

The relationship between the Hervormde Kerk in Suidelike Afrika and the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika in the new South Afrika: co-existence or merger?¹

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Abstract

The article points out that the debate on church unity cannot be confined to either a spiritual or structural perspective. It is argued that the church, both visible and invisible, is a given reality. Racially based beliefs are identified as the cause of the separate existence of the NHKA and the HKSA. It is indicated that the true and tenable foundation for the church's mission work and ecclesiastical organisation is the love of God, which makes possible true Christian fellowship, service and witness. After pointing to developments in the cooperation between the two churches, on which structural unity can be built, the article makes a strong call for a merger of the two churches in the new South Africa, for the sake of positive witness to Christ's mission in the world.

1. INTRODUCTION

Church unity, as we all know, is one of the most important elements making up the Christian Church's confession of faith. This unity is prayed for by our Lord Jesus Christ in the Gospel according to St John 17:21, 22, and is therefore, "a given reality of the new creation of God the Father through the Holy Spirit in Christ Jesus" (Fowler 1988:1).

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This unity or oneness of heart, mind and purpose was the bottom-line for the first Christian church. We read in Acts 2:42-47 that members of this church were together in:

- their devotion to the teaching of the apostles
- their koinonia or fellowship, having everything in common
- their breaking of bread or the holy communion
- their prayers
- their service to one another or diakonia
- their glorification of God.

And we read in verse 47(b) that, as Christians engaged in the above-mentioned activities, the Lord kept on adding those who were being saved. This oneness, togetherness or unity constituted a strong witness to the love of God in Christ, and was conducive to church growth (1 Jn 4:12; Rm 12:10, 16). This love flows over into service unto one another (Jn 13:14; Gl 6:10; 1 Pt 4:10), and leads to total acceptance of one another (Rm 14:1, 15:7). The voice in a vision, in Acts 10:15, indicated to Peter that he had to love and accept Gentiles, because God had loved and cleansed them. We realise therefore, that this intimacy between Christians and with Gentile converts was and is of particular importance to God and his kingdom.

It is on this basis that we want to venture into this discussion about the possible unity between our two churches in obedience to the will of God and in concretion of the unity we confess as part of the Christian church. About the koinonia, Koekemoer rightly points out in Booysen (1993:25): "Die geloofsgemeenskap word profeties vanaf die kansel verkondig in woorde wat opgevolg moet word in dade". Based on the love of Christ and the active work of the Holy Spirit as cementer of this fellowship, the church cannot do otherwise but become an actively interactive community, not just in word, but also and more importantly in deeds.

The Christian church and in particular our two churches confess this unity. This unity is however interpreted differently by different churches. But there are basically two

opposing views, namely the structural unity and the spiritual unity. I have a problem with the way in which these two views are espoused and propounded by their adherents.

2. THE PROBLEM OF INTERPRETATION

The problem I have with the way the unity of the church is being interpreted based on the above-mentioned views, is that they are mutually exclusive. The one says structural unity is the only possible expression of church unity. Emphasis is on the “visible church”. Others who are opposed to the structural unity interpret church unity as confessed, in such a way that for them, the only unity spoken of is spiritual unity. They confine the demand for unity only to the “invisible church”. In my view:

- There is but one church of Jesus Christ, which is both eternal and temporal, both visible and invisible.
- This view is based on the teaching of the Word of God, and as set out in the articles of faith (Jn 17:21b; Eph 1:1-16), (Apostolicum, Art 9; Niceanum, Art 9 – Constantinopolitenum as well as Confessio Belgica, Art 27 and Heidelberg Catechism, A 54 (Engelbrecht 1978:285).
- The church is described above in terms that point to it, both as visible and invisible, although the two terms are not used in both the Bible and the articles of faith. For example, when our Lord prays for the oneness of his disciples, he prays for them as a concrete visible group of people who he wished and prayed that they could remain together as one (Jn 17:21a). This visible church is also inferred in the Confessio Belgica, Art 27(b), in the words: “... even though for a time it may *appear* very small in the *eyes* of men – as though it were *snuffed* out” (emphasis mine).

But the church is also described as invisible, in that it is spiritual and transcends all boundaries and ages. Confessio Belgica, Art 27(b) says: “... And so this holy church is not confined, bound or limited to a certain place or certain persons. But it is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world, though still joined and united in heart and will, in

one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith.” The unity being confessed by the church is the unity in teaching and in the truth of the Word of God. That is indisputable. But because the church is both *visible* and *invisible*, the unity as the *coming together* and *merging* of two or more churches must not be deliberately excluded. Engelbrecht (1978:291) indicates that the guidelines for the unity of the invisible church are the same as those of the visible.

Structural or organisational unity of the church in South Africa is of utmost importance, if the church is to return to the truth of the Word of God, and acceptance of the guidance of the Holy Spirit. To be able to fully grasp the importance of unity of our churches, more especially the missionary and mission churches, one needs to look at the reasons that led to separation and division. After looking at the developments and prejudices that led to separation, it may be required that we reconsider our positions on church unity.

3. REASONS FOR SEPARATION AND DIVISION

The separation and division of the White missionary churches and the black mission churches can be ascribed to a twofold capitulation by the former, to racial pressure, which emerged and gained momentum in the early 19th century. The Afrikaner church capitulated to:

3.1 Dehumanising colour prejudice of white members against black Christians.

This situation emerged especially after the promulgation of Ordinance 50, which legislated equality between peoples of the Cape Colony in 1828, and the emancipation of slaves in 1834. Van der Merwe (1985:22) writes in this regard: “Gedurende die negentiende eeu het kleurgevoel in toenemende mate maatskaplike verhoudinge in Suid-Afrika begin beïnvloed. In ’n mate het dit saamgegaan met die proklamasie van Ordinarsie 50 in 1828 waardeur anderskleuriges gelyk gestel is, sowel as die emansipasie van slawe in die Kaapkolonie op 1 Desember 1934.”

From that time, that is 1828, white members in some congregations in the Cape started, and persisted in their objection against receiving the holy communion together with the black members, claiming they were being hindered by that fact. In spite of the

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church's official guidance against such attitude, the dissident group insisted until the synod capitulated in 1857, when, dealing with the matter which came via a request of ds Shand van Tulbach that it be approved that: "... gekleurden in een afsonderlijk gebouw alle voorrechten van den christelijken godsdienst afsonderlijk genieten", on which the synod decided:

De synode beschout het weschenlijk en schrifmatig dat onze ledematen uit de heidenen in onze bestaande gemeenten opgenomen en ingelyfd worden overall waar zulks geschieden kan, maar waar deze maatregel als gevolg van de zwakheid van sommigen de bevorderen van de zaak van Christus onder de heidenen in den weg zoude staan, de gemeenten uit de heidenen opgericht of op te richten hare christelijke voorrechten in een afsonderlijke gebouw of gestichten genieten zal.

(Van der Merwe 1985:25)

In this decision, the church accommodated the weakness of the *so-called weak members at the expense of the weakest and destitute members*. Yes, they were new arrivals in the Christian faith. They were mostly poor slaves. Poor indeed in spirit and material things. Therefore, the poorest and weakest, people who needed to be embraced with love and care, but who were instead being pushed away through negative prejudiced attitudes.

It is however important to note that there were people who, inspired by the Holy Spirit objected to the prejudices against people of other colour, among whom were: ds N J Hofmeyr, who, writing in *De Gereformeerde Kerkbode*, under the pseudonym of I T opposed the misconception about the "curse of Ham", opposition to mission work and also referred to: "*de goddelose rigting*" which he said was: "*Raakt ons niet aan, want wij zijn heiliger dan gij*" (Van der Merwe 1985:25). The "holier than you" attitude was clearly identified as the cause of this urge to reject communion with black Christians. Another opponent of discrimination based on colour prejudice was Van Lier, who according to Van der Merwe, emphasised that the evangelisation of underdeveloped people demanded a true spiritual empathy and contact with them. He said the following

in this regard: “*Zyn de geringsten niet onze evenmensen? ... Waarom zouden wij dan weigeren eenige omgang te houden met de zodanigen, waarvan sommigen met ons eeuwig zullen vereenigd zij voor den troon des Lams?*”, according to Du Plessis, in (Van der Merwe 1985:26). The beliefs, based on colour prejudice against black Christians, were unfortunately to be the basis for mission work and organisation of church life and work in South Africa. How can such inhumane attitude and conduct be made the foundation of the life and work of the church of God?

3.2 The church also capitulated to the pressure from opponents of mission work

According to these opponents, black people were not part of the nations to be made Christ's disciples. Therefore the church was not sent to make black people Christ's disciples together with other nations as commissioned in Matthew 28:19. These people expressed their obnoxious views regarding the exclusion of blacks from God's grace, thus holding the church's mission work to ransom, because of their racist beliefs. These beliefs were inter alia:

3.2.1 Go nowhere among the Gentiles (Mt 10:5)

Which was among others, used by G J Engelbrecht and his ilk to argue that: “it was not proper to take the bread which was due to their children and give it to other people”, so writes H G van der Westhuizen (in Banda 1996:47).

3.2.2 Association of blacks with Ham.

This association meant to these people that blacks were descendants of Ham and therefore not in line for salvation, but destined for everlasting doom, servitude and destruction. This association was based on the misinterpretation of Genesis 9:25 (Banda 1996:49).

3.2.3 Sacred things must not be given to dogs nor pearls be thrown to swine (Mt 7:6; 15:27).

According to this belief blacks were like dogs and swine, not worthy of receiving the Gospel, and were potentially dangerous to whites who would proclaim the Gospel to them (Banda 1996:48).

3.2.4 Blacks were not human beings, according to some

According to this view blacks were believed to have no immortal soul. This view was among others expressed around 1911, by G J Engelbrecht who then argued that there was no need for mission work among them, according to Banda (1996:50).

While it is understood that there were many people in the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika, opposed to these beliefs and attitudes, it has to be accepted that these beliefs and attitudes indeed bedeviled prospects for healthy mission work and full koinonial existence of the church, as well as race relations in South Africa in general. The church and its mission can indeed not be based on such a foundation. Such beliefs and attitudes forced the church to search for strategies which would enable it to do mission work, which is commendable indeed. Therefore, when the church accepted mission work as its responsibility, it was on condition that assurance would be given that there would be:

- no equalisation of blacks to whites
- no mixing of blacks with whites in the same church organisation or structure.

These conditions presupposed the planting of a separate Bantu church, which would also be divided along ethnic lines as it would be expanding to other ethnic groups (Banda 1996:79).

While it is acknowledged and appreciated that the decision of the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika to plant separate autonomous churches facilitated acceptance and support of mission work, the continued parallel existence of our churches cannot be regarded as an ideal state of affairs in this age and era of reconciliation, more especially when we consider the negative racially based foundation on which this

separate existence was founded and nurtured. The great missionary achievement was based on the great compromise, and that situation needs to be reconsidered and corrected. This should happen because of the following contrasting positions brought about and perpetuated by separate existence:

- Separate existence of the two churches might have given some members of the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika the needed distance between themselves and the blacks whose nearness constituted a stumbling block to them, but
- it robbed and continued to rob black Christians who are members of the HKSA, of the needed proximity, intimacy and warmth which could act as real support system for their faith and newly acquired Christian way of living. It discouraged and actively impeded, and continued to do so, true koinonia which is demanded by faith in Christ.
- While it was an activating mechanism for the NHKA to actively embark on, and continue with mission work, it on the other hand,
- traumatised black members of the mission church; for example when in 1979, the first moderator of the HKSA was barred from entering the hall where he was sent by his church, to deliver a message of greetings to the General Church Assembly of the NHKA. He had to wait outside until the assembly could reach a decision to allow him in – that in spite of the fact that the church he represented had been invited. I have no intention here, of expanding on other incidents of this nature, which traumatised the young HKSA, because they are common knowledge in our two churches.

In this type of forced separate existence, there is no actual opening up of the “I” to the “You” as a result of true faith and love. There is no merging of the “I” and the “You”, which Brunner says is, and should be the characteristic of true koinonia, (Booyesen 1993:25-26). Our churches cannot continue to live out a false koinonia in and before the world. What message does that situation send to the world?

There is an urgent need for a serious effort to seek to move towards a more ideal goal, which will complete the unity of our two churches. The unity that exists between

our two churches, based on our faith in the Triune God and His truth, can and should also be expressed practically. On this, Church and Society (1986:15) says: "The church has the responsibility to confess its profound, inviolable unity in Christ and to experience and make this unity visible in this broken and divided world." Explaining this point further, it is pointed out that, "it is essential that this unity be experienced and made visible", for the edification of believers, and in order that the world may see and know "the authenticity of Jesus mission". Based on the already existing unity and practical cooperation between the two churches, it is possible to actualise and intensify this unity. The question is however, whether it could be practically possible to do and achieve that. Let us therefore look at the possibilities.

4. POSSIBILITIES OF UNITY BETWEEN THE HERVORMDE KERK IN SUIDELIKE AFRIKA AND THE NEDERDUITSCH HERVORMDE KERK VAN AFRIKA

It is pleasing to note that many developments have in recent times taken place, pointing to the opening up of our churches to one another. These developments, are to my mind, pointers to the necessity of a closer and real cooperation. The developments referred to, also point to possibilities for togetherness which should replace the ad hoc approach to cooperation. Some of the developments referred to are:

- The compartmentalisation of the HKSA along ethnic lines has not materialized. We can therefore, in our case only talk of unity between two churches and not nine, which would compound the process even more.
- The NHKA has to a larger extent won the battle against the anti-mission and anti-equalisation lobby. Most fears and misconceived prejudices have largely been overcome.
- For this reason, it has been possible for the two churches to invite one another to their respective General Church Assemblies, to have fellowship – without problems. The invitation in 1995, of the HKSA by the NHKA, to send two delegates to attend the full 64th General Church Assembly session as observers, and the positive spirit which prevailed at that assembly, points clearly to the opening up for, and to one another between the two churches.

- The active and positive interaction between circuit mission boards of the NHKA and ministers and congregations of the HKSA, have improved and continue to do so.
- The mutual recognition and acknowledgement of one another's autonomy has increased between our two churches. It has increased to the extent that more and more reference is made from the side of the NHKA, to the needed partnership between the two churches.
- The positive decisions taken by the 1995 General Church Assembly of the NHKA in respect of:
 - movement away from official exclusivity with regard to membership regulations;
 - positive consideration of multi-cultural services;
 - closer cooperation with the HKSA in areas of mission work, and the church's charity and development work et cetera.
- The holding of joint symposia, in 1994, on ecumenism, in 1995, on poverty and the current one (1996), on church unity.
- The holding of discussions on cooperation on theological training, and more recently on budgetary readjustments.
- The growing realisation and acceptance of the HKSA, of its financial responsibilities towards maintenance of own services, and her intensified efforts to achieve financial independence.
- Strict adherence of the two churches, to pure Scriptural principles and Reformed theological heritage.

These developments and more others are positive indicators, pointing to possibilities and opportunities for more intimacy and togetherness, in expression of our true and complete fellowship, witnessing task and service to God and to fellow humans. It is, I believe, desirable and possible to strive towards structural unity, for the sake of Christ and our witness to Christ and his love in the world.

My appeal to this symposium is: where it is Scripturally, doctrinally and geographically possible to merge into one big and strong church structure, whose witness and programmes will impact positively on God's work among Christians and in the society at large, such structural unity should not be resisted but encouraged and nurtured. The motto of the NHKA is in this regard quite encouraging, it reads: "Eendragt maakt magt".

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, please allow me to state the following:

- Church unity (visible and invisible) is a noble course to be strove for, in "order that the world may believe that you have sent me" (Jn 17:21b).
- Structural church unity is possible. We have a good example in the Uniting Reformed Church in South Africa and the Apostolic Faith Mission.
- Church unity can only be enriching. It can only help to unite people from diverse backgrounds, their experiences and talents into one big theologically harmonious family.
- Church unity can only promote better relations, intimacy and better understanding among our church members and office bearers. The Afrikaans saying: "bekend maak bemin en onbekend maak onbemin" just shows how actual the need for structural unity is for fuller expression of our "*communio sanctorum*".

If there is an opportune moment for our churches to consider joining forces against the forces of darkness, it is now, when the majority of the people of our country are trying hard to reach out to one another. There is indeed so much to unite for, in terms of our mission as the church of Christ.

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