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# The meaning of the unity of the church – an ecumenical perspective[1]

ABSTRACT

The modern ecumenical movement is historically deeply rooted in (inter)denominationalism of the 17th century. In this movement doctrinal differences were not considered to be of fundamental importance. In sociological terms (inter)denominationalism can be described as anti–sectarian but that does not imply that it is pro-church. From a denominational perspective 'pro-church' has a distinct 'sectarian' ring to it and might even be considered to be socially disruptive. Therefore the catholicity of the church should not be confused with modern interdenominationalism. In 'part one' some characteristics of denominationalism are critically scrutinised. 'Part two' deals with the indissoluble link between the 'simplicity of God and the unity of the church'.

## NO VIEW WITHOUT A *POINT* OF VIEW

The topic that was allotted to me does not read merely 'the meaning of the unity of the church,' but a rider was added: 'an ecumenical perspective.' This calls for closer scrutiny.

From the outset, it should be clear that no ecumenical perspective transcends (for instance) the Roman Catholic, Lutheran or Reformed traditions and provides, so to speak, a perspective from above. Consequently, the concept 'ecumenical theology' does not denote an all-inclusive form of theology, but rather refers to a specific branch of theology within the various historical traditions 'produced with the conscious intent of contributing to the recent movement toward a greater or more visible unity of the church'[2]. The so-called 'ecumenical texts,' which are the object of ecumenical studies, do not hover above the various traditions, but they came about through endeavours within the various traditions, be they texts from single churches, or joint multilateral texts from groups of churches, or bilateral texts that have resulted from discussions between two churches.

The qualification, 'an ecumenical perspective' in the title, should consequently be understood as a perspective *on*, not a perspective *from*. Like every other perspective, this represents a specific point of view. This is unavoidable because, without a *point* of view, there is no view at all. Nowadays we are told by all and sundry that every point of view is contextual. I take them seriously, and can only hope – although I cannot take it for granted – that they will take themselves seriously in this regard.

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1 Paper read at a conference at the Free University of Amsterdam, October 2003, on 'Affirming and living with differences'.
2 Michael Root, 'Ecumenical theology,' in: D.F. Ford (ed.), *The modern Theologians. An introduction to Christian theology in the twentieth century*, UK 1997, 538.

Since I belong to the Reformed tradition, firstly by birth and later by choice, this will be a *Reformed* perspective. My context is fundamentally shaped and influenced by the texts of the so-called 'ecumenical' and Reformed confessions. As there is no single simple Reformed position, but sometimes even contradictory Reformed 'narratives,' I also accept the truism that my interpretation of the essence of the Reformed tradition is not the only possibility. Granted that all people, including myself, always speak from a personal point of view, I would, however, like to add another platitude namely that this is not an isolated point of view but presents a point on a line. Some people's views are closer to, and others more remote from mine. This holds good for people within my tradition, but also for people who belong to other Christian and even non-Christian traditions, including atheists. Since we all belong to the human race, I believe communication is not impossible and that we are able to agree or disagree, and therefore can learn from other people, otherwise I see no point in speaking to anybody. Every time we take the trouble to talk to another person, we *de facto* refute the sneaking solipsism which the modern 'turn to the subject' has unfortunately foisted upon us.

Openness to others does not exclude firmness of conviction. I don't believe that all points on the line are on the same level, otherwise no choice and no conviction would be involved. Furthermore, I am convinced that a fundamental conviction is not so much your choice, but more a case of being chosen. The conviction takes hold of you. Your choice takes the form of surrender. This conviction determines the way you look at and experience the world. Without it you are blind and nothing makes sense. This resembles the way we use our spectacles: we do not look so much at our glasses but through them in order to see the world. That does not exclude the possibility of exchanging your point of view for another. This may vary from a slight shift in conviction to a full-blown conversion. If that were impossible, I fail to see the point of theological discussion.

Michael Root rightly maintains that virtually all theology would claim to be 'ecumenical.' Most certainly this is true of Reformed theology. The ecumenical character of Calvin's theology is well attested[3]. Could it be a mere coincidence that the name 'Geneva' to this very day has an ecumenical ring to it? Not for nothing have the Reformed churches of the early period been called the 'Protestants of the Diaspora'[4]. As fugitives scattered across the globe living in London, Embden, Geneva, Straatsburg, Frankfort, etc., 'they admitted that they were aliens and strangers' on earth (Heb 11:13)[5] and, like the Puritan Pilgrim Fathers, their existence often resembled a *peregrinatio*[6], i.e. a pilgrimage in a foreign land 'longing for a better country – a heavenly one' (Heb 11:16).

PART ONE: THE RISE OF DENOMINATIONALISM AND THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

**Ecumenical and denominational**

'Unity' and 'ecumenicity' are not simply identical, but refer to two related, albeit different, subjects. In Michael Root's definition of 'ecumenical theology' quoted above, we saw that he

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3    W. Nijenhuis, *Calvinus oecumenicus: Calvijn en de eenheid der kerk in het licht van zijn briefwisseling*, s'Gravenhage 1959.
4    Cf. O. Noordmans, 'Het Calvinisme en de Oecumene,' in: *Verzamelde Werken* (V W) 6, 397-409.
5    *Ksenoi and parepidemoi*. Cf. 1Peter 2:11: *paroikoi* and *parepidemoi*.
6    The Latin parallel of the Greek *paroikia*. Augustine used the concept and it can be translated as a 'temporary residence,' but also as a 'pilgrimage in a foreign country.' See R. Feldmeier, *Die Christen als Fremde*, 211f.

refs to 'a recent movement.' In an article that attracted much attention and has even been called a 'classic',[7] the church historian Winthrop Hudson argues cogently that the roots of this 'recent movement' go back to the dawn of *denominationalism* in the 17th century. The mood of this movement is well captured in the much-cited words of John Wesley, quoted by Hudson:[8] 'I … refuse to be distinguished from other men by any but the common principles of Christianity … I renounce and detest all other marks of distinction. But from real Christians, of *whatever denomination*, I earnestly desire not to be distinguished at all .…'[9] Whilst British Methodism did not consider itself to be a denomination or church next to, or in opposition to the Anglican church, Richey is convinced that it embodied what he has called 'the denominational principle'[10], which requires 'de facto surrender of claims to be *the* church – to be the church continuous with the early church or to be the only church exemplificative of the New Testament. Methodism by the accidents of its creation and implantation in America witnessed to this principle'[11].

In common usage it is noticeable that we seldom, if ever, speak of the ecumenicity of the church. Whilst the notion 'unity' is naturally associated with the church, it would seem that the concept 'ecumenicity' is intuitively reserved for the various denominations. Apropos of Hendrikus Berkhof's book, *God's one church and our many churches*[12]*,* one could say that 'unity' has to do with God's one church, whereas 'ecumenicity' refers to our many churches, respectively denominations. For that very reason, 'ecumenicity' can be rather confusing. It is a symptom of the lack of unity and, simultaneously, a sign that longing for unity lingers on. It shows that the church is part of this world that is falling apart and, at the same time, it is a signal from God's coming eschatological Kingdom of which the church is a *paroikia*[13].

*Denominationalism*, which is closely connected to the development of the ecumenical movement, is an ambiguous phenomenon that, in a sense, is concurrently a symptom of despair, and a sign of hope. According to Hudson[14] the concept *denomination* became fashionable during the early years of the Evangelical Revival. However, to trace the origin of *denominationalism* as an overall pattern, compels us to delve deeper. Hudson himself is convinced that behind this phenomenon one can detect a new ecclesiology that has its roots in the theology of the Reformers who deny that any ecclesiastical institution can claim exclusively to be the true church of Christ. In 17th century England, however, a new but important element was added by the *Independents* within the Puritan movement that allowed not only for different churches within different

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7    R.E. Richey, 'Introduction,' in: R.E. Richey (ed.), *Denominationalism*, Nashville 1977, 19.
8    W.S. Hudson, 'Denominationalism as a basis for ecumenicity: A seventeenth century conception,' in: R.E. Richey, *Denominationalism*, 21. This article originally appeared in *Church History* 24 (1955), 32-50.
9    It should be noted that Wesley himself was a devoted Anglican who had no intention of forming a Methodist denomination apart from the Church of England. According to Richey, a link also exists between Wesley and the later Anglican comprehensiveness. 'Wesley's experientially and theologically derived eclecticism and his maturation as a folk theologian or catholic theologian did not dissolve Wesley's dedication to the Anglican Church or his resolve to maintain the evolving Methodist connection within it.' Consequently, he did not join, but rejected the Dissenters. R.E. Richey, 'Social sources of denominationalism: Methodism,' in: R.E. Richey (ed.), *Denominationalism*, Nashville 1977, 172.
10   Idem, 174.
11   Idem, 177.
12   H. Berkhof, *Gods ene kerk en onze velen kerken*, Nijkerk *s.a.*
13   See P.F. Theron, 'The church as paroikia and "higher critical" theological training,' in: *Church and Ministry, Studies in Reformed Theology* 3, (1999), 51-70.
14   W.S. Hudson, 'Denominationalism as a basis for ecumenicity,' 21.

countries, but for different expressions and organisations of the same church within the same city. Russell Richey[15] suggests the possibility of two other, perhaps additional, sources, namely John Locke's *Letters concerning Toleration* in which he claims that the church is 'a free and voluntary society,' as well as so-called 'catholic' Protestantism including figures such as Bucer, Beza, Melanchton and, he adds, 'perhaps John Calvin.'

This hesitancy ('perhaps') concerning Calvin is called for. The unity of the church was of prime importance for Calvin, but one should be careful not to identify this longing for unity with *interdenominationalism* that goes hand in hand with denominationalism. The mood reflected in the words of Wesley referred to above, is far removed from Calvin's intentions. From the start the phenomenon of *denominationalism* had the tendency to make light of the existence of the many denominations and, therefore, to gloss over doctrinal divergences. In his article 'Denomi-nationalism: The shape of Protestantism in America,' Sidney Mead enumerates a number of characteristic traits of this movement including revivalist Voluntarism with a strong leaning in 'an Arminian or even Pelagian direction with the implicit suggestion that man saves himself through choice'[16]. The liberal spirit is reflected in a history of Congregationalism published by the Congregationalist press and quoted by Mead who describes a Congregational church as a 'group of Christians, associated together for a definitive purpose, not because of peculiarities of belief'[17]. George Lindbeck observes that 'the relative unimportance of denominational differences in the eyes of pietistic and revivalist Christians, even Lutheran and Anglican ones, made interdenominational cooperation possible'[18].

The same propensity to trivialise the disunity in the church, which is characteristic of 19th century liberal theology, is apparent in Kuyper's approval of, and even praise for, the 'pluriformity' of the church. The remark of Rev. Sikkel is to the point when he denies that one should call a broken vase a very 'pluriform' vase. It is not pluriform, but in fragments. 'Pluriformity' is too pretty a word for something that, in reality, is rather painful. In South Africa during apartheid, we also called ethnic denominations a sign of the rich diversity of the church while, in actual fact, it was a sickly symptom of divisiveness. As Lindbeck puts it: 'The massive interdenominationalism of nineteenth-century evangelicalism together with its liberal offshoots blurred the lines between the Protestant churches, but by itself contributed nothing to their unity'[19]. The doctrine of denominationalism, like the doctrine of pluriformity, is a symptom of 19th century liberalism when life (and work) was deemed to be of far greater importance than faith (and order). This tendency manifests in the preference for the church as a *living organism* at the expense of her *institutional form*. What it boils down to is a choice for *Romanticism* at the expense of the *Reformation*[20].

The syncretistic tendency inherent in the emphasis on life at the expense of faith, is clearly perceptible in the close relation between the so-called 'Abrahamic ecumenism' including Jews, Christians and Moslems propagated recently by Karl-Joseph Kuschel, and the call for an all-

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15    R.E Richey, 'Introduction,' 20.
16    S.E. Mead, 'Denominationalism: The shape of Protestantism in America,' in: R.E. Richey (ed.), *Denominationalism*, Nashville 1977, 92.
17    Idem, 81.
18    G. Lindbeck, 'Ecumenical theology,' in: D.F. Ford (ed.), *The modern theologians. An introduction to Christian theology in the twentieth century* (Vol. 2), UK 1990, 256.
19    G. Lindbeck, 'Ecumenical theology,' 261.
20    See my 'One Bible, Two Testaments: Covenant, ethnicity and new creation,' in: *Faith and Ethnicity* Vol. 2 (*Studies in Reformed Theology* 7), Zoetermeer 2002, 48-50.

encompassing world ethos[21]. Wim Balke detects the same trend in the invitation sent to other religions to attend the meeting of the WCC (1983) in Vancouver. Apparently, the emphasis on the unity of the church had shifted to unity between the world religions[22].

According to Lindbeck, anti-unitive interdenominationalism is a characteristic of Protestants in general and he sees Roman Catholics lately moving in the same direction. Due to its importance, please allow me the following more extensive quotation: *They [the Protestants, PFT] regard the various denominations as basically interchangeable and move freely from one to another as convenience and congeniality dictate. In the United States, most Protestants, so the surveys indicate, belong to more than one denomination in the course of their lives. One of the chief values of ecumenism for them is that it has legitimated this dissolution of abiding communal loyalties and made church-hopping religiously respectable. There are not a few Roman Catholics who, since Vatican II, are beginning to acquire similar attitudes. Church unity greater than inter-denominationalism does not greatly interest them. They are content to stop short with mutual respect, cooperation and intercommunion*[23]. He is also aware, and very much in favour, of multi-lateral dialogues like the one that resulted in the Lima document, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (1982), and bilateral enterprises such as, for instance, the discussions on the doctrine of justification between Lutherans and Roman Catholics but, generally speaking, he is afraid that interest in what he calls 'thematic ecumenism' has declined dramatically over the past decades.

## Civil religion and social justice

Denominationalism has alternately been blamed for its sectarianism and praised for its anti-sectarianism. In his well-known *Kerk en Secte* (Church and Sect) that was dedicated to the great ecumenist, H. Kraemer, F. Boerwinkel defines a sect as 'a group of people who predominantly out of a desire for purity of doctrine, absolutises a half-truth, breaks the solidarity with the whole and no longer experiences this breach as painful'[24]. Using this definition as criterion, one most certainly must say that denominationalism lacks the desire for purity that is a typical trait of the sects. This does not prevent the different denominations from fighting for themselves, but it is more a case of propagating than of proselytising. It lacks the vigour and conviction of the 'battle of the sects.' Simultaneously, one can hardly say that they experience what has been called the 'frightening fragmentation'[25] of the church as especially frightening. Denominationalism is not fanatical, but shallow.

Sociologically speaking, *denominationalism* respectively *interdenominationalism* is anti-sectarian but this does not imply that it is pro-church. As a matter of fact, to be more precise, from a denominational perspective, 'pro-church' has a 'sectarian' ring to it and might even be considered to be socially disruptive.

On the face of it, denominationalism may seem to foster diversity and frustrate sameness in society, but many observers maintain that rather the opposite is true. They consider denominationalism as the root that produced a national civil religion, transcending specific religious creeds, as fruit, serving a common secularity, which prevents social strife and promotes

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21     C. van der Kooi, 'Towards an Abrahamic ecumenism?' shortly to be published in *Reformed Studies*.
22     W. Balke, 'Abrahamitische Oecumene,' in: *Heel het Woord en heel de Kerk*, Kampen 1992, 206. At the same Vancouver meeting, the WCC refused to condemn the Russian invasion of Afghanistan. Small wonder that many regarded the *Program to Combat Racism* (PCR) as nothing but political opportunism.
23     G. Lindbeck, 'Ecumenical theology,' 261.
24     F. Boerwinkel, *Kerk en secte*, 's-Gravenhage 1959, 19.
25     E.D. Roels, *God's mission. The Epistle to the Ephesians in mission perspective*, Franeker 1962, 290.

secular peace. After all, the 'American dream' implied overcoming Europe's problem of disunity as, in 1829, nobody other than Charles Hodge claimed: 'having one language, one literature, essentially one religion, and one common soul'[26]. During John F Kennedy's presidency 130 years later, Robert Bellah published his *Civil religion in America*[27]. This social function of denominationalism is especially apparent in ethnic denominations, such as the white and black denominations in South Africa and America, where 'pure' means 'pure white' and black means 'beautiful.' Therefore, in his *The Denominational Society,* Andrew Greeley described the denominations as the supporting framework for the American society[28], whilst Martin Marty[29] views ethnicity as the skeleton in the denominational cupboard.

The *Missionary Movement* that, to a large extent, was the stimulus behind the establishment of the *World Council of Churches*[30] had its heyday during the 19th century. This was the time of powerful missionary societies that coincided with the rise of denominationalism. During the 20th century it became clear that the disunity within the church poses a serious threat to the effectiveness of her witness to the world. In this regard, Christ's prayer for his people: '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' (Jn 17:20f. cf. 11), springs to mind. Nevertheless, we should sound the warning that if the denominations try to be one merely that the world may believe, the latter will not believe but rather call our bluff. We should be one because we *are* one in Christ; then the world will believe. This caution is called for because it so happens that one of the characteristics of denominationalism noted by Sidney Mead[31] and elaborated upon by Russell Richey[32] is its *purposiveness*.

According to the Dutch scholar and ecumenist, J.C. Hoekendijk[33], we should not speak of the 'apostolicity of the church,' but more accurately of the church as a function of the apostolate. In this 'functional ecclesiology' (or rather: lack of ecclesiology), the church is merely an instrument serving an alternative end. From the start, this functional view caused much tension within the WCC between the 'Faith and Order' and 'Life and Work' movements, a friction that Lindbeck believes increased in the latter part of the previous century[34]. In certain circles there are those who 'may be committed to working for the unity of the churches, but if so, their reasons will be instrumental: they will not be interested unless they see how church unity contributes to peace, justice, liberation, and the unification of humanity.'[35] This emphasis is already clearly perceptible in the phrasing of the invitation to the first

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26    M.E. Marty, 'Ethnicity: The skeleton of religion in America,' in: R.E. Richey (ed.), *Denominationalism*, Nashville 1977, 256.
27    Idem, 256, 258.
28    See R.E. Richey, 'Introduction,' in: *Denominationalism*, 249f.
29    M.E. Marty, 'Ethnicity: The skeleton of religion in America,' in: *Denominationalism*, 251-272.
30    See G. Vandervelde, 'Costly Communion: Mission between Ecclesiology and Ethics,' in: *Ecumenical Review* 49 (1997), 46.
31    See S.E. Mead, 'Denominationalism: The shape of Protestantism in America,' in: R.E. Richey (ed.), *Denominationalism*, Nashville 1977, 70-105.
32    R.E. Richey, 'Social sources of denominationalism: Methodism,' in: R.E. Richey (ed), *Denominationalism*, Nashville 1977, 163-179.
33    See J.C. Hoekendijk, *De kerk binneste buiten*, Amsterdam 1966 (4th edition).
34    G. Lindbeck, 'Ecumenical theology,' 261f. He argues that it coincided with the shift within Roman Catholic theology from *resourcement* that entails a profound study of the sources of the Christian faith, to *aggiornamento* that propagates the involvement of the church in society. He complains that the excitement evoked by Vatican II's *Decree on Ecumenism* has vanished, since many seem to view the concern of *Faith and Order* for church unity and confession as a distraction from the social task.
35    G. Lindbeck, 'Ecumenical theology,' 265.

*Life and Work* Conference in Stockholm (1925), which states emphatically that 'our Conference does not wish to deal with any controversial questions of theology or of ecclesial organisation. By contrast, the Christian communities can already now without difficulty extend hands in various directions in order to deal with the big questions of our time in accordance with the foundation of Christian ethics and the Spirit of Christ'[36]. When, at the same time, the *Message* of the Stockholm conference insists that 'the world is too strong for a divided church' and Nathan Söderblom submits: 'We say deliberately that in the region of moral or social questions we desire that all Christians begin at once to act *as if* [emphasis PFT] they were one body in one visible fellowship,' the same sentiment is patently clear. Bishop Desmond Tutu alluded to these words at the Fifth Conference on Faith and Order (1994) when he declared that Apartheid was 'too strong for a divided church,' describing the unity of the church a 'practical imperative' and calling on the churches to act 'as if' united, letting the 'theologians sort out the mess for themselves'[37].

Lately there have been serious attempts to bridge the gap between 'faith' and 'life' as evidenced by the so-called 'ethics and ecclesiology study' and the publications *Costly Unity* and *Costly Commitment*[38]. Also worth mentioning is the University of Notre Dame Conference (1995) organised by the *US Faith and Order Commission* on *The Fragmentation of the Church and Its Unity in Peacemaking*, which, explored 'the link between ecclesiology and peacemaking, in dialogue with the Historic Peace Churches'[39]. The Report states that 'the divisions in the Body of Christ in the world are a counter witness to the peace sought and proclaimed by the church as the follower of the Prince of Peace who prayed for his disciples to be one. The movement toward unity among the churches is itself a sign and model of their peacemaking vocation'[40].

Vandervelde agrees with Henk Vroom that seeking to be a source of inspiration for the secular society involves the danger of merely accelerating the process of secularisation, adding rather pointedly: 'Paradoxically then, when the church achieves secular relevance, it has become irrelevant'[41]. He reminds us of the statement by Lesslie Newbigin that the primary mission of the

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36    G. Vandervelde, 'Koinonia between church and world,' in: *Exchange* 26 (1997), 3.
37    See G. Vandervelde, 'Koinonia between church and world,' 1, 38. These words allude to the Message of the Stockholm conference that insists that the First Word War has compelled the churches to recognise with shame that 'the world is too strong for a divided Church,' as well as Archbishop Nathan Söderblom submission: 'We say deliberately that in the region of moral or social questions we desire that all Christians to begin at once to act *as if* [emphasis PFT] they were one body in one visible fellowship.'
38    See G. Vandervelde, 'Koinonia between church and world' and his 'Costly Communion: Mission between Ecclesiology and Ethics.' Also M.E. Brinkman, 'Church and Politics: Remaining ecumenical divergences?, shortly to be published in *Reformed Studies*.
39    J. Gros & J.D. Rempel (eds.), *The fragmentation of the Church and its Unity in peacemaking*, Michigan/Cambridge 2001, 220. The WCC has decided on a 'Program to overcome Violence' to succeed the 'Program to Combat Racism,' and to call the period 2000 to 2010 the 'Decade to Overcome Violence.' Time does not allow for scrutinising Matthew 5:9: 'Blessed are the peacemakers …' In: A.J. Tambasco (ed.), *Blessed are the peacemakers. Biblical perspectives on peace and its social foundations*, New York 1989, 62-74, H.M. Humphrey ('Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God') argues rather convincingly that the 'peacemaking' referred to in this text should be understood ecclesiologically as Christians' responsibility toward Christians.
40    Idem, 221. One of the recommendations reads: 'That the conciliar work on justice, peace, and the integrity of creation consider unity in common confession, sacramental life, and mutual accountability for the process of common witness and action in the world' (226).
41    G. Vandervelde, 'Koninonia between church and world,' 32.

church is not to promote 'values' or to provide social services but to proclaim the Gospel which is sharply at odds with the assumptions of society[42].

From a Reformed perspective, to maintain that Christian faith cannot be separated from Christian life, is stating the obvious. That the unity of the church is indeed costly, is *extra controversiam* as Calvin would say. However, what is needed is not simply to emphasise the costly ethical implications of faith, but also the costly doctrinal implications of ethics. The emphasis on ethics at the cost of doctrine, suggests a superficial unity that is not nearly costly enough. Not only the inherent connection between faith and *works*, but also the intrinsic relation between *faith* and works, should be stressed. Paul, the 'apostle of Protestantism,' told us in Galatians 5:6 that 'the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.' It is sad to say but it seems that, at this juncture in time, highlighting the first part of this pronouncement is even (especially?) in many Reformed circles very much overdue. Small wonder that, in spite of all the activism, we are lagging behind also as regards the second part of Paul's pronouncement. It is so degrading for our self-asserting flesh that nothing but faith counts. That entails being crucified with Christ. No other unity is nearly costly enough.

PART TWO: THE SIMPLICITY OF GOD AND THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

**The unity of the attributes of the church**
The *Nicene Creed* that safeguarded the unity of the faith against the Arian heresy, confesses: 'I believe one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.' From the very beginning, truth and unity have been inseparably united. On the one hand, the unity of the church consists in the truth that the church proclaims; at the same time, the unity of the church is part of the truth that the church confesses. For that very reason unity and apostolicity are one, albeit not identical. The same holds good for the relation between unity and holiness. The church's lack of unity and the absence of holiness boil down to the same thing. To acquiesce in our lack of unity, would mean resigning ourselves to our sinfulness. In the same breath, Jesus intercedes for our unity and prays (Jn 17:17): 'Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.'

Of special importance for the purpose of this paper, is the intimate relation between *unity* and *catholicity*. The latter attribute was of special importance in the early church, as is apparent from the adage, *Christianus mihi nomen, catholicus cognomen* (*Christian is my name, catholic my surname*). It is a pity that, because of polemical reasons, the notion of *ecumenicity*, in its modern sense, has to a large extent replaced the concept of *catholicity* in our ecclesiology. Karl Barth deplores the fact that the term 'ecumenical' has been chosen to describe the modern ecumenical movement because of the 'passionate opposing of the terms "Catholic" and "Protestant"', and expresses the hope that, in due time, the 'term "catholic" will fill out or burst through the narrower term "ecumenical"'[43].

Quite obviously, *unity* and *catholicity* are two sides of the same coin. Unity refers to the fact that the *whole church is one*; catholicity refers to the *one church as a whole*. Ignatius of Antioch already relates the concept *catholic* to the entire church as distinct from the local church; but, belonging to the catholic church, also the local church can be called 'catholic.' After all, the

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42    Idem, 35.
43    K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV* (Part One), Edinburgh 1956, 703. See also H. Stirnimann, "Catholic" and "ecumenical," in: *The Ecumenical Review* 18 (1966), 293-309, and L. Vischer, V. Borovoy & C. Welch, 'The meaning of catholicity,' in: *The Ecumenical Review* 16 (1964), 23-42. For an in-depth research of the historical use of the concept 'catholic,' see W. Beinert, *Um das dritte Kirchenattribut* (2 vols.), Essen 1964.

principle of Ignatius applies: 'Where Christ Jesus is, there is the catholic church'[44]. Augustine declares: 'The church is one, which our forefathers called catholic, in order that it should be made clear by her name, for she is a single whole'[45].

The concept acquired a polemic connotation referring to the 'whole truth' as diametrically opposed to the half-truths of the heretics. In his *Commonitorium* (434), Vincentius Lerinus warns that 'in the Catholic church itself the greatest care must be exercised to hold that which has been believed everywhere and always and by all'[46]. Therefore K. Barth explains the catholicity of the church as its *identity* amidst all modification, difference and dissimilarity in time and geographical location. 'In essence the Church is the same in all races, languages, cultures and classes, in all forms of state and society. If it is to remain the true Church, it cannot be essentially determined by any of these societies. It cannot allow its conception of itself to be dictated by them. It cannot adjust itself to them'[47]. After all, in the final analysis, the *fullness* of truth to which the concept catholicity refers, is not the sum total of an addition sum, but the fullness of God who resides in his Son (Colossians 2:9). 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever' (Heb 13:7) and the church 'is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way' (Eph 1:23)[48].

### The simplicity of God and the multiplicity (respectively: duplicity) of man

Throughout history, every renewal of the church that was not merely ephemeral but of lasting significance, was accompanied by the call: *ad fontes*, and was therefore a movement back to basics. The *sjema* of Israel in Deuteronomy 6:4f: *Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one* [*echad*]. *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength,* is about as basic as it gets. In these words, faith and life, doctrine and ethics are intimately connected.

The *sjema* in the Old Testament resonates throughout the entire New Testament and has rightly been described as the message of the Bible in a nutshell. As a whole, Scripture could be seen as a clarification of this basic confession: The Lord is One. In Rabbinical literature, the word *echad* was used as a synonym of God[49]. Consequently it is a warning against idolatry in its multifarious forms. God is *one*; therefore: *Love the Lord your God with* all *your heart and with* all *your soul and with* all *your strength.* The singularity of God tolerates no rivalry or competitors. Against all forms of *semi*, his singularity insists on *soli*: *Soli Deo gloria*.

The *sjema* not only proclaims formally that God is one of a kind (unique), but, at the same time, that God is one in character. What Augustine has said regarding the church i.e. that it is 'a single whole,' applies in the first instance to God Himself. *Unity* characterises God's very being. In relation to everything else, He is *singular*; with regard to Himself, He is *simple*. The same expression is used in Exodus 36:13, when the skilled men who made the tabernacle, 'fasten the two sets of curtains together so that the tabernacle was a unit,' in other words, undivided. When Joseph interprets Pharaoh's two dreams, he uses the same expression in Genesis 41:25: 'The dreams of Pharaoh are one and the same.' God's simplicity signifies his integrity.

We are prone to think that God is perplexing and complicated whilst, by comparison, we are 'pure and simple'. After all, what can be more complex than, say, the Trinity? It is rather amusing

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44    V. Borovoy, 'The meaning of catholicity,' 28.
45    V. Borovoy, 'The meaning of catholicity,' 28
46    R. Seeberg, *The history of doctrines*, Michigan 1964, Vol. 1, 384.
47    *Church Dogmatics IV* (Part One), 703.
48    For the relation between *pleroma* and catholicity, see H. Berkhof, *De Katholiciteit der Kerk*, Nijkerk 1962.
49    S. Hanson, *The unity of the church in the New Testament*, Uppsala 1946, 6.

that, in Scripture, it is precisely the other way round. In Roman 7, Paul is utterly and completely confused by … Paul! 'I do not understand what I do', he complains. 'For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.' Paul is not merely referring to himself. Neither is he practising psychology, but theology. What he says holds good for the individual, for Jew and Gentile, for the entire groaning universe of Romans 8. We are not 'pure and simple'; we are impure and multiple. Hear O Israel, humanity is chaotic. When asked: what is your name, we are unable to answer: *echad*, but, like the demon-possessed, we should confess: 'Legion, for we are numerous.'

According to Scripture we are puzzling, but God is plain. Indeed, at the same time God is incomprehensible. The same article (Article 1) of the *Belgica* that proclaims God's simplicity refers in one breath to his incomprehensibility. But this does not delete but rather underscores all the other wonderful things that this same article confesses: God is incomprehensible wise, incomprehensible just, incomprehensible good and an incomprehensible overflowing fountain of all that is good. 'God is light; in Him there is no darkness at all' (1Jn 1:5). We are murky, but God is crystal clear. We are turbid, but He is transparent. His character is an open book – more precisely: an open Bible. Because God is simple, the Reformers could confess the *clarity* of Scripture. That refers to the truthfulness, sincerity and simplicity of his promises that are 'yes' in Christ and, as such, proclaimed to Jews and Gentiles by the Holy Spirit.

From the simplicity of God and the clarity of Scripture follows the unity of faith that cuts across all racial and ethnic barriers. This unity of faith must not be confused with uniformity. God's *unitas*, understood as *simplicitas*, does not exclude his *trinitas* but implies it. Unity in Christ is far removed from a mere formal unity in number. As Noordmans[50] puts it: 'Unity in number is stifling and suffocating for there is but one number one and the rest is nothing. In Christ however there is room enough.' What is excluded is any room for boasting. *Soli Deo gloria, sola Scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia* are *echad*: they are one and the same. Therefore, our unity does not reside in performance but in faith, not in race but in grace, not in our glorious or infamous past but in God's compassionate promises. Only then are we true to the intention of the Reformation that taught us that the *articulus stantis et candendis ecclesiae* is the doctrine of the *justification of the wicked*. Building the unity of the church on any other basis but that of God's grace and our godlessness would boil down to rebuilding the tower of Babel. Viewing it from our side, in Christ, *mirabile dictu*, nothing but our sinfulness unites us. We are united not by our spiritual power, but by our poverty. The *unity* of the church corresponds with the *alone* (*sola*) of the Reformed solisms.

Because God is *echad*, Deuteronomy demands that, unlike the many Baals, Yahweh must have only one place of worship to preclude the possibility that the many places may result in more than one Yahweh, suggesting that Yahweh Himself is divided. One recalls Paul's exasperation when there were divisions in the church: 'Is Christ divided?' (1Cor 1:13), he wants to know. Since there is 'one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all' (Eph 4:6) we are by 'one baptism,' 'one bread,' 'one faith,' united to the 'one Lord' (Eph 4:5; 1 Cor 10:16f.). Consequently there is 'one body and one Spirit' (Eph 4:4). When Paul deals with the different spiritual gifts, he repeats again and again that it is one and the same Spirit (1 Cor 12:4-9). In short: 'There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord.

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50    O. Noordmans, 'Land en Leven,' in: *Verzamelde Werken*, Kampen 1978, 335.

There are different kinds of working, but the same God …' (1 Cor 1:4). As Barth says: 'Viele Kirchen … bedeutet: viele Herrn, viele Geister, viele Götter'[51].

### God's simplicity and eschatological peace

In his *Théologie de la paix,* J. Comblin[52] draws attention to the fact that unity and peace are parallel themes in Scripture. Since the unity of God includes his singularity and simplicity and, therefore, is much more that a mere unity in number, the unity of the church signifies much more that a mere formal unity, but is a sign of the eschatological peace.

Under influence of the *Pax Romana* with the adage: *si vis pacem para bellum*, in Western culture the word 'peace' purports predominantly the idea of the absence of war.[53] However, the Biblical concept *shalom* is so rich in substance that the *LXX* needs no fewer than 20 Greek words to translate it. *Shalom* signifies a situation of wholeness and therefore unity. Where a people, a home, a heart is undivided, peace reigns supreme. *Lebab shalem* (1 Chron 12:38f.) means *whole-heartedly*. With God's simplicity corresponds his peace. He is the 'God of peace' (Rom 16:20) for whom Gideon built an altar and called it 'The Lord is peace.' He had decided 'to bring all creation together, everything in heaven and on earth, with Christ as head' (Eph 1:10 TEV). On that day when God's creation, which is falling to pieces, is brought together by the 'Prince of Peace' (Is 9:5), God 'will be their peace' (Micah 5:5).

It is this eschatological peace that the angels proclaim when they pass on God's greetings (Noordmans)[54] to the shepherds that night in the fields outside Bethlehem. God's peace and his salvation are the same[55]. Christ's cross is the root and the eschatological peace is the fruit, as is clear from Colossians 1:19f.: 'For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on the earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.' When Jesus says, 'Go in peace,' or when the minister of the Word greets the congregation with the benediction, 'Grace to you and peace …' they refer to nothing other than this eschatological peace. While sending out his disciples 'like lambs among wolves' (Lk 10:3), Jesus tells them that, when they enter a house, 'first say "Peace to this house." If a man of peace is there, your peace will rest on the him; if not, it will return to you.' (Lk 10:5). This Christological–eschatological peace that Jesus leaves to his church as her inheritance, is not the peace that the world gives (Jn 14:27). It is unique and, as such, a reflection of God's singularity and, accordingly, this peace is a manifestation of his simplicity. Consequently, the church's unity itself is a sign of the peace of the eschatological new creation in Christ, the eschatological Adam, in whom Jews and Gentiles are united. Therefore, every word of Ephesians 2:14-18 is loaded and pregnant with meaning: '*For he [the eschatological Adam] himself is our [eschatological] peace, who has made the two [Jew and Gentile] one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh [on the Cross] the law with its commandments and regulations [justification of the wicked]. His purpose was to create [the eschatological 'new creation'] in himself one new man [humanity] out of the two thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to*

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51    K.D. IV/1, 754.
52    J. Comblin, *Théologie de la paix*, Paris 1960, 228.
53    H. Schmidt, *Frieden*, Stuttgart/Berlin 1969, 15: '… erst die Schrecken der A.B.C.-Waffen sheinen die alte Römerweisheit "Si vis pacem, para bellum" durch die neue Zumutung zu überholen: Si non vis bellum para pacem.' Cf. also K. Wengst, *Pax Romana and the peace of Jesus Christ*, London 1987.
54    O. Noordmans, 'Gods groetenis,' in: V.W. 8, 282.
55    J. Comblin, *Théologie de la paix*, 185: 'Le salut ou la paix, c'est la même chose.'

*death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away [the Gentiles] and peace to those who were near [the Jews]. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.'*

**The death of denominationalism**
The unity of the church is far removed from a mere formal ('as if') unity in which the apostolic Trinitarian truth, as expressed in the Reformed doctrines of election and justification, can be played down in order to serve an ulterior purpose. In fact, our salvation does not depend on the *doctrine* of the Trinity but on the *Trinity*; not on the *doctrine* of election (respectively justification) but on the unmerited *grace* of the Father, in the Son, through the Holy Spirit, as expressed in this doctrine.

Quite obviously, the unity of the church is something far more profound than superficial interdenominationalism. Karl Barth puts it rather pointedly in his *The Church and the Churches*: 'The quest for the unity of the Church must not be a quest for Church-unity in itself; for as such it is idle and empty. On the road to such a "Church-unity in itself" we shall find that both the powers of sin and the powers of grace are against us, and against us irresistibly'[56]. Church unity implies accepting God's judgement pronounced on us and everything that we may call our own, in the Cross of Christ. It entails less than the death of denominationalism (respectively interdenominationalism) in order that something of the 'new creation' may manifest in the one church of God. The doctrine of justification, as the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*, implies nothing less than a new creation in Christ. Romans 4:25: 'He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.' The unity of the church is a sign and signal of the eschatological peace of the new world in the midst of the old. 'Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he/she is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come' (2 Cor 5:17). In this eschatological Israel 'neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God' (Gal 6:9).

Although unity, like the church's other attributes, will never fully be realised in this passing age, the peace of the new creation already manifested in the church, may serve as a sign of the ultimate meaning of creation and history within this strife-torn world living under the judgement and curse of the Cross. Although we have no guarantees, this may result in parables of peace, as, in a sense, 'sacraments' of God's promises, becoming visible also in secular society. 'But seek first his kingdom [better: kingship] and his righteousness, and all these things will [eventually] be given to you as well' (Mt 6:33:).

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56    K. Barth, *The Church and the churches*, Grand Rapids 1936, 27.