This is why we pray: Lord, move us with the power of the Spirit.

We affirm that the Spirit gives us dreams  
And opens our mind to new horizons, encouraging those  
who dream these dreams, to live in the hope of better times.  
That is why we pray: Lord, fill us with the dreams of the Spirit.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Gerardo Oberman, *Credo del Espiritu Santo*.



# Maintaining the unity of the Spirit

Henk deWaard\*

*Unity is the ideal situation of the church and we have to overcome the considerable disunity found in the church. Henk de Waard however observes that there are fundamental Christian truths necessary for unity. What are these basic doctrines?*

The New Testament speaks consistently of the church as being one. The classic passage that emphasizes the unity of the church is found in John 17:20-21.

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”<sup>1</sup>

The anticipated formation of the World Communion of Reformed Churches is a unique opportunity to focus on the *Unity of the Spirit in the bond of Peace* and consider again the unity that God gives which is at the same time a mandate for the church.

I will first focus on Ephesians 4 and then draw out some biblical, theological and confessional issues for consideration.

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<sup>1</sup> Biblical references in this article are from the New International Version (NIV).

## **One in Christ**

In the first three chapters of Ephesians, Paul has been unfolding God's great redemptive programme. It means the restoration of a universe, the reconciliation of all things through the cross of Christ and the formation of a new humanity where all the barriers of race, colour, ethnicity, and social class are broken down.

It is hard for us to understand the intensity of the struggle for Jewish Christians to embrace Gentile converts. Should they not be circumcised and submit to the Mosaic laws? We see the strength of this struggle reflected in Galatians 2:11-13 where Paul opposed Peter in Antioch because he was inconsistent in his relationship with the Gentiles.

The Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 addressed this issue and determined:

"It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality."

This decision meant that the church could break out of its Jewish confines to become a universal faith.

Paul in Ephesians 2 marvelled at the miracle of reconciliation between Jew and Gentile. The Gentiles were brought near; the two have become one; hostility has ended; they are no longer foreigners or strangers; they are fellow citizens in God's household. God accomplished that great reversal through Christ. "For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility." (Ephesians 2:14)

## **Maintain the unity of the Spirit!**

The challenge for the church is to maintain that unity that was given. If God's people are one, single body composed of Jews and Gentiles, then it stands to reason that such unity must be made manifest. The manifestation of unity is part of the life that is in accord with the high calling that the church has received (Ephesians 4:1).

As Paul unfolds the nature of the church's unity in Ephesians 4, he emphasized that:

- Unity can only be realized on the basis of genuine love. (4:2)
- Unity is based on the fact that God is one. (3-6)
- The diversity of gifts within the body of Christ enhances unity (7-12)
- Unity must lead to growing maturity (13-16)

The theme for the General Council meeting in 2010 focuses on the second aspect, namely, that unity is based on the fact that God is one and therefore: “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace”.

The call to maintain unity is based on the character of God Himself. It is God the Father who has created the human family and more specifically a new humanity. This new humanity comes into existence through the reconciling work of Christ and it is the Spirit who creates this one body. There is only one Christian family and one Christian church because there is only one God. To speak of a multiplicity of *gods* is as incongruous as speaking of a multitude of churches. Equally, as you cannot split God, you cannot split churches! At least, that is the *ideal* situation. Yet, we are painfully aware that the church is divided into many fragments! There is considerable disunity and in certain instances the one gospel is distorted.

Therefore, this call to maintain the unity of the Spirit is as timely as it is urgent. It will not do to justify the disunity of the church by resorting to and hiding behind the distinction between the *visible and invisible* church. Such a distinction minimizes the call to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the face of potential conflict, disharmony, competition and human arrogance. Rather according to Ephesians 4, Christians are to display a spirit of humility, gentleness, patience and tolerance.(4:2) Furthermore, striving for unity requires effort. “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace”. Unity does not just happen. It needs to be worked at in the concrete, local setting!

Yet, there is a wider application as well implicit in the image of the church as a body.

## Imagery of the body

One of the images the New Testament uses to highlight the unity of the church is the imagery of the body with many members, all of whom are needed and all of whom contribute to the proper functioning of the whole body.

The term *body of Christ* is used without the definite article to indicate that the local church is never the total body of Christ. Rather it is a manifestation of the one, universal church. In the local church, the new people of God are represented. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul points to the interdependence of the members who are responsible for each other. This same mutual dependence and fellowship are expressed in the images of a household and brotherhood (1 Peter 2:7, 5:9; Ephesians 2:19). The church is bound together by an underlying, essential gospel which binds the members together (Romans 1:1; Colossians 1:26; Acts 28:31; 1 Corinthians 15:1-3). Unity is not primarily doctrinal or organizational, though these things are important. True unity is *in Christ* (Ephesians 4:15-16).

The imagery of a body and household is not just a description of the relationship of one

individual member of the congregation to others. There is a wider dimension. We see this expressed in the gifts of food sent from one church to another, in the greetings exchanged between churches, in the mutual decisions on matters of dispute (Acts 15), the actions taken together and many other considerations. This mutuality between churches can be seen in such passages as Acts 11:27-30, 1 Corinthians 16:1-3, 2 Corinthians 8:9, Romans 15:25-27, Galatians 2:10.

## **Unity and Truth**

Are there any limits to that unity? As observed earlier, people with different gifts need not be a threat to unity. Rather, they enrich the functioning of the body. (Ephesians 4:7-12)

Are there circumstances that lead to the breaking of fellowship? How much doctrinal diversity is allowed and how much conformity is required to maintain unity?

The New Testament indicates that there are some kinds of error that are not to be tolerated; some beliefs and behaviours that require judgment to be expressed. In 1 John 4, 2-3: "Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus (...) is the spirit of the antichrist." The church has drawn from these scriptural injunctions the principle that fellowship is not to be exercised with those who deny basic doctrines of the faith.

What are the basic doctrines that would require repudiation of fellowship? What are the identifying, fundamental Christian truths that are necessary for unity?

## **A hierarchy of truth**

There should be little question that a distinction should be made between essential and less essential doctrines and that fellowship should be maintained with all those who agree with us in essentials. The great leaders of the Christian Church have all been in agreement with this. John Calvin once wrote to the refugee church in Strasbourg that they should not disrupt the unity of the church over a candle. He was willing to accept some kind of episcopacy in the church provided the bishop would subject himself to the word of God. When shown the second prayer book, he wrote back to one of the Puritans: "In the Anglican liturgy (...) I see many tolerable stupidities" (*tolerabiles ineptias*). He recommended that they be endured for a time. In the fourth book of the Institutes he expresses himself as willing to maintain fellowship with the Catholic Church itself, provided the essential doctrines of the church were maintained.

The real question for us is how these essential doctrines are to be determined. The early Church found two criteria helpful in this respect; to listen to the *bishop* who was considered the successor to the apostles and to follow the formulation of the *Creeds*. In the profusion and confusion of modern differences within the church these do not prove easy solutions to work with. There are many issues which have arisen since the Ecumenical Creeds were written on which they have nothing to say.

## Reformational Confessions

An appeal to Reformational confessions will be helpful but will not provide easy answers to the possibilities and limits of unity.

*The Belgic Confession Article 29* contrasts the true and false church in terms of the classical marks of the church, namely, the pure preaching of the Word, the proper administration of the Sacraments and the faithful exercise of church discipline. It goes on to say that by these marks the true and false church is easily distinguished.

But where is that church? Do jurisdictional or personality differences justify breaking fellowship? For example, in 1 Corinthians 3 we read of a party spirit in the church- “I am of Paul, I am of Apollos...”. Did such differences require an anathema? What do we mean when we affirm with the Nicene Creed: “We believe one holy, catholic and apostolic church”? We affirm that the church is one (though we don’t know exactly the shape of that unity), that it is holy, that it is catholic (universal) and that it is apostolic (interpreted differently by Catholics and Protestants).

While this Creed raises many issues it also provides us with a *vision*. The unity of the church is an article of faith which at the same time requires us to give visible expression to it. Nothing absolves the church from striving to express the unity of God’s people. We must engage in conversation with other Christians with whom we disagree on certain matters and express fellowship with all whom we may legitimately recognize as Christians.

Another confessional document worth considering is the *Heidelberg Catechism* (Lord’s Day 21):

“I believe that the Son of God, through His Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, *from the beginning of the world to its end*, gathers, defends and preserves for himself a community chosen to eternal life and united in *true faith*. And of this community I am and always will be a living member”.

The person who confesses this cannot hold that the church began with the emergence of the Reformed Church in Reformation times. The church is gathered from the beginning to the end of time and is gathered out of the whole human race. Yet the tension is also felt here when the catechism says: *united in true faith*.

*Chapter 25 of the Westminster Confession* speaks of the invisible church which is catholic or universal, consisting of all those throughout the world who possess the true religion, together with their children. And then it says:

“This Catholic Church hath been sometimes more, sometimes less visible. And particular churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered and public worship performed more or less purely in them”.

At least this confession recognizes that even the purest churches on earth are subject to mixture and error.

## **Identifying the one faith**

While the Reformational Confessions are helpful, they cannot give the definitive answer to the question of fundamental Christian doctrines that are necessary for unity.

But there is indication in scripture itself as to what are considered fundamental doctrines of the faith without which the gospel is either distorted or lost.

a. Some of these doctrines are already clear in the Old Testament and reiterated in the New Testament. Paul, while speaking to Gentiles in Athens ( Acts 17) alludes to these doctrines. They include the holiness, unity, spirituality and graciousness of God. The doctrine of creation, providence, the createdness of humanity, human accountability and a final day of judgment. All of these truths are part of apostolic preaching.

b. We can go a step further and single out some doctrines as being absolutely essential and integral to the gospel. We think here of the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ. These truths are considered to be *of first importance* (1 Corinthians 15:3).

c. Galatians 1:8 clearly spells out that the denial of justification by faith implies a rejection of Christ’s redemptive work and a return to a legalistic form of religiosity.

d. The Incarnation of Christ according to 1 John 4:1 is another doctrine that is foundational to faith. To deny it is to adopt the spirit of antichrist.

e. Peter's confession of Christ as Messiah and Son of God is the rock of Christian faith. If this is not believed, worship becomes an act of idolatry (Matthew 16:16).

The above at least indicates that the gospel has a clear doctrinal foundation that must be believed. Without this foundation the Christian faith becomes a pious illusion or an empty charade!

## Conclusion

Fostering fellowship and working with brothers and sisters of other churches and denominations is not optional. It is implicit in the call to unity. When we strive to maintain such unity, a great discovery sometimes awaits us. Often we learn that the positions ascribed to persons of another family of Christians are inaccurately pictured or do not mean what we have always thought they meant. We may discover that there is indeed a greater degree of unity than we had expected!

Even if there are doctrinal departures from the faith, at least we are able to hold each other accountable on the *things that really matter*. Or as Paul puts it: "We bear with one another in love". Such mutual accountability is also part of our ecumenical calling!





# Musings on a text

Dorcas Gordon\*

*Dorcas Gordon asks in this article how the text of the theme for the Uniting Council in 2010 was chosen. Does not the strong call for unity in Ephesians 4 go together with authority in such a way, that some may be excluded. Caution is needed!*

For Reformed people scripture is “the rule of faith and life,” a foundational element in all confessions. It is then a truism that the use and interpretation of the Bible is central in all that we do. We have privileged a process of ordering, evaluating and relating what is said in the Bible to the questions at hand.<sup>1</sup> As Reformed people, we would hold that a basic principle for interpretation is “love of God and neighbour” and that “all interpretations of scripture are to be judged by the question of whether they offer and support the love given and commanded by God”, i.e. both love of God and love of human beings.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout WARC’s history this principle has resulted in interpretative statements and confessions that seek to hold in balance both love of God and love of neighbour. The most recent, the Accra Confession, condemned the systemic injustice in the economy and the earth, and provided a scriptural warrant for every statement. For Reformed people, scripture is central to belief and action. Hence scripture used as a theme for our gatherings needs to be prayerfully and thoughtfully chosen because it does matter to us, indeed is a matter of life and death for us.

It is with this background then that I venture to speak of the choice of scripture for the General Council meetings to be held in Grand Rapids, USA in 2010; a choice that I am

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<sup>1</sup> The opening statements in this article rely on a document of the Presbyterian Church (USA) that can be found on its web-site: <http://www.pucus.org/oga/publications/scripture-use.pdf>

assuming seeks to hold in balance ongoing work on the Accra Confession and the celebration of union with the Reformed Ecumenical Council (REC). Given this context to speak of “maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” seems like an appropriate theme, however these words from Ephesians do have a shadow side that we need to recognize and take into account as we plan for 2010. This article will attempt to situate my concerns about what the author of Ephesians was hoping to accomplish and relate it to concerns about how it might be used inappropriately in our common life.

## A second-generation text

Ephesians is generally considered a second-generation text. That is, a text written in the second phase of growth within the Jesus Movement. Many of those who were with Jesus during his earthly ministry, those who had firsthand experience of his ministry, death and resurrection, have died. It is clear from the text of Ephesians that there has been at least one generation that was no longer with them (Ephesians 2:20). It is equally clear that there are concerns about multiple and conflicting understandings among the believers about how the good news of the gospel is to be lived out (Ephesians 4:14, 5:6). As second generation believers, both members and leaders are facing particular challenges. The one of perhaps greatest urgency concerns whose voice will have the authority to form the community, to form those who are increasingly removed not only from the immediacy of Jesus’ message, but also from the experience of the apostles and prophets.

As the Jesus Movement grew and, through the influence of the Apostle Paul (who himself had never experienced Jesus’ ministry), spread throughout many of the cities of the Roman world, the task of reinterpreting the gospel in new and different cultural and religious contexts became increasingly urgent. The likelihood is that when Ephesians was written, Paul himself is dead and that another leader in the churches he founded is the one who actually penned this letter.

Additionally, this letter is distinct from others in the Pauline *corpus*. It is not written to a single community or to a particular individual but is more likely a circular letter<sup>2</sup>, a letter written to all of the churches planted by Paul. Its *raison d’être* is a familiar one for us in the twenty-first century: who has the authority to present the gospel message

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>3</sup> Ralph P. Martin, *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon*, Interpretation a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1991), 5-6.

to a new generation of believers who come from a variety of contexts and face different challenges from those faced by the founding fathers and mothers. Can unity be found? Is peace within the community attainable?

Ephesians is interesting in the eloquence and challenge of its message. On the one hand it affirms often in doxological language that “in Christ, who is now Lord of the cosmos and the destined final point toward which history is moving, God has spelled out a concern for the world and its people.”<sup>4</sup> This would have been encouraging and empowering news for those believers who must have felt the weight of the power of Rome and its suspicion of eastern religions. What a message: no matter how things appear to be, God is in control; justice will win in the end and the faithful will know vindication. The letter also expresses a hope for oneness and unity (primarily in the section within which the WARC text is found). The dividing wall between Jew and Gentile has been broken down; a new race has been created; unity in this troubling and divisive area seems to have been realized. The author, affirming the one foundation in Christ, draws on the symbol of the church as a building in which the family of God - one family - is to be housed.<sup>5</sup> The use of family (household) imagery in relation to the church is further developed in chapter 5 where the church (“without spot or stain”) is described as a bride obedient to her bridegroom (husband), Jesus Christ, and again in chapter 6 where the other pairs in the Roman family are addressed in their relationship to the head of household i.e. children to father and slaves to master.

In the Roman world the household structure was what gave unity to society and provided primary support to Roman peace. If everyone in each household including that of the emperor (head patriarch) lived out their role in relationship to their household head (patriarch) then the political and economic systems of Rome could work effectively. Household obedience and order are central to empire values, central to Roman peace (*pax Romana*). Given this interpretative framework one begins to experience a sense of wariness and uneasiness about the shadow side of Ephesians. In other words the obedience required for unity, the obedience owed to Jesus Christ appears to be identified as an obedience of some to others within the community with little doubt as to who obeys whom. At the very least the interpreter should ask questions about whose voice we are hearing, and how accurately that voice defines the reality of the community of believers? Dare we ask about the place and the possibility of support for empire values within the Pauline formed communities.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 37.

## The choice of the text

Why this epistle with its themes of oneness and the cosmic power of Christ might be important to WARC at this time seems evident. As we look at the world of the twenty-first century with its injustice, wars and terror, Ephesians' affirmation that God is ultimately in control is empowering. That we will be whole, at peace, reconciled one with the other engenders hope. The promise of this text is especially powerful for WARC and for the 2010 assembly where oneness with REC is to be celebrated.

Such a text can be an important message particularly in light of the reality (or my perception of reality), that our common life lacks unity. This appeared evident to me at the Accra General Council meetings. Here "red" and "blue" signs, intended to assist the delegates to reach consensus, were instead raised vigorously in opposition to each other - the divisions of region, ethnicity, north and south so evident. I would guess that these divides will continue to plague the WARC membership. The Accra meetings painfully pointed out the difficulty of reaching consensus in the face of political and economic, not to mention cultural, racial, and gender difference - perhaps not so different from what the author of Ephesians was facing in his community!

For WARC a challenge at this next General Council in Grand Rapids, I would suggest, will be to claim and to reach some consensus around ecumenical oneness across such economic, political, ethnic, racial and gender divides. Maybe this is too much to ask. Perhaps the challenge is simply to find a space or as some post-colonial biblical interpreters would claim, a borderland or border crossing<sup>6</sup>, a liminal space, where we can continue to debate practices that support not only economic but gender and racial justice. Such space is especially critical at this stage in WARC's history given the union with REC with its related name change and by no means less critical, the financial exigencies of WARC's own survival.

Critical for me is the assurance that the lessening of ecumenical divisions or the focus on systemic injustice in the economy and the earth (and this in no way is to diminish the sinfulness of economic injustice) will not be at the ongoing expense of those who have traditionally been at the bottom of the patriarchal pyramid. All the "isms" in our world are related and equally sinful. We cannot pursue some to the exclusion of others.

A lot is riding on the biblical theme for such a gathering especially since scripture continues to be central to how reformed people discern the Spirit of God in their midst! Thus I am worried, or more accurately wary, of the choice of Ephesians 4:3. Given its context I am

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<sup>6</sup> D.N. Premnath, ed., *Border Crossings: Cross-Cultural Hermeneutics* (New York: Orbis, 2007), 1-11.

anxious about what kind of warrant it will provide for our meetings. How was this text chosen? Whose voice(s) was/were authoritative in the selection process and on what grounds does that voice claim authority! What is the goal hoped for - exhortation, encouragement or what! Is this text good news equally for all?

“Making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3)

Ephesians 4:3 is part of a larger section that goes from 4:1-6:20. Chapter 4 begins the paraenetic or exhortatory section, that section in which the author beseeches the hearers to live lives of unity and peace.<sup>7</sup> These chapters focus on how unity within the community, a unity that is divine, i.e. comes from the Spirit, should be lived out in earthly relationships. In a series of creed-like statements the meaning of the unity of the Spirit is unpacked. Seven times “the one” is emphasized in three sets of pairs forming a triad of couplets (one body-one Lord, one Spirit-one faith, one hope-one baptism).<sup>8</sup> Given that the hope of persuading the hearers to his viewpoint governs and shapes the author’s argument, a hermeneutics of suspicion asks whether the emphasis on oneness does not suggest more about the author’s intention than the reality within the community. In other words, why focus on unity if it already exists? Surely this emphasis more likely indicates that there are deep divisions within the community.

In addition, the allusion to baptism is illuminating in light of what comes later. In other words, it is startling to observe the difference between Paul’s own rhetoric in Galatians 3:26, which insists that oneness and unity necessitate the erasure of differences of ethnicity, class and gender, and what transpires in chapters 5 and 6 concerning women and slaves - again in the midst of an allusion to baptism (Ephesians 5: 26-27). Given the earlier celebration of the breaking down of the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile, a natural progression would be the breaking down of barriers of sexual and class distinctions. Such is clearly not the direction of the author’s thought.

Throughout Ephesians it is not hard to see the fervent appeal for unity. Unity is already given (i.e. it comes from above, from the Spirit). When community gathers surely there is

<sup>7</sup> Carolyn Osiek, “The Bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:22-23): A Problematic Wedding,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 32 (0), 31

<sup>8</sup> Martin, *Ephesians*, 48.

simply the need to confess and practise what is present. That we can grant the author until he provides his own agenda for the appropriate practice of that unity with its subtle threat that any other course is against the Spirit. This is a potentially dangerous text for anyone who disagrees with the author's interpretation especially if his authority to set such rules is accepted within the community of believers.

A new generation is being incorporated into the community, a generation that does not have the benefit of the tradition of the apostles and prophets. They only have the interpretation of the leaders present with them now. Within this battle for the minds and hearts of new believers, the author's theological appeal to maintain unity in the Spirit is powerful, but also dangerous in its subsequent identification of unity in terms of obedience to those who are the household head, i.e. husbands, fathers and masters.

### **Community stabilization**

Margaret MacDonald who writes on the institutionalization of the Pauline churches argues that three stages in the development of the earliest Pauline communities is visible in scripture. These she identifies as: community building (Paul's genuine letters); community stabilization (the authors of Colossians and Ephesians) and community protection (the author of the Pastoral Epistles). The first stage, the stage of community-building institutionalization, is a stage in which the symbolic universe<sup>9</sup>:

“is in the process of solidifying. At this stage, much ambiguity surrounds the question of how members of the community should act and how beliefs should be interpreted. Institutionalization is relatively free to proceed in different directions... As problems of management increase, more firmly established guidelines for living will be required.”<sup>10</sup>

By the second stage the community is facing different challenges and debate emerges over how to bring Paul's teaching to new situations. Beliefs become detached from their original setting and are fitted into the new situation. An example would be Paul's use of the

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<sup>9</sup> The symbolic universe gives order to the lives it embraces; it is continuously shaped by social experience and continuously shapes what is experienced. Moreover, the symbolic universe of the community constantly reinforces the social structures of the community and is constantly being reinforced by them.” Margaret Y MacDonald, *The Pauline Churches: A Socio-Historical Study of Institutionalization in the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> MacDonald, *Ephesians*, 84.

body image in 1 Corinthians 12 to emphasize the interdependence of the community. Here the head is just one more body part whereas in Ephesians the head is clearly Jesus Christ and the believers are united in their obedience to their head (Ephesians 1:22, 4:4). Another example would be Paul's de-emphasis in this same letter of marriage and the Roman household structure (ch.7) and its prominence in Ephesians 5: 21-6:9. In other words in this second stage of development, increasing problems of management and formation necessitated more definite guidelines for how belief and practice relate. The author of Ephesians is exhorting those in the community to adopt the head/body distinctions and the order and peace attainable through the Roman household code to provide that stabilization.<sup>11</sup>

There is a clear relationship between unity and authority in the body expressed in Ephesians 5:23. Here the husband over the wife (bride) provides the example for the symbol of Christ as head of the church. The logic is clear: the Holy Spirit gives unity; Christians need to live that unity in their lives; living that unity means an affirmation of the headship, familiar in the Roman household code, revised,<sup>12</sup> but nonetheless clearly recognizable. Now the subjection of the wife (bride without spot or stain) to the husband is divinely ordained and bears the weight as to<sup>13</sup> whether a community exhibits the unity that comes from the Holy Spirit. Even more dangerous is the presentation of the woman as the one who is to reflect the purity of the sect. The physical union of marriage seems to be described as providing sanctifying possibilities. In spite of the exhortation to mutual submission in 5:21, the unfolding of the argument suggests that submission is a "woman thing".<sup>14</sup> It is also a "slave thing" as we can see in 6:5-9 where slaves are to submit to their masters as if they were Christ. It is not difficult to understand what this teaching and its relationship to the headship of Christ and the unity/oneness of the community of believers in the Spirit might mean for the woman and slaves in the Ephesian community.

In other words within this community the belief or confession of unity and oneness is urgent, however it is the practice that holds danger for all marginalized groups but particularly for women in light of how the author describes the authentic/authorized practice of unity.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>12</sup> Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), p. 107 has coined the phrase love-patriarchalism to speak of the difference between the Roman code and its description in the New Testament, i.e. unlike the Roman code some limit is put on the patriarch's exercise of his various roles, even while his authority within the system is upheld.

<sup>13</sup> Martin, *Ephesians*, 118.

<sup>14</sup> Osiek, *Bride of Christ*, 31.

Given the credal confession of “oneness” there is the strong hint that if practice does not conform to the author’s understanding, such is a sin against the Holy Spirit as indicated by the list of vices and a plea to the community to walk as children of light not of darkness (Ephesians 5:8) that comes just prior to the text’s development of expected relationships within the community.

The tone in Ephesians is unmistakable, leading us to ask about the difference between reality and rhetoric, about the fact that the church is challenged to discern what it means to live in the world of the Roman Empire, a world defined by hierarchy and order, a world where obedience to the household code was a mark of good citizenship, disobedience a matter of national security or at its worst a treasonable offence! What does it mean here? Here again we need a hermeneutics of suspicion to ask what might be unfolding. How does the reality of the community relate to the words of the author? What might other evangelists, prophets and preachers hold, i.e. is there more than one direction for the community of believers to go? What do we gain and what do we lose by accepting without question the words of the author who is claiming Paul’s voice to lead in a very particular direction.

## **Exclusion?**

Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, a feminist scholar, would ask: What does this text do to those who submit to its world of vision and values?<sup>15</sup> This is an important question for WARC. If we submit to its vision and values, how does Ephesians 4:3 or more particularly what follows in chapters 5 and 6, impact hope for racial, ethnic and gender equality within the Alliance? Throughout the history of the church chapter 5 has certainly been used to limit women’s equal participation in both church and society, and continues to be hazardous to women’s fullness of life.

Any use of scripture as an organizing motif that seeks to motivate people to set directions for that organization necessitates asking about issues of power. Judith Butler states<sup>16</sup>

“to establish a set of norms that are beyond power or force is itself a powerful and forceful conceptual practice that sublimates, disguises and extends its own power play through recourse to tropes of normative universality. And the point is not to do away

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<sup>15</sup> Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 187.

<sup>16</sup> Judith Butler, *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York, London: Routledge, 1992), 6-7.



with foundations, or even to champion a position that goes under the name of antifoundationalism. Both of these positions belong together as different versions of fundamentalism and the sceptical problematic it engenders. Rather, the task is to interrogate what the theoretical move that establishes foundations authorizes, and what precisely it excludes or forecloses.”

What the author of Ephesians wants to exclude or foreclose can be identified in a reading of the authentic Pauline letters. Through a close reading we see the author selectively picking up parts of Paul’s argument to form new communities of faith and practice. What he leaves out speaks loudly about the future direction of the community if his voice is accepted as authoritative! A similar question needs to be asked of us: what might WARC be excluding or foreclosing in its privileging of this text?

In a sermon given in Trinidad when the decision on unity with REC was made, Cliff Kirkpatrick said: “The line which may have separated guest and host has been erased and we have become one. Thus we shall proceed as members of the one body, the body of Christ.”<sup>17</sup> I would suggest caution. Surely the claim that the line separating guest and host has been erased depends on whose voice is privileged, whose voice determines what it means to be guest and host. How can we be certain that some do not continue to remain outside the feast, neither guest nor host, still uninvited and unnamed or inside but served a different and lesser menu! i.e. unlike the Roman code some limit is put on the patriarch

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<sup>17</sup><http://warc.jalb.de/>



# Maintaining the unity by living in peace

Ephesians 4:3

Piet Strauss\*

*How can the World Communion of Reformed Churches become a real communion, relevant for modern times and an influential factor in the ecumenical world? In this article Piet Strauss wants to answer that question.*

Two important words for the co-existence of Christians as members of the church of the Triune God are used in this context: unity and peace.

## Unity

This unity is a unity in faith. It comes from the Holy Spirit as one of the three persons in the Triune God and therefore from God Himself. It is not strange that it is explained as a unity based on the very existence and the work of God the Father, the Son or Lord and the Spirit (Ephesians 4:4-6).

It is a unity in the faith of the one and only God binding the believers in a unity of hope and in church particulars or aspects of faith such as baptism. A unity that is shown in their doctrinal understanding of these particulars, their application of it and its influence on their relationship with God and on faith and life as a whole. A unity that is created and guided by the truthful message of Christ and, in doing so, simultaneously guarding the believers against heresies and false prophets (14-15).

It is a unity that grows just as the church grows as one body. A unity that is as natural as the unity of a physical body with all its parts. A unity that is strengthened by a growth in the knowledge of Christ and by living close to Christ: a unity in imitating Christ (13). This

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knowledge of Christ, of his teachings and what he did for our salvation is not only an intellectual thing, but also something of the heart. It determines the attitude in life as a whole.

True church unity is possible only in relation to the Triune God Himself and is based on Christ as the Head of the church (1:22).

True church unity is not formed by human inspiration or mere planning. Church unity is in the first instance worked at and brought about by the power of the Spirit and the truthful Word of God. It is a fact given in connection with the Lord Jesus Christ, but also a command to every believer. A calling or task to be fulfilled in obedience to God. In Ephesians 4 church unity is as part of the Christian life as is faith or love.

As an institution of faith, church unity is part of the church. Close church unity implies a unity in the core elements of faith or the basic truths of the Christian faith. This does not suggest that church unity requires a unity in every aspect of church life or - even less important - in every ethical viewpoint or point of faith in church. A point of departure which also opens the way for a meaningful and acceptable diversity.

Ecumenical bodies should work and strive for church unity as a unity of faith and should not try to force members or member churches to compromise core elements of their faith which, in the reformed tradition, is formulated in creeds or confessions of faith. Issues of faith are things you should be convinced of and not forced to accept. The closer you get to the core elements of faith, the easier unity gets.

That is why getting together in the new World Communion of Reformed Churches is the more *natural* thing for these churches. The truths of confessed faith according to the Reformed tradition, as accepted by member churches, create a unity of faith, which can be enjoyed and worked with. The opposite is conflict and internal opposition.

Important and accepted core truths of faith in the Reformed tradition are the well-known *solas* of the Reformation: *sola gratia*, *sola scriptura*, *sola fide* and *sola Christus*. These in itself create a strong basis for church unity and forms an important point to work from for the new World Communion. These truths are summarized concepts of the Christian faith and perhaps the broadest Reformed umbrella available to be used in a Reformed ecumenical body as a point of departure and a visible form of church unity.

The point of departure for church unity in the Reformed tradition is not one or other form of structure, but oneness in the basic elements of the faith. The form of this structure, however, should also indicate the closeness of the involved churches or believers as far as their common faith is concerned.

## Peace

Peace here is seen as a requirement for unity. If there is no peace, there can also be no unity. This peace, however, is not just the absence of strife or conflict. It is much more positive than that.

This peace is created by the fact that the Gospel of Christ takes hold of the inner life of the believers or members (14-16) of the church and drives them to meet one another on the basis of the Word and the laws of God. When the commandment of the Lord is obeyed, there is a just peace and a unity maintained by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit chooses to work through the Word for obedience of the law of God. A law which is summarized by God's central commandment of love.

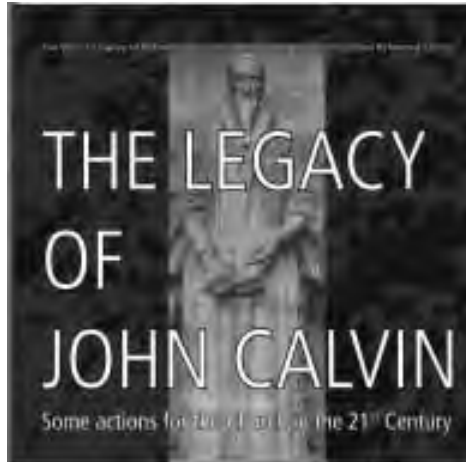
The Holy Spirit transforms peace amongst people from a negative lack of conflict to a positive, active, peaceful unity behind the will of God. It transforms people's lives from a negative "we don't do this and that..." to a positive "we are reborn to act on this and that..." This kind of peace adds quality to peoples' lives.

But this kind of peace as an indicative or given gift in the believers in Christ, should also be maintained as an imperative (4:3). What we have here in Ephesians 4:3 is a unity as well as peace based on the foundation of the fruitful life-bringing message of Christ. A unity and peace belonging and linked to one another in its existence.

The truthful message of the Bible does not only give people something worthwhile to believe in and cling to at all costs. It also works new life and unity and peace in peoples' lives.

## Conclusion

On this basis a World Communion of Reformed Churches should be more than only an outward structure of believers being able to meet, join in shallow worship and debate in relative peace. It should also be a real communion in the Spirit of Christ doing more than only engaging in academic debates. It should be an influential unity or body, which is a factor for the Reformed idea worldwide. A factor because it binds a significant number of reformed churches and carries the scriptural truths of the Reformation, which is still very relevant in modern times.

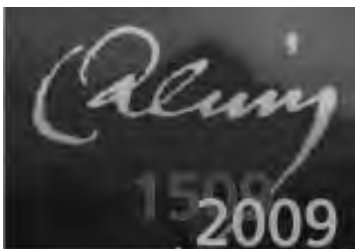


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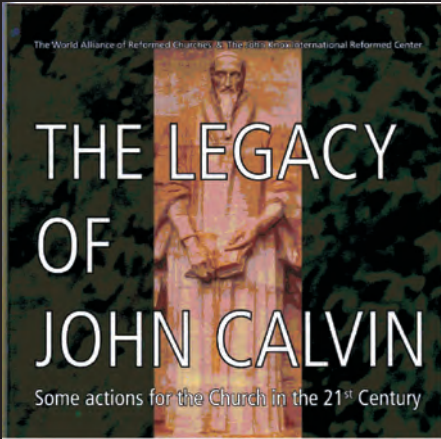
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