

FLOURISHING LIFE-GIVING *OIKOS*  
– A FAITH JOURNEY TOWARDS COSMIC UNITY –

Park Seong-Won

*“How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! (Ps 133.1)*

No other word than this beautiful praise comes to my mind as we congratulate and celebrate the coming together of the two worldwide Reformed families, forming one World Communion of Reformed Churches.

What kind of joy is it that we are enjoying and celebrating today? What sort of unity is it that we have achieved today? What type of life in unity should we live out today and tomorrow? What challenges are ahead of us in our ongoing journey of unity and justice?

Celebrate! Celebrate! Celebrate!

In Psalm 133, “good and pleasant” is a kind of joy the Psalmist expressed when kindred came to live together in unity. The Hebrew word טוב (Tob) for the English “good” describes an extraordinary joy for reunion of the divided family; it is the same word that God spoke with acclamation as each stage of the creation was accomplished (Gen. 1.4,10,12,18,21,25,31). “Tob” also means “beauty”, the esthetics of Eden, the garden of life.

What kind of “good” is it? What kind of “beauty” would it be? A highly significant point to be noted here is that “Tob” is not a relative concept. It is not the antonym of “bad” or “ugliness”. It is an absolute concept as it is. In Buddhism too, the concept of “beauty” is neither dualistic nor relative. Beauty stands as it is. In Confucian teaching, “Tao” (道) or “The Way”, is a concept of the ultimate virtue just as the Johanine theological term *logos* is viewed through the concept of beauty and good.

“Beauty” and “good” represent the concept of unity and perfection. It is the concept of the ONENESS of creation. It perfectly corresponds to the *Ubuntu*, an African expression of human interrelated ties (or bonds) lived in community and in harmony with the whole creation. It also corresponds to the *Sangsaeng* (相生), an ancient Asian concept of “conviviality”, sharing community and economy which allows all to flourish together.

Unity is a major vision God longs to realize in this divided world. All biblical stories since Genesis 3 are the stories of what human beings divide and God unites. “That all may be one” is the major goal of the mission of Jesus as he clearly stated in his last prayer (John 17.21). But the unity God promotes is not merely for the sake of unity, but firmly based on God’s justice, that is, right relationship. As God created the cosmos from chaos, God wants to put order into the chaotic disunity of all the relationships of God’s creation, including the relationship between God and the creation, on the basis of God’s justice and God’s rhythm of life.

What we have achieved, and are acclaiming and celebrating today is this sort of unity. It shouldn’t be just a structural merger of the two organizations for various reasons including ecumenical survival. It shouldn’t bring the two together by compromising the theological differences. It must be one of the most committed responses that the divided human community can make. For the ultimate vision of Jesus is that all be one, in an interrelated and even mysterious way, as illustrated in John 10.17-26. That is why the Psalmist used *בא*, (Tob), the word describing utmost joy. In this respect, the unity we have achieved today is something to be extraordinarily acclaimed and celebrated.

**Flourishing life-giving *Oikos***

What is clear is that our journey toward unity is not finished here. A greater unity lies ahead. A more urgent task is before us. The ecumenical movement has always been committed to the unity of churches and of humankind, and this must be continued. However, a particular challenge I want to make today is **our unity**

**with nature, that is, cosmic unity.**

Through our faith, we are witnessing the Kairotic implosion of today's modern civilization, which is rapidly destroying the foundation of all living beings. The danger of climate change and ecological disaster is approaching an extraordinary critical point. We are told that the current human civilization will soon reach the point of no return unless immediate and urgent action is taken.

The Accra Confession has clearly pointed out the level of danger the current human civilization has reached. Just to give you some shocking figures, according to data by Prof. John van Klinken of Groningen University, between 1850 and 1950 one animal species vanished every year; in 1989 one animal species vanished per day; in 2000 one animal species vanished per hour and within 50 years, 25% of animal and plant species will vanish due to global warming. Dr Clara Deser, senior scientist of the National Centre for Atmospheric Research (NCAR) said in her interview with a Korean paper on March 3rd, 2008 that the global warming process is advancing 10 or 20 years faster than expected. The portion of the glaciers in the Polar Regions that melted down last year was what had been expected to happen 10 or 20 years later. The situation is much more serious than we imagine. If we continue down this current path, we will produce changes greater than any experienced in the past 300 million years. Alan Durning pointed out that the global consumer class produced and consumed as many goods and services in the half century from 1950 to 2000 as throughout the entire period of history prior to that date. This sort of data indicates that the impact of modern economy and development is far greater than one can imagine. As mammon keeps tempting us to BUY more, the time has come to say BYE to consumerism.

Ishimure Michiko, a Japanese environmental writer, pointed out that the original sin today is modernity itself, which separates humanity from humanity, and humanity from all other living beings in God's *Oikos*. In today's world it is widely accepted that the Christian worldview has been a major contributor to ecological destruction. With "Witnessing in the Midst of a Suffering Creation – a Challenge of the Mission of the Church" as the theme at the International Consultation on God's Creation, held in September 2006 in Geneva, a critical point was made that the worldwide expansion of Western or modern civilization through Christian mission is one of the responsible contributors to the current ecological crisis. "The ecological crisis has its origin in Western civilization. The intellectual foundation leading to the exploitation of nature and the excessive human claims on the resources of the planet has been laid in the West ... Christian preaching and Western civilization have historically been closely connected and have functioned hand in hand. On the one hand, the Christian mission laid the spiritual ground for the freedom from nature, and on the other hand, the benefits of Western civilization were often interpreted as an additional proof for the credibility of the Gospel... For a long time certain theologians proudly maintained that the Christian mission had prepared the grounds of modernity." (Lukas Vischer)

Thus, modern civilization with the spiritual support of Christian theology and mission has made a considerable contribution to separating human beings from nature, and as a consequence, both human community and the environment are now paying a high price.

How should Christian theology, spirituality and mission respond to this crisis? What would be the way that the Christian community could respond to the crisis in a responsible way? Diarmuid O'Murchu claims that human community today needs a "spiritual homecoming", namely, reconnection of human beings with nature. We, the human community should take decisive action to go back and reconnect ourselves with the nature which is the divine source of life. This requires a radical reformation of our theology, our spirituality and our missiology. We may need another reformation today.

I find that there is no task more urgent than the question of unity with nature, Cosmic Unity, to which the united Reformed family worldwide must commit themselves today, as our planet faces total destruction of the foundation of life of all living beings.

Attention, therefore, has to be drawn to a different level of Unity as we praise, celebrate and enjoy the living together of Reformed family today. Traditionally, the goal of unity has been focused on "Unity of the Church" and "Unity of Humankind". Having been convinced that the ecumenical movement for these two dimensions of unity should continue, we now need to widen the horizon of Cosmic Unity towards the whole *Oikoumene*. *Koinonia* in diversity should not remain at the level of Unity of the Church and Unity of Humankind. It should be expanded to all creation in God's *Oikoumene*. Justice, peace and reconciliation

should be realized not only in human history but also in the whole creation. Therefore, fellowship and unity among all the members of God's *Oikos*, including cosmic Unity and *Koinonia*, should be the major witness of the Ecumenical Movement in the 21st century. In this sense the Ecumenical Movement should be an **initiator of life-giving civilization**.

A further step for living out the Accra Confession needs to be taken. No doubt, the Accra Confession has made a remarkable step in taking a clear faith stance with regard to mammon and the lordless empire that drives the God-created cosmos into chaos. The Accra Confession, however, is not enough, because its main focus is "resistance" as it keeps saying "We reject..." In response to the search for alternatives, a more proactive step needs to be taken. A messianic ecumenical process is needed for not only resisting mammon and empire, but also choosing life by reclaiming and flourishing Life-Giving Civilization so that we and our descendants may live. Can the newly born World Communion of Reformed Churches commit to this historic mission of transforming life-depriving civilization into Life-Giving Civilization as a forefront ecumenical initiator in this century when life and death are set before the earth community?

#### **A prayerful hope as a concluding remark**

Irenaeus of Lyon put spiritual implication of social justice by saying the following simple slogan, "*Gloria Dei, homo vivens*". The glory of God is that humans may live. John Calvin, our common theological ancestor expressed the same concern by saying "Where God is known, there humanity is also cared for." In the face of today's major challenge of unprecedented ecological devastation, could the World Communion of Reformed Churches coin a contemporary equivalent saying, "*Gloria Dei, cosmos vivens*": The glory of God is that the cosmos may live and "Where God is known, there the cosmos is also cared for"?