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Schism – and Reformed theology?

ABSTRACT

The article deals with the question of schism in the Reformed faith and ecclesiology, by focusing on four fundamental issues developed in the form of five theses each. These fundamental issues involve, first, the well-known Reformed passion for the unity and catholicity of the church; secondly, the equally widely known traditional Reformed problems and troubling experiences with questions of unity and catholicity; thirdly, some typically Reformed theological perspectives on unity and catholicity as their contribution to ecumenical thought and practice, and, finally, some concrete and urgent practical challenges currently facing the Reformed faith and world community regarding unity and catholicity.

1. INTRODUCTION: REFORMED FAITH AND SCHISM

By way of introduction, I would like to offer *twenty brief theses*, divided into four groups of five theses each. They deal respectively with the Reformed *passion* for unity and catholicity; with traditionally Reformed *problems* with unity and catholicity; with some typically Reformed *perspectives* on unity and catholicity, and with *practical* questions facing the Reformed faith regarding unity and catholicity. Nearly every single thesis may be contested and thus calls for more argument and discussion. It is hoped that they may together serve to suggest sufficient different angles into, and issues related

to the broad theme of schism within the Reformed faith for the purposes of our discussion.¹

2. PASSION

The Reformed tradition is known for its expressed *passion for the unity of the church*. This was true of Calvin – in his ecclesiology, in his unwavering attempts to solve disputes and conflicts, in his deep sadness about divisions in the church, and in his moving references to the unity which he, on occasion, described as *pia conspiratio*.²

This passion for the unity of the church was also present in many of the *confessional* documents of the Reformed tradition, despite contrary claims that the confessions divided the churches, because of the conflicts in which they mostly arose; because of their contextual and historical nature, and because of the deliberate multiplicity of Reformed confessional documents.³ During the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, those Reformed theologians who argued for the visible unity of the church often appealed in their key arguments to the ecclesiology of the *Heidelberg Catechism* and the *Confessio Belgica*, for example.⁴

This passion for the unity of the church was *theological* in origin. It flowed from the claim of Reformed ecclesiology to be “an ecclesiology of the Word”, since, for the New Testament, there can clearly be only one body, and Christ

1 This paper was the plenary lecture during a Consultation of the Reformed Church Center, New Brunswick Theological Seminary, New Brunswick, New Jersey, USA, on 5 November 2018, on the theme “Schism – and Reformed Theology?”. Several speakers were invited to respond to these theses in additional papers, leading to an interdisciplinary discussion on the theme, also available on the web.

2 For Calvin’s understanding of the unity of the church, see, for example, Locher (2004) Thönissen (2012) Zachmann (2008). See the moving original material in Vischer (2000). More general on Calvin’s ecclesiology, see, for example, Busch (1997) Freudenberg (2011) George (1990).

3 For the controversial question as to whether the confessions were intended and functioned as instruments of division or unity, see Smit (2010a).

4 See, for example, Boesak (1984) Smit (2012). When the *Belhar Confession* was drafted in response to the *status confessionis*, a moment of truth in which the gospel itself was seen to be at stake, the *Confessio Belgica* (and this confessional document’s explicit appeal to the words in 1 Peter 3 that the church should always be ready to give a public apology of the hope within them, while honouring Christ as Lord) played a crucial role in the self-understanding of what the Synod was doing.

cannot be divided (Vischer 2002; 2010). For Calvin, the unity of the church was deeply Christological and so central in his understanding of the Lord's Supper and its implications. For the confessional tradition, it was deeply Trinitarian such as, for example, still present in the introduction of the *Confession of Belhar*, with direct allusion to 16th-century confessions.⁵

One may even argue for a Reformed passion for the *catholicity* of the church – in all the many different senses of the term, whether geographical and referring to many places; or referring to the fullness of truth; or referring to the comprehensiveness of the sovereignty of God, the lordship of Christ, and the common grace of the Spirit, or referring to the call to discipleship and the claim to sanctification upon all spheres of life, as in Kuyper's well-known "every square inch".⁶

During the 20th century, in particular, the Reformed faith became known – for many different and convincing reasons – for its remarkable *ecumenical* passion.⁷

3. PROBLEMS

In reality, however, Reformed history was very different from this often-expressed Reformed passion.⁸ According to Oberman (2003:116-168),

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- 5 For Calvin, see, for example, Opitz (2011) Faber (2009; 2011). From a South African context, see the studies by Durand (1961; 1964). For Calvin's later views on the Lord's Supper, which played an important informative and inspiring role in the South African debates, see Smit (2009).
 - 6 For Kuyper, see, for example, Heslam (1998). For the Reformation and catholicity more generally, see Bavinck (1968) Berkhof (1962) Berkouwer (1976) Birmelé (2003) Jonker (1992) Mudge (1963) Oberdorfer (2001) Blei (2005) Braaten & Jenson (1996). Arguments and motifs from these well-known contributions will be presented in what follows in these theses. Kuyper's claim about all spheres of life and every square inch deeply inspired Black South African theologians such as Allan Boesak and Russel Botman.
 - 7 Literature on the ecumenical passion of the Reformed faith is overwhelming – whether historical, doctrinal, practical, ethical, missional, or biographical. See, for example, Beintker (2011) Birmelé (2011; 2012) Birmelé & Thönissen (2012) Brinkman (2006; 2016) Douglass (2004; 2005) Heron (2002) Hesselink (2010) Hofheinz *et al.* (2011) Koffmann (2009) the classic study of Nijenhuis (1959) Tylanda (1981), as well as the many works by the Reformed theologian Weinrich deeply involved in several ecumenical dialogues over many years, including 1995, 1998, 2002, 2005, 2011, 2012, as well as the collected essays during the Calvin commemoration, edited by Weinrich *et al.* (2011).
 - 8 Once again, critical and self-critical literature on the many ways in which the Reformed tradition has failed the unity of the church and in practice contradicted and betrayed its own self-understanding is readily available. See, for example, Leithart (2016) Smit (2004; 2010b) Van de Beek (2002; 2012) Van der Borcht (2010), with several instructive contributions.

the Reformed tradition *failed* tragically to remain true to Calvin's two major insights, namely the gracious election and the church's catholicity. According to Vischer (2000) (after a survey of 750 Reformed churches), the reality of the Reformed tradition is a "sorry state of affairs". According to Kromminga, "Reformed churches have upgraded secession at the expense of unity".⁹

This dates back to Calvin's own horror at the divisions and schisms in the church of his time, but it dramatically intensified over the *centuries* of further *division and schism* in and between the churches of the Reformed tradition.¹⁰

In July 2017, during the 500-year commemoration of the Reformation in Wittenberg, the Lutheran World Federation and the World Communion of Reformed Churches together signed the *Wittenberg Witness* during the ecumenical worship service in Wittenberg. In this document, they together "acknowledge, confess and *lament* that divisions still obscure our unity and hamper our witness". They explained:

We regret that through our history we have too often formed divisive habits and structures, failing to discern the body of Christ. Injustice and conflict scar and scandalise our one body. We are implicated in colonialism and exploitation that have marked our history. We are saddened by the ways we have allowed race and ethnicity; class and inequality; patriarchy and gender bias; and arrogance of nation, language and culture to become divisive and oppressive in our churches and in our world.

9 For Kromminga, see his preface in Schrotenboer (1992). The Reformed passion, including the sense of self-critique, is obvious from a fuller quote of Kromminga's (1992:7-9) words: "Throughout the history of the church there has been tension between the ideal of unity and the practice of separation in the name of purity of doctrine (and one may add purity of life, DJS) ... Where that tension has reached the point of agonizing decision, it has more often than not resulted in at least a partial victory for separation. The resulting rifts, once created, tend only to widen until they are beyond repair ... (T)he existence of a countless host of competing denominations, all claiming adequate justification for their separate existence, is loud testimony to the prevalence of defeats endured by catholicity ... Vigor and initiative are more prominently displayed on the side of separation than on the side of catholicity. In almost every instance, separation is pictured as separation from unbelief; seldom if ever is it thought of by the seceders as a rending of the church ... Reformed churches have not lagged behind ... in this regard ... (T)hey have divided frequently and easily, with well-developed arguments to support their actions. There can be little question that it is time to be honestly facing this situation ... There is a need for ... the power of the Reformed confession of catholicity to break into and challenge the Reformed tradition of secession ... (I)t is time to recommit the Reformed churches to catholicity ... Reformed churches have upgraded secession at the expense of unity."

10 See many powerful expressions of this feeling of horror at disunity and division in Vischer (2000).

They then together witnessed that they hear God's call and Christ's claim (in many voices and in diverse ways, from the voices of their forebears to the pain on the faces of others all around us nowadays) that this should become different through continuous reform; they pleaded together for "renewed imagination" of what being the church in communion could mean, and they committed themselves to concrete actions, in order to explore new forms of life together, to resist the forces of injustice and exclusion together, and to make their unity more visible in all local contexts (The Lutheran World Federation & The World Communion of Reformed Churches 2017).

The *Wittenberg Witness* itself was based on their seven-year joint study (2006-2012) and their shared report called *Communion: On being the Church*.¹¹ This report is one of many in the contemporary ecumenical world that consider the expression *koinonia* or communion as description of the nature of the one and catholic church. In the development of this particular report, it became increasingly clear that Protestantism initially suffered from an "ecclesiological deficit". In having to justify their own existence while still confessing the one and catholic church of the creeds, Protestant churches suffered from an insufficient appreciation of the communion of the one body of Christ.¹²

Instead, over the centuries, Protestant churches rather took their real and existing differences as points of departure and developed a variety of *ecclesiologies* to justify these differences, instead of acknowledging and lamenting them as scars, as shameful divisions and schisms, scandalising

11 Some of the members of the commission were Birmelé, Locher, and Weinrich, who all wrote extensively on questions of unity, catholicity, ecumenism – and divisions. For similar studies from the ecumenical movement on the nature of the church, including its unity and catholicity, see, for example, Faith and Order Papers 181, 198, 214, as well as the Canberra and Porto Alegre Statements; the study on communion by the Protestant Churches of Europe, and the Catholic report on fifty years of ecumenical dialogues since Vatican II, by Cardinal Kasper (2009).

12 In this same spirit, Noordmans (1935:75) already wrote that "de locus de ecclesia is de zwakste plaats in de dogmatiek, vooral in die der reformatoren en 't allermeest in die der gereformeerden". Long before, Bavinck already wrote to his friend Snouck Hurgronje regarding his inaugural lecture in Kampen on the catholicity of Christianity and the church that it was intended "as medicine against our narrow-mindedness and meanness", literally "als eenige medicijn voor de separatistische en sectarische neigingen, die soms in onze kerk zich vertoonen. Er is zooveel enghartigheid, zooveel bekrompenheid onder ons en 't ergste is, dat dat nog voor vroomheid geldt", in Puchinger's introduction to the Dutch reprint of *De Katholiciëit van Christendom en Kerk*, v.

the one body of Christ.¹³ All kinds of so-called “social sources” (Niebuhr¹⁴) and so-called “non-theological factors” – including ethnicity and culture –

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- 13 See, for example, the Reformed ecclesiology in Alston (2002). Van de Beek (2012:146-150), for example, warns strongly against schism as the rendering apart of the one body of Christ and of the Spirit – which should be unthinkable and impossible, according to him, following the rhetoric of the New Testament. “Een schism verschilt van een ketterij daarin dat een ketterij een afwijking van de leer van de kerk is, terwijl een schisma voortkomt uit andere oorzaken ... Er is blijkbaar ook onder protestanten een besef overgebleven van de eenheid van de kerk, dat hen ongemakkelijk met schisma's doet omgaan ... Het schisma moet ook maar ongemakkelijk blijven. Het schisma is immers een onmogelijk iets. 'Is Christus gedeeld?' is reeds de rhetorische vraag van Paulus aan die mensen in Korinte. Het ene lichaam van Christus kan niet verscheurd worden ... Door hun schisma geven zij er blijk van niet te delen in de liefde van Christus, niet te willen dienen, niet te willen dulden, niet de minste te willen zijn. Tertullianus schrijft al dat de belangrijkste oorzaak van schisma's het haantjesgedrag is van mensen ... Mensen die macht willen hebben, veroorzaken de conflicten en zulke mensen bederven de kerk. Zij zijn antichristelijk. Als zij weggaan, dan geven zij er inderdaad blijk van niet bij de kerk te horen. Het is verdrietig dat ze gaan, maar het is onvermijdelijk ... [R]ede tot aarzeling is dat het niet altijd duidelijk is *wie* de schismatici zijn ... Als twee groepen uit elkaar gaan en de kerk scheurt, welk deel is dan de kerk en wat is een schisma? ... Schisma's zijn een familieruzie in de ene kerk en die moet leiden tot verzoening en niet tot uitsluiting ... Beide delen zijn dus een gescheurd lichaam. Juist daarom is de schisma zo erg. Het risico is steeds weer dat we de familieruzie gewoon gaan vinden en ons er niet meer om bekommeren ... Juist omdat schisma's niet leiden tot herziening van de grenzen van de kerk, maar breuken zijn in het ene lichaam van de kerk zijn ze onverdraaglijk. Ketterij is erg ... [m]aar een schisma is een breuk in ons eigen lichaam, dat het lichaam van Christus is. Het is een verdeling van de Geest over twee entiteiten en hoe kan de Geest ooit gedeeld zijn?”
- 14 According to Niebuhr (1929:25), “denominationalism represents the moral failure of Christianity”. In his very clear and informative discussion of catholicity, unity and truth, Jonker (1992:16) is equally critical of the failures of Reformed ecclesiology in this regard. “[S]omehow it seemed possible to interpret [‘the great New Testament texts on the unity of the church’] in such a way that the visible disunity of the church was not experienced as something totally unacceptable. Especially the trend to understand these words as referring to the invisible unity of the church in Christ played a decisive role in this respect. It seemed possible to believe the biblical message on the unity of the church without being disturbed too much by the existing disunity. Theories about the multi- or pluriformity of the churches were developed ... to explain the disunity in such a way, that it seemed quite acceptable, yes, even as the will of God.” According to Jonker (1992:23, his italics), such developments contradict the intentions of the Reformers, including Calvin: “[T]he idea of different denominations existing side by side, recognizing each other as true churches of God and fostering friendly relations with one another *but without any desire to seek and realize the visible unity of the church* would have been totally unacceptable to them.”

became normal, taken for granted,¹⁵ and defended theologically.¹⁶ All kinds of theological arguments had to justify *volkskerke*, national churches, denominations, and the continuous schisms further fragmenting these already fragmented churches.¹⁷ Very often, walls that had been broken down were built up once again – with theological and ecclesiological arguments justifying these new divisions and schisms.¹⁸

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- 15 Berggren (2015:307) concluded his recent doctoral dissertation, entitled *Catholicity challenging ethnicity*, on congregations and churches in post-apartheid South Africa, by claiming that “these issues of catholicity not only challenge the South African context, but every society where barriers occur in the Christian community”. According to the South African Black theologian Maimela (1982:1), denominationalism is “an embarrassment for the church”. Indeed, “denominationalism thrives on the fact that the church has miserably failed to become *the church* ... Denominations exist as creatures of sinful disobedience to the expressive will of God for the church, and it is therefore with profound sorrow and penitence that we should talk about the so-called denominations rather than the church.”
- 16 In his essay, entitled “Is Christ divided?” – An analysis of the theological justification of a church schism”, the South African Reformed theologian, J.H. (Amie) van Wyk (2010a), also laments the many ways in which theological arguments are used to justify scandalous schisms. He concludes: “It is a long road on which we have travelled with the troubled church of Christ, troubled by division, disunity, dissension, separation, fragmentation, and schism. It is a very shameful route. It is a route where in the beginning, no disunity whatsoever was tolerable (Augustine), to a situation of disunity in extraordinary circumstances (Calvin), to disunity as an accepted principle (post-Reformation), to recurring schism as an almost unavoidable necessity (modern times). The last view represents a sectarian ecclesiology, totally foreign to and in contradiction with what the Bible teaches.” In this regard, Van Wyk (2010a:66) concludes that Reformed theology, in general, has distanced itself a longer way from the slogan *sola Scriptura* in ecclesiology than anywhere else.
- 17 The fact is that many theologies have been used to justify this sectarian ecclesiology. Sometimes, we argue that truth is more important than unity. Sometimes, we claim that visible unity only has to do with the well-being of the church and not with its being. Sometimes, we appeal to our own ethical convictions and long to distance ourselves from so-called moral disobedience that may not be allowed in the true church. Sometimes, our claims about the authority of Scripture, therefore, justify our divisions and separations. Sometimes, we are thus convinced that it is sufficient that the so-called invisible church is one, which means that our visible divisions and conflicts do not really matter. Sometimes, we rejoice in the wonderful blessing of pluriformity in the church, which, in our opinion, justifies all kinds of differences and separations. We develop theories about the importance of separate churches for each nation, for each *volk*, for each culture. We speak about the need for immigrant churches to maintain and cultivate their cultural ties with their homelands. We appeal theologically to the ancient wisdom that grace never destroys nature but makes it perfect. This implies that the visible church will never be different from the natural diversity. Sometimes, we proudly confess that we believe in congregations and interpret that to mean rather than in the church, one and catholic. Of course, these and many other ecclesiologies all appeal to elements of truth, but their consequences for the life and witness and self-understanding of the church are often harmful and disastrous.

4. PERSPECTIVES

Of course, the unity (or communion) of the church does *not* imply *uniformity*. This is after all what catholicity or fullness means. According to the *Wittenberg Witness*, “[t]he gift of unity does not require uniformity but can be found and celebrated also in diversity ... so that we are united, not divided by our diversity”. In the same spirit, the *Belhar Confession* states that the unity of the people of God is manifested and active in a variety of ways, especially in that we love one another – which includes many other expressions (with allusions to the Bible and to Reformed confessions) – which together imply that

this unity can take form only in freedom and not under constraint; that the variety of spiritual gifts, opportunities, backgrounds, convictions, as well as the diversity of languages and cultures, are by virtue of the reconciliation in Christ, opportunities for mutual service and enrichment within the one visible people of God.¹⁹

In ecumenical theology and life, the so-called “*Copernican revolution*” (proposed by Schlink²⁰) made it increasingly possible to recognise, respect, and even celebrate diversity and differences of spirituality, liturgy and worship, doctrine (including views on baptism and the Lord’s Supper), church order, ministry, witness, service, and Christian life. *Confessing the Apostolic faith together* and growing together *Towards koinonia in faith, life and witness* increasingly became not only ecumenical longings, but also ecumenical realities, although these strivings still have a long way to go.²¹ Many Reformed churches are also realising how important it is to celebrate a diversity of *geloofsmanieren*, of diverse ways of living and embodying the faith, and of

18 In his discussion of “the meaning of catholicity”, Berkouwer (1976:107) refers to “the associations inherent in catholicity” and mentions as examples “boundaries and walls that have been broken, open windows, wideness, and universality”. The South African church historian Johannes Adonis (1982) deliberately called his doctoral dissertation, an analysis of the mission policy of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, “the broken down wall built up once again”, as a reference to Ephesians 2.

19 For the text, see, for example, Plaatjies-Van Huffel & Modise (2017:489-495) Botha & Naudé (2011:19-23) Naudé (2010:219-224) Cloete & Smit (1984).

20 Schlink (2005) famously developed this notion in his ecumenical dogmatics and applied it as method together with his equally famous analysis of the structure of doctrinal statements, which also had its origins in his attempts to serve the ecumenical movement and to overcome what seemed like divisions. For the ripened fruit of these methodological moves his systematic theology, see Schlink (2005). For discussion and interpretation, see Smit (2008).

21 See, for example, the ecumenical documents with these titles, as well as many other documents and statements that resulted from the same study processes.

providing opportunities and room for many and deeply diverse ways of being congregations and disciples.²²

In this growing together, it has often been important to acknowledge explicitly that many remaining differences, including central doctrinal convictions and claims, are *no longer church dividing*. In inspiring historical cases, churches have officially “declared communion”, which meant that they “mutually recognized one another as true expressions of the one church of Jesus Christ”, thereby confirming their agreement in their understanding of the gospel (despite different confessional documents and remaining doctrinal differences of formulation and emphasis), granting one another pulpit and table fellowship, recognising one another’s ministry, acknowledging one another’s ordination, providing for orderly exchange of ministers, and committing themselves to common witness and service in the world.

Since so many differences remain between and within churches on *moral issues and ethical questions*, Faith and Order (1979; 2013a) is still engaged in an ongoing process of study and consultation on why this is the case, attempting to understand better how authority functions in diverse ways in different moral communities, between and even within churches. Although the study process is still ongoing, the intention is not to allow such moral differences to divide churches to the point of separation and schism. This clearly remains an urgent challenge in many churches nowadays, and the commitment not to allow these moral differences to “scar and scandalise” the one body even further remains a crucially important “call and claim”. Considering the respective processes of ethical decision-making more closely indeed helps everyone appreciate that the causes for our divisions do not always lie where we may claim them to be. This may again help open us to one another, while we continue to struggle with our differences.

Within Protestant, including Reformed churches, in particular, the claims to authority are often claims to the authority of *Scripture*, which makes these conflicts particularly serious and difficult. Once again, however, several developments in so-called ecumenical hermeneutics during the 20th century – documented, for example, in the studies *A treasure in earthen vessels* and *Interpreting together* (Bouteneff & Heller 2001; Smit 2003a) – may help

22 Already during the 1970s, the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam launched an interdisciplinary research project of several years on the so-called plurality of the church; see, for example, the volume of the *Gereformeerd Theologisch Tijdschrift*, later also published as *Pluraliteit in de Kerk*, edited by Furet *et al.* (1977), with several essays from the perspectives of a variety of academic disciplines, as well as the comprehensive collection of theological essays, *Geloofsmanieren. Studies over pluraliteit in de kerk*, edited by Vlijm (1981). This volume includes an informative essay by Brinkman, in which he engages Noordmans’ (1935) well-known and challenging comment on ecclesiology as the “weak spot” of the Reformation.

churches appreciate the many factors that do play a role in such appeals to “the Bible says”. Whenever appeals to the Bible (and the accompanying assumptions and accusations that others do not respect the authority of the Bible) become the causes of conflict and potential division, the commitment not to allow such differences to scar and scandalise the body of Christ with further schisms may once again help believers stay together while they struggle together for ways forward. Augustine’s reminder that the Bible can only properly be read with a hermeneutics of love, an agapic reading, an interpretive rule of charity, can only further assist and inspire in this regard.²³

5. PRACTICE

These struggles together for ways forward very obviously do not exclude, but rather invite and necessitate *very serious engagement* of one another, including admonition, reprimand, critique, argument, and attempts to persuade, convince, and change. The fullness of the catholicity most certainly includes serious engagement with one another about the way, the truth, and the life.²⁴ Many within the Reformed tradition have, over centuries, taken these responsibilities very seriously. Once again, however, in the Reformed understanding, such struggles and such serious engagement of one another (even in the form of discipline) should itself always take place in the spirit of love and in order to convince and keep the others, never in order to exclude and leave the others. The final purpose is always to keep and to hold, to love and to save.²⁵

23 For the influential history of reception of these hermeneutical convictions of Augustine, see, for example, Smit (2018).

24 One is reminded of Bonhoeffer’s well-known warning against the false and dangerous assumption of ecumenism that all positions and viewpoints, all convictions and practices are equally valid and legitimate and that truth in ecumenism is, therefore, simply another name for the totality of all perspectives and backgrounds.

25 In this spirit, Jonker (1992:23-26) argues for the importance of staying together as long as possible, in spite of deep differences even about the truth. “Of course the unity of the church is broken when the truth of the gospel is denied. But we should not easily let one another go because differences arise. The truth itself is catholic and unifying (Eph. 4:11-16). The truth is grasped ‘together with all the saints’ (Eph. 3:18) ... [W]e need other Christians to assist us in knowing the truth. Differences of opinion may often lead to a clearer vision of the truth. We may not simply identify our own interpretation of the Bible with the truth of God, nor our own denomination with the true church of God and make a high-handed decision to maintain our isolation from others. The lines of communication among the churches must increasingly be opened. The communion of the saints is not a luxury that one may opt not to practice, because love for our brothers and sisters and our zeal for the truth should urge us to seek the unity of the church. When our zeal for the truth tends to become divisive in the sense that it continually threatens the unity of the church and fosters a spirit of withdrawal from the fellowship with other

Of course, the Reformed tradition also knows extreme situations of *status confessionis*, moments of truth, when the truth of the gospel and the credibility of the witness and life of the church truly seem to be at stake. They may seem to be moments when the indifferent (*adiaphora*) is no longer indifferent (*adiaphora*), when the differences are no longer acceptable, when the divergences have become too much, when it is necessary to take a stand and confess. They may seem to be moments of truth.²⁶ Sometimes, the word “heresy” has even been used.²⁷ The judgement that such moments have arrived is always in itself a risk, without any guarantees. The gospel indeed “seems to be” at stake – for some, according to some. These are moments that cannot be calculated and easily determined; they come by “neither calendar nor clock”.²⁸ They arrive when some are convinced that they can do no other; they have been struck on the mouth (Barth); they have no other choice but to say “no” to what they view as betrayal and denial of the gospel itself. Even then, however, the “no” is still inspired by a deeper “yes”; the cry is a cry from the heart and an appeal for conversion and renewal and for a way forward together. This was, for example, the case with the *Theological Declaration of Barmen*, just as it was the case with the *Confession of Belhar*.²⁹

In the history of the Reformed tradition, moments of separation and schism have often been framed in terms of moments of *truth*. The habits of the Reformed mind have often made it easy for many to give truth (and, therefore, separation) primacy over unity (and, therefore, love and belonging and staying together despite struggles). Reformed scholars have described

churches, we may have reason for some caution. At least we will have to ascertain whether the differences in question are of such a nature that we have no choice but to withdraw ourselves. We may well ask whether our concept of the truth is not perhaps lacking in depth, and whether we are sensitive enough as far as the unity and catholicity of the church are concerned. The truth of the gospel is obviously more than our formulation of it ... [T]he church has a calling to manifest the catholicity which it confesses. No church should ever settle for an exclusive view of the church by becoming a church for a specific nation or class, race or colo[u]r ... A church that feels no hurt because of the disunity and fragmentation of the total Church of God on earth is simply lacking in its understanding of catholicity as a gift and a challenge that is given to the church in Christ.”

26 For the South African experience during the struggle against apartheid and the way in which moments of confession were understood, see Cloete & Smit (1984) Smit (1984).

27 On the role of heresy in the church struggle in South Africa, see the essays collected in De Gruchy & Villa-Vicencio (1983), as well as Gaybba (1984).

28 Naudé (2010), with direct reference to Karl Barth and his views of confessions.

29 In the case of the *Confession of Belhar*, the official *Accompanying Letter* expressed these intentions and longings. See, for example, Smit (2003b). The Synod of the Mission Church decided at the time that the *Accompanying Letter* belongs officially with the *Belhar Confession* and should always be published and distributed together with *Belhar*, to serve as a reminder of the historical context, intention and hopes.

this typical attitude as “bound to differ”.³⁰ Given the passion of the Reformed tradition for unity, catholicity, and ecumenicity, being so “bound to differ” is no reason for self-assurance and pride, but rather for lament and shame. Schism should never be viewed as a solution. Schism is never positive. Schism is never a legitimate and preferable strategy to deal with tensions, conflicts and struggles within or between churches.³¹

Still, the potential conflict and tension between (our understanding of) truth and (our willingness to work for) unity cannot be denied. The confession of the catholicity of the church necessarily raises the question of “the *boundaries* of the church”.³² The question of *Truth and community* is indeed the question of “diversity and its limits” in the ecumenical church, according to Kinnamon (1988). Diversity is, of course, of extreme importance in any understanding of the catholicity – and community and unity and ecumenicity – of the church, for many reasons, of many kinds, and in many concrete ways. But are there also boundaries to these many ways of enriching diversity? Could what is called “legitimate diversity” not actually mask shameful separation and schism? Could what is called “reconciled diversity” not actually cover deep divisions and lack of reconciliation?

For Kinnamon (1988), there are indeed such boundaries. He distinguishes two principles that could help discern the limits of legitimate diversity. The first unacceptable expression of diversity, for him, would be the absence of love (for which he mentions as examples the German Christians of the 1930s or the Afrikaner churches of apartheid South Africa). The second unacceptable diversity would be an idolatrous allegiance to things that are less than ultimate (for which he mentions as example

to give ultimate allegiance to anything else, whether that be nationality or economic ideology or personal ego or visions of earthly achievement, and especially to justify that allegiance theologically) (Kinnamon 1988:115).

30 Kort (1988:viii) describes his own cultural background in these terms: “(My) topic arises from my exposure from youth on to theology. I grew up in an environment where theology divided people, at times even ending relationships within families. Theological hostility and conflict were touted as inevitable, even virtuous. ‘Rotten wood won’t split’ was the excuse. People who did not hold and articulate sharp and non-negotiable theological distinctiveness were judged as lacking conviction. Tentativeness and tolerance were identified with indifference.”

31 For valuable contributions, see the collection of essays, edited by Van der Borgh, on schism and Reformed faith edited by Schrottenboer (1992); see also Van Wyk (2010b), in a volume of essays on the unity of the church according to Reformed understanding.

32 In his discussion of catholicity as one of the characteristics of the church according to the creeds, Berkouwer (1976:105-198) first deals with “the meaning” of catholicity and then with “the boundaries” and “the continuity” of the church.

Even if one finds his two principles attractive and helpful (perhaps because they exclude all other justifications that are so often and so easily used to claim that some “have moved outside the circle of acceptable Christian diversity”), his examples themselves make clear how extraordinarily difficult it still remains to apply these principles in real life and to discern and determine that such moments of truth (and, therefore, exclusion and the end of community) have indeed arrived (Kinnamon 1988:108-118). With good reason the word “risk” is often used to describe the difficulty of what is at stake in such processes and moments of discernment.³³

Ecumenical spirituality has often been described as a spirituality of encounter, (Wainwright 1986, quoting Cardinal Mercier; Kasper 2007) as the refusal to let go of one another, as the willingness and desire to *welcome* one another like Christ also welcomed and accepted us, to the glory of God, in the spirit of Romans 15:7. For those who understand that Romans 15:7 closes the circle of Romans 1:16-17, that the welcome we are called to extend to one another flows from the justice of God which justified us all out of radical free grace, welcomed us and accepted us, such a spirituality excludes any positive consideration of separation, schism, and exclusion, as if such spiritualities were visible embodiments of the gospel of free grace.

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33 The *Accompanying Letter* to the *Belhar Confession*, for example, began with an explicit acknowledgement of an awareness of the difficulties involved in such a risk. “We are deeply conscious that moments of such seriousness can arise in the life of the Church that it may feel the need to confess its faith anew in the light of a specific situation. We are aware that such an act of confession is not lightly undertaken, but only if it is considered that the heart of the gospel is so threatened as to be at stake. In our judgement, the present church and political situation in our country and particularly within the Dutch Reformed Church family calls for such a decision ... We are aware that the only authority for such a confession and the only grounds on which it may be made are the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God. Being fully aware of the risks involved in taking this step, we are nevertheless convinced that we have no alternative ...”.

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