

A divided church? – A blasphemy!

ABSTRACT

By referring to the Creed of Nicaea-Constantinople this article provides a strong argument for insisting that the unity of the Spirit as the one God is expressed in the unity of God. Holding to a wrong doctrine concerning the unity of God is a reason to be excluded from the church. That begs the question what pertains if the Church herself is divided and thus is excluded from the unity of God?

The only way urged upon the Church is conversion, a change that cannot be postponed. To do anything otherwise would cause the theological roots of Apartheid to remain viable.

THE CREED OF NICAEA-CONSTANTINOPLE (*additions of 381 in bold*):

We believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, who is of the same being with the Father by whom all things were made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried, and the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father. And he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead, **whose kingdom shall have no end.**

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father [added by the West since Augustine: 'and the Son'), who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets. And we believe in ('in' left out in the West since Rufinus and the later Augustine, ± 400¹) one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins. And we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

1. GOD'S PRESENCE IN CHRIST

'Do you know me?'

'Yes, I know you, first born of the Satan!'

This is a short quote from an encounter in the second century, reported by the Church father Irenaeus (*Adversus Haereses* 3,3,4). The two people in this exchange are Marcion and Polycarp. What made Polycarp behave so impolitely: greeting Marcion as the first born of the Satan? It was not a personal conflict but instead the deep aversion of Polycarp toward what Marcion proclaimed. Claiming to be a Christian, Marcion taught ideas that were fully contrary to the

1 See Van de Beek 2006.

Christian faith – and he attracted so many followers that the Church was totally split; indeed, the majority followed him. It was not a philosopher like Celsus from outside the Church who attacked the core of Christianity. It was someone from inside the Christian community.

What made Polycarp furious over against Marcion was that the latter did not speak rightly about God, for according to Marcion the God of Jesus Christ is not the Creator of heaven and earth. Marcion taught that there are two Gods: a lower god who was the creator and the highest God who is pure love in Jesus Christ. The latter is love and forgives everything; the former made the imperfect world and was jealous, angry and clumsy. By consequence, our life in this world is of a lower level compared to our spiritual Christian life.

These ideas, taught and propagated by Marcion, were against the very core of the Christian faith according to Polycarp and his follower Irenaeus. To them Christ is not a newcomer to a lower creation, but He is the coming of the God who created the world. To them it is a blasphemy to state that the true God did not create the world and it is a blasphemy to deny that Christ is God's coming into the world precisely because He loved the creation of his own making so much that He —on behalf of this created world— died on the cross. Thus when Marcion introduces within the Church a doctrine that has exactly this very denial as its core, he is the first born of the Satan.

According to the orthodox fathers, God the almighty Creator comes so close to created human beings, limited and sinful as they are, that He himself is present in a created human body and suffered death in this very body. Therefore they added to the Christological confession of the first century —Jesus is Lord (I Cor. 12:3)— a section on the Father who created the world. We believe in one God and we believe in one Lord. That does not mean that you can add up the one God and the one Lord as two beings. The Lord Jesus is *homoousios* with the Father: and is the very same Being. This one God is the Creator as the Saviour. God is the God of this world and He does not keep any distance of space between Him and us. Early orthodoxy wanted to keep to the salvation of the world by refuting any teaching that denied that God participated in this reality. This is God's love, not that He replaces creation by a spiritual world in Christ, but that He loves the world so much that He gave his one born Son so that we live in Him. The Nicene Creed summarizes everything in that one word: *homoousios*: Christ is the very being of the Father. God Himself came into earthly reality, in the Virgin Mary, and in the politics of Pontius Pilate. This *homoousios* is the core of Christian faith – it is the translation of Immanuel (God-with-us) into the language of the Greeks.

2. GOD'S PRESENCE IN THE SPIRIT

The title of this article is about the Church, even while so far we dealt with creation and Christology. We need this base, however in order to understand what is really at stake in the doctrine of the Church. In the Christological section of the Creed the Church confesses that the almighty God was present in created human reality. But He has gone: He ascended to heaven. And for many people this implies that only his message or his example is left to the Church. More orthodox people will confess that the power of his Spirit dwells in the Church as an inspiring medium that exhorts us to a new life. Yet both views imply that there is no physical presence of God in the world after the ascension of Jesus. It is only his spiritual power that is working now. Such ideas were already present in the fourth century and it is interesting to see how the Church reacted to them. An extension was made to the very short section on the Spirit in the Nicene Creed. In Nicaea, after the long section on Christ that took all their attention, they added a simple 'and in the Holy Spirit' (Denziger 1967, 125). The Church elaborated this short phrase on the Spirit into a fully-fledged pneumatology at the council of Constantinople in 381 and to

analyze this text (Denziger 1967, 150) is an eye opener.

This year 381 version of the Creed goes as follows: 'We believe in *one* God ... and in *one* Lord', - '... and in *one* Holy Spirit' — at least this we would expect this 'one' in the latter. Instead it is: ... 'and in the Holy Spirit', without the word 'one'. How so: is the Spirit not one? In the Western version this impression arises even stronger: the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son — the so-called *filioque*: 'and from the Son.' Does this imply that in God's very Being there seems to be a diversity in the Spirit? If so, by consequence not only the unity of the Spirit as such is endangered but also the unity of the Trinity because then there is a double procession. The flipside of this diversity in procession is the diversity of the working of the Spirit: increasingly Western (and Asian and African theology as well) stresses the diversity of the spiritual presence in all contexts and cultures, in inspiration and empowerment in a large diversity of activities. The Spirit is often used as a disclaimer of a supposed narrow Christology.

Does the Creed support this kind of theology when it does not say 'in one Holy Spirit'? And is the Spirit not as strictly one with the Father in the same way as the Son is one, as expressed in the *homoousios*? Does the Spirit now introduce a plurality in God? And does that not fit or give rise to ideas of a social Trinity for which many theologians opt nowadays?

The Creed makes a totally different turn, a most surprising move from the perspective of Christians living after the fourth century. This is especially so to those who are influenced by Western theology. And except for the Eastern Orthodox and the Copts, that includes almost all Christians —even almost all the young Churches in Africa and Asia because they have adopted Western theology in the format of modernity wherein early Christian ontology has evaporated.

The surprising turn of the Creed is that —after mentioning the Holy Spirit— it continues with 'and in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.' Take note: 'we believe ... in one ... Church.' Notice that the 'one' of the Spirit has been shifted to the Church. That implies: the unity of the Spirit is expressed in the unity of the Church. And as we saw in the sections on the Father and the Son: we cannot add the one and the one: they are expressions of the one and only God. The statement means: the Church is the presence of the one and only God in the world.

We will focus on the phrase in more detail:

- Firstly, it implies that the unity of the Spirit is expressed in the unity of the Church. There is only one Spirit, so there can be only one Church.
- Secondly, the unity of the Church is expression of the unity of God. The unity of the Church in the section on the Spirit is the equivalent of the *homoousios* in the section on the Son.
- Thirdly, how much the Church is presence of God becomes clear by the preposition 'in': we believe 'in the Church'. Theology usually makes a difference between believing *in* and 'believing' attached to a mere object or proposition. 'Believing in' is restricted to the relation with God: we believe in God, for 'believing in' means: finding your ultimate trust in. That can only be said about God and not about the Church. The Creed however clearly states: 'We believe in the Church.' The Church is our ultimate trust. That does not mean that we trust in something next to God. It is precisely because we trust in God that we trust in the Church.

And here we turn back to Marcion. Marcion denied the unity of the God of the concrete material world and Jesus Christ. Therefore, the orthodox fathers of the second century called him the first born of the Satan. To them, God's grace is precisely that He is present in the created material world of human beings as the second Adam, and that this world is his own. The crucified Jesus is *homoousios* with the Father. Fourth century orthodox Christianity stresses that this concrete presence of God was not withdrawn on Ascension Day but is fulfilled in the Spirit who indwells

in the Church. God continues to be present in the concrete visible world. He now is not present in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, but God is present as such in the body of the Church. When the Church celebrates Communion, the members participate in the one body of Christ. God's visibility in the world is the visibility of the Eucharistic community of the Church as the visible presence of the Holy Spirit. Just as the Lord Jesus Christ is not another God than the Father, so the Holy Spirit is not another God than the Son, and the members wherein the Spirit dwells are the members of the Son. There is one body of Christ as there is one God and this one God is visible in his human body, as visible and touchable as human bodies are.

We must keep to this unity of God. We cannot separate the Son from the Father, as Marcion did. We cannot separate the Spirit from the Son as those people do who conceive the Spirit as a mere inspiring power. We cannot separate either one from the Father by conceiving the one body of Christ as a mere spiritual unity.

According to the Creed the body of Christ is a created body, visible and organized. Just as the Nicene version of the Creed of 325 refutes any docetism in Christology, so the version of 381 refutes any docetism in pneumatology. And just as the version of 325 refutes any Christology wherein Jesus is not really God, so the 381 version refutes any pneumatology wherein the Spirit is not really God – and thereby any ecclesiology wherein the visible, bodily Eucharistic community is not God's own presence. God is one. Thus the Lord Jesus is one. And the Spirit is one. *Thus* the Church is one. Who denies the unity of the Church, denies the unity of God – and that is blasphemy.

3. CYRIL OF JERUSALEM

We can clearly see what is at stake in the Creed when we compare it with the catechetical lectures of Cyril of Jerusalem. In his lecture on the Church (*Catechetical lecture* 18) Cyril does not refer at any time to her unity. Actually he is very brief on the Church and he stresses especially her catholicity and holiness. Unity does not seem to be his concern.

On the other hand, when in his lectures he deals with the phrase of the Creed on the Holy Spirit he has explicitly 'and in one Holy Spirit.' He takes two lectures for his pneumatology (*Catechetical lecture* 16-17) and both are centred on the unity of the Spirit. 'There is only One Holy Ghost, the Comforter; and as there is One God the Father, and no second Father; —and as there is only One begotten Son and Word of God <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09328a.htm>, who has no brother— so there is only One Holy Ghost, and no second spirit equal in honour to Him' (*Catechetical lecture* 16,3). This is not just his own opinion but Cyril refers explicitly to the faith of the Church: 'But lest any, from lack of learning, should suppose from the different titles of the Holy Ghost that these are various spirits, and not one and the self-same, which alone there is, therefore the Catholic Church, guarding you beforehand, has delivered to you in the profession of the faith that you believe in one Holy Ghost, the Comforter, who spoke by the Prophets; that you might know that, though His names be many, the Holy Spirit is but one' (*Catechetical lecture* 17,3). Cyril knows about a multitude of gifts in the Spirit, just like there is an abundance of grace in Christ. But that does not mean that there are many Spirits any more than that there are many Christs. Because of the diversity of work the Spirit can be named by many names: He is the Giver of Life, He is the Comforter, He is the Sanctifier, but it is one and the same Spirit. 'For it is one and the Self-same Spirit who divides His gifts to every man severally as He will, Himself the while remaining undivided. For the Comforter is not different from the Holy Ghost, but one and the self-same, called by various names; who lives and subsists, and speaks, and works; and of all rational natures made by God through Christ, both of Angels and of men, He is the Sanctifier' (*Catechetical lecture* 17,2).

It may seem that Cyril and the Creed present two different positions: one stressing the unity of the Spirit and the other one the unity of the Church. One could even develop a whole theological discourse on this difference, arguing for a Low Church or a High Church respectively. That, however, would be totally against the historical and theological reality of the second half of the fourth century.

The Creed of Cyril is generally conceived as the base of the Constantinopolitan version of the Symbolum or at least belonging to the same close family of Creeds. It is unthinkable that the Council would change the content of the Creed without any discussion if it would harbour a real disagreement about the text. Cyril is not a creative theologian. Cyril is merely teaching his catechumens what has been handed over by the tradition. It is precisely that circumstance that makes his lectures so interesting: not their originality but their traditionality.

For its part, the council does not aim to change tradition either. It explicitly wants to confirm the tradition. And it does so by putting the 'one' as characteristic of the Spirit in the phrase of the Church. That is nothing new but is in line with the earlier tradition as we can find it, e.g. in the ecclesiology of Cyprian. The Church is the place where the Spirit is present and outside the Church you will not find Him. That is the *oikonomia* of God's salvation just as God's incarnation is in Christ. Certainly, inhabitation is different from incarnation, but that does not mean that you can separate the divine presence from the Church. That is what the Creed stresses. That is not against the tradition, but is in line with the tradition, which is the same tradition to which Cyril belongs: the Spirit 'is one and the same; living and subsisting, and always present together with the Father and the Son; not uttered or breathed from the mouth and lips of the Father or the Son, nor dispersed into the air, but having a real substance, Himself speaking, and working, and dispensing, and sanctifying; even as the Economy of salvation which is to us ward from the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, is inseparable and harmonious and one, as we have also said before' (*Catechetical lecture 17,5*).

Also, according to Cyril, this economy of salvation is working in the Church. After his resurrection Jesus 'says: *Tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be clothed with power from on high*. Receive it in part now; then, you shall wear it in its fullness. For he who receives, often possesses the gift but in part; but he who is clothed, is completely enfolded by his robe. Fear not, He says, the weapons and darts of the devil; for you shall bear with you the power of the Holy Ghost. But remember what was lately said, that the Holy Spirit is not divided, but only the grace which is given by Him' (*Catechetical lecture 17,12*; see also 13-15). Therefore, the acts and decisions of the Church can be considered as the acts and decisions of the Holy Spirit, argues Cyril. At the meeting in Jerusalem the apostles wrote: '*For it has seemed good unto the Holy Ghost and to us ... showing evidently by what they wrote, that though the writing was by the hands of human Apostles, yet the decree is universal from the Holy Ghost: which decree Paul and Barnabas took and confirmed unto all the world*' (*Catechetical lecture 17,29*). If the Church and the Spirit are so closely related, it is not necessary to speak explicitly about the unity of the Church when you spent two lectures on the unity of the Spirit.

What the Creed does is affirming precisely what Cyril teaches about the Church as the visible and audible expression of the Spirit who dwells in her. That is what Cyril taught his catechumens, in line with the tradition before him. And this is what the Council stresses over against all confusion about the unity of the Church in the fourth century. The unity of the Spirit was at stake because the unity of the Church was at stake. Therefore they shift the 'one' from the Spirit to the Church. The Church is one as the Spirit is one and God is one.

4. THE CHURCH AS COMMUNITY

The Eucharist is the core of Church life. There she celebrates being the body of the crucified

Christ and participation in his eternal life. It is there that the one God who was present in Jesus of Nazareth is present in the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Christ who in his broken body is the Son of the Father. It is the communion of the many members in the one body. Not the plurality of contexts, cultures, challenges or natures are the core of the Eucharist, but the unity of the one body in the one Spirit. It is the presence of the one God who is confessed and shared by all.

The 'we' of the creed express this community. Many Churches use the Apostolic Creed in the Eucharistic celebration. I think this is a dislocation of the Creed. The Apostolic Creed is a baptismal confession. It is the confession of a person who enters the Church and as a single person comes to the community of the body of Christ. Therefore it is in the singular: 'I believe.' But in the Eucharist we celebrate the body of Christ. Here we are not individuals but members of the one body, where we confess what we share with all the members. Therefore the Eucharistic Creed is in the plural. That is the way the Nicene Creed is formulated: 'We believe in one God, one Lord, one Church.' On the other hand, using the baptismal Creed in the Eucharist does not take into account the real presence of God in the Spirit in the Church. In this Creed the members of the one body are the individuals that each time must confess personally again and again. It differentiates not only the members of the one body but also the unity of life of the members, making it seem as if they should enter the unity with Christ at every celebration from the very beginning. In the Eucharist you do not come as somebody to be baptized again, but at the Table of the Lord you are present as a member of the body of the eternal God who remains faithful forever.

Because the Eucharist is the core of the Church's life it is precisely here that her unity is vulnerable. When Christians exclude each other from the Eucharist it is not a mere matter of organization or even of ethics. It strikes to the core of faith: the unity of the one God. God cannot be divided and Christ cannot be divided. His body is one and his Spirit is one. There cannot be any reason for Christians to exclude another Christian from the Eucharist because this implies excluding the other from the communion with God or dividing God into separate pieces. Both exclusion and a division are a blasphemy: keeping away from God those who are God's own, and to divide the one God. Who could ever do so? And how could any organization that calls itself Church ever even think of it?

There is only one reason that causes people to be excluded from the body of Christ: when they are not Christians. People, who refuse to be a member of the body of God in Christ and or belong to the community wherein eternal salvation is celebrated, cannot participate in the communion of the body. It would be absurd to connect this reason for exclusion from the Eucharist in the sharing of the one body to any other condition such as skin colour or culture. God did create people with all kind of skin hues, in a diversity of cultures, living in a variety of contexts; and the same God creates all of them. It is the same humanity wherein Christ dwelled and which is the temple of the Spirit.

5. HERESY

We repeat: there is only one reason that people can be excluded from the body of Christ: when they are not Christians. Now it is clear that in early Christianity this is not the same as *saying* that you are not a Christian. There are many people who claim to be a Christian whom the Church does not perceive to be so. As inclusive and as strict as the early Church was when it was about unity, so strict was she in the exclusion of heretics if it was about the true Church (and the Church is always true, otherwise it cannot *be* the Church, because the Spirit dwells in her and leads her in all truth). Heretics were enemies of the truth and they do not share the one Spirit.

There cannot be any communion with them. 'Do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work,' writes John (II John 10f).

If we stress the unity of the Church as strong as possible by identifying it as an expression of the unity of God, then we do not imply that every person and every community should be accepted. The question is: are these persons and communities in the Holy Spirit? If not, then they do not belong to the Church and thus not to the one body of Christ. The plea for Church unity is not a plea for unification of all organizations that call themselves Church. It is a call to the Church to *be* truly Church, both in the unity as expression of the unity of God *and* in her keeping to the one God whose life she shares. Therefore heretics are excluded.

This puts the question on the table: what is heretical?

We can learn from early Christianity what the Church in her beginnings considered as heresy and how she dealt with it.

First of all it must be clear what is *not* conceived as heresy: wrong ethics and a wrong praxis. Certainly, immoral acts were condemned, and a whole procedure of penitence was developed, but precisely this procedure implies that the person is not excluded from the Church except from some extreme sins like murder. Generally, the Orthodox Church liked to defame heretics for their ethics, e.g. Paul of Samosata for his luxurious life style. But that was not the reason for rejecting them. People such as he and Marcion were excluded from the Church because of their heresy. And the gossip —true or not— about their moral life helped this exclusion to be accepted by the people in the Church.² Wrong ethics were bad and unacceptable in the Church, but what caused condemnation and exclusion from the Church were wrong teachings about God.

Also, Church practices do not put one's salvation at stake. There are different practices and often debates arose from these differences, but are and were no reason to withdraw from the communion with those with whom one disagreed. Even conflicts on such issues as the rebaptism of heretics could not split the Church though it was a narrow escape, because it had to do with the presence of the Spirit (see Van de Beek 2010 and also Van de Beek 2009).

Exclusion for heresy had also nothing to do with all kind of theological questions such as how people experience salvation or the coming to, and living in, the body of Christ. Discussions such as those about the relation of covenant and election were not a basis for heresy —nor are all kinds of other questions wherein Reformed Churches abound when making cause for organizing new denominations. There could be even different opinions on eternal salvation. According to Justin Martyr, Socrates must be considered as a Christian (*Apology* I,46; II,10). Tertullian certainly would not agree with him, because Jerusalem has nothing to do with Athens (*On the Praescription of Heretics* 7), and Cyprian says explicitly that outside the Church there is no salvation (*On the Unity of the Church* 6). Nevertheless they do not label Justin as a heretic. When we trace what was decisive in order to be labelled as a heretic, it becomes clear that this designation has to do with the right doctrine concerning *God*. When you speak false *about God*, then your salvation is at stake.

If we approach the praxis of the early Church from this paradigm we can understand why they accepted, on the one hand much that nowadays would give great troubles, and on the other

2 Even in the case of Marcion there are stories that he was morally inferior. According to Epiphanius Marcion was wrong in his ethics, taking for granted that God would always forgive every sin and thus forgiving himself when the bishop was not willing to forgive him when he had seduced a young girl (Epiphanius, Panarion 3.42). Most recent scholars reject Epiphanius' story, because it is not recorded by any of the earlier Church fathers who strongly opposed Marcion, such as Irenaeus and Tertullian. On the other hand, it is claimed that the Marcionites in Rome practiced frequent rebaptism after having practiced sin (Epiphanius, Panarion 3.42).

hand were strict in issues that nowadays are commonly accepted in the Churches. It might be well to reprise their praxis because it gives direction to the Church and keeps her identity what it should be.

The first assertion that can be taught wrongly about God is to deny that He is the only Lord of lords, i.e. to acknowledge other lords or powers equal to Him or even above Him. Those who are prepared to accept the emperor as God and Lord and to sacrifice for him, cannot be Christians. It was precisely this exclusivism of the Christian confession that evoked persecutions. Similarly, when people in the German Church in the third decade of the twentieth century taught that the *Führer* was their God-given leader, the confessing Church raised her voice and denied that those people were Christians. They could not be in communion with them.

This judgment puts any state Church under suspicion. It cannot possibly be that the head of a state is also the head of the Church. Newman draws the conclusion that the Church of England seemed to him to be 'the veriest of nonentities' (Newman 1864, 339), and consequently he also opposed territorial claims of the pope, who by doing so gained the position of a monarch. Wherever a Church is dependent on state decisions in her teaching or her election and ordination of bishops, her salvation is at stake; or in the words of Newman: it becomes a nonentity, for it claims to be a Church while it is not.

The second basic heresy is that the confession of God as Creator is denied. That was the case with Marcion and the Gnostic movements. These did not keep to the faith that the Creator of the world is the Father of Jesus Christ. A person who does not believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, is not a Christian. He is the 'first born of the Satan.'

In present times, it is not so much the creatorship of the Father that is denied, but it is his Omnipotence that is challenged in the teaching of many theologians. In this case God is usually put too much in anthropological categories and his holiness is not given enough consideration. Certainly the anti-Marcionite fathers would label this also as heresy.

A third type of heresy denies the divinity of Christ. It is this heresy that is opposed in the earliest ecumenical councils, especially Nicaea. After the full divinity of the Father was denied by Marcion, now the full divinity of the Son was at stake. And here too are present day variations on this heresy that should be excluded from the teaching of the Church.

Finally there is a denial of the full divinity of the Spirit. The Church explicitly refuted this heresy at the Council of Constantinople in 381. She did so by putting the Church in the centre of the confession of the Spirit. Anyone who does not keep to the unity of the Church and propagates separated churches is heretical. It is a sin against the Holy Spirit. Therefore Apartheid theology was heresy. It was not a heresy due to its ethics, but due to its theology—which of course had ethical consequences.

Heresy on the pneumatological article of the Creed continues where churches accept being divided and claim that there can be national Churches or denominational Churches, which can operate without being one with the whole body of Christ. Thus Apartheid is not over, if we see it in a theological perspective, and do not restrict it to South Africa. In South Africa it was given the brutal face of racial exclusion in a deliberate program. Even so, but all those 'churches' who claim that they can be independent and can live with a divided Church share the same basic heresy.

Many present day people will be inclined to condemn the *Deutsche Christen* and the Apartheid churches as heretic. That is not wrong. But if they do not take the other heresies equally serious, one must wonder whether it is not about mere moralism and thus an anthropological judgment

instead of a theological assessment. In the latter case, they should address themselves just as pointedly to those who deny God's omnipotence and the divinity of Christ as they identify the issues at stake in Barmen and Belhar. And they should do the same against all those who live without raising a prophetic voice against the heresy of Church division.

6. REALITY

Presently, we are living in a situation that is totally different from what the Creed confesses. The Church is rent into many denominations, national Churches, conflicting groups and self-made communities. It is an absurdity to have a national Church: for it implies a national God! Such a God is not the Creator of heaven and earth and is not the one Lord; it is not the one Spirit who gives life. Likewise, it is an absurdity to have a denominational God —as though God can be confined to any one theological tradition or defined by theological one sidedness or even distinct curiosities. It is an absurdity that there are conflicting Churches —as if God could be in conflict with God self. It is an absurdity to make a program for Church planting —as if God's One Church is a business company or a vineyard planted by human beings.

Even so, a divided Church —is it not a reality? No, it is not. The reality is the reality of the one Church as the reality of the one God. What God calls into being is the most real that exists. God's presence makes things real. Therefore, the table of the Eucharist is more real than the meeting table at a conference, just as the economy of God's salvation is more real than the economy of the stock markets. That the Church is divided indeed, is not reality but sin. And sin is privation (*privatio boni*) —not a simple theft but it is a taking away from God what is God's very being: his unity and glory. It is crucifying Christ again it seems; yet that is impossible for Christ has died once, for all and forever. Therefore, a divided Church is blasphemy. It is denying that God is one —or that God is present in the body of Christ. It is denying the Holy Spirit and therefore denying the Father and the Son. And people who do so are the Antichrist, as the apostle John says (I John 2:22); or in the words of his pupil Polycarp: they are followers of the firstborn of the Satan.

7. THE WAY BACK

'Let all be assured of this: God has made this Jesus whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ' (Acts 2:36). That was Peter's message on the first day of the presence of the Spirit in the Church. The response of the people is: 'What shall we do to be saved?' Peter answers: 'Repent and be baptized every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit' (Acts 2:27f).

We are now in the situation that we have torn the Holy Spirit to pieces by dividing the body of Christ —this Spirit who is Lord and gives life. Yet I do not hear voices in the Church: 'What shall we do to be saved?' However, this question is the only response that would be suited to the present situation that we ourselves created. What shall we do to be saved from the judgment that we are tearing God apart?

The answer cannot be the same as Peter's on Pentecost. We *have* been baptized and we *did* receive the Spirit. But we changed the one baptism into many baptisms, and we became leaky vessels so that the Spirit who was poured out into us is spilled on the streets of the world instead of nourishing the vineyard of the Lord, and thus evaporates in the air without a body to contain.

The only answer to the question what we should do is to unite as members of the one body of Christ, sharing the one body of the Eucharist. We should not do this as a good gesture as neighbours or colleagues who organize a barbeque once a year —as some congregations presently do. We must do it as members of the one body who cannot do without each other,

because we are the visible members of God's dwelling in the world. We must do it every week and even better: every day.

The Church must stop blaspheming the Name of God. The Church must stop erasing from the Creed this one word 'in'. The Church must stop denying the indwelling of the one Spirit in the concrete body of the Church. The Church must convert. That is the only way of salvation: conversion to the living God.

Since our call is about conversion to one God we cannot stop to consider which possible way we have to go. There is only one-way: the narrow way who is Christ. Any other thought is an escape that does not see that the Church is the presence of the One God: 'The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength' (Deut. 6:4f). There is no place for 'yes, but/never' if we turn to God.

As a consequence we cannot negotiate about terms of travel time either. The question 'when?' with regard to Church unity is blasphemy in itself. It is like telling God that He has to wait for a moment until we will have arranged things according to our own interests. Conversion cannot be postponed. Any delay of Church unity is an insult to God.

We cannot negotiate about conditions either. If it is about conversion to God, any condition is out of order. The other Christian is a member of the same body and we can only intensely long for reunification since we both will die without the other one. The other partner, either a person, a denomination or a group, is part of the one visible presence of the one Spirit. The same Spirit is in the other one as the Spirit of the same God. That does not mean: the same *human* spirit. If it is about human spirits we can look for congeniality, for being on equal terms, for common interests. It is precisely such a style and focus that happens within many negotiations about Church unity: all kind of issues is debated and we look for agreements. We search for the same confessions and common declarations. We even negotiate about properties and contract rights for employees. Yet actually there is only one confession that is important: that the Lord our God is one —in his visible image that is the Crucified Christ, and in the communion of his body through the Spirit, in the Eucharist.

The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed is enough for the unity of the Church: the Almighty God became a human being in Christ who is of the same being with the Father and the life giving Spirit is visible in the one Church. Neither the Belhar nor the three classical Reformed Confessions share the holiness of God as the Church does. If the Church is really Church it is self evident that she keeps to what is said in Belhar and that she preaches and teaches in such a way that the classic confessions will be guidelines. They belong to the Church but they are not conditions for the one Spirit. Conversion to God is not putting your own claims forward, or using the claims of the other to escape. Conversion is return to the living God. And the living God is now present in this world in the fragments of the visible Spirit in the scattered members of Christ. As in Ezekiel's vision (Ezek. 37), bone to bone should join, and muscle to muscle should stretch, and become together a living body. Where is God in this world? In the Church! Where is the Church? It is a dissected body with limbs scattered along the byways of the world. It is a broken body that cannot boast in being broken as the body of the crucified God. For the crucifixion belongs to the second section of the Creed —to God's presence in Christ. A body broken, now and today, is crucifying Christ still, and thus denying the fulfilment of his work. It is vivisection of God the Spirit who is life. A broken Church is turning theology upside down. It is an absurdity.

We can use the metaphor of a married couple for Church unity. When they have quarrels reconciliation is needed. The way Churches try to make reconciliation is: 'You began with the arguments ...' 'But you did not listen to me!' 'You must first promise that ...' The only way to reconciliation is by leaving all arguments and conditions aside and by embracing each other. It

is after the partners have reunited that the pain and the sorrows can be discussed. And even then we must be careful, for a heart that is wounded once is easily hurt again. We should stop discussing, claiming, negotiating, but enter into the one house of love, sharing the body of Christ. That is enough. Afterward, together we can see what has to be improved in the house.

The metaphor of a couple makes clear that reconciliation is different from a negotiated agreement. Speaking about the body of Christ is not a metaphor. The body is reality. We *are* the members of his body, a visible presence of God. How can it happen that we joyfully celebrate the Eucharist without the other ones? How can we celebrate without going immediately to the other ones and call them to come and embrace them and then celebrate. Or do we not take the Creed seriously—do not we take seriously our God? Maybe we do, with regard to the Father as our Creator, and with some hesitation perhaps the Son who is not just an example or teacher but God in our midst. But do we take the Holy Spirit who presents the unity of God in the Church seriously?

We speak often about Church unity within the Reformed family —without accomplishing it. Certainly the Reformed Churches must unite. But it is nothing if it is just a merger. God is not Reformed and the Holy Spirit is not a Calvinist. If it is about Church unity, all God's children in whom the Spirit dwells must be united: Reformed and Episcopal, Pentecostal en Roman Catholic, free Churches and mainstream Churches. There are no limits. There are no national limits, especially. The manifestation of national Churches is a source of many splits, because in national Churches political issues easily grow dominant, becoming more important than God. Politics, power, rights, economy —everything becomes important —and they *are* important, indeed, but only in the service of God, which means: in the service of his visible presence in the brothers and sisters in Christ. Nothing is taboo in the freedom of Christ and everything to his body is a call for worship.

'We believe in one God ... and in one Lord ... and in the Holy Spirit ... and in one Holy Church.' It is time that we take the confession that we share serious. It is time that we take God serious who is visibly present in his body in the world. If not —'I know you, firstborn of the Satan!'

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