

REFLECTIONS FROM LATIN AMERICA:

“Make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of Peace” (Eph 4.3)

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Peace ruled. Or so told the official story. Borders were secured by the emperor’s legions. Surely taxes and tributes were burdensome, especially when the benefit was mostly seen in far-off centres of power. But then again, they did guarantee security; the slightest disturbance was swiftly repressed. Torture was a common practice, and served as deterrence. Honour, naturally, was due the emperor, the “Lord”, who so effectively imposed peace and kept unity among such a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious array of people. By the way, any parallels with the global scene today are absolutely coincidental! Those were the days of the *Pax Romana*.

Yet one holy night, into this fragile peace, pounded precariously together with cross nails and oppressive taxation, another peace was announced. The angels shattered the repressed silence with songs of “Peace on Earth!” They announced good news to a weary people: the long-awaited Prince of Peace had broken into history in the shape of a poor working class baby in an insignificant corner, far from the seats of Roman and Temple power. Once he went public, Jesus’ rule was not marked by military nor economic might. Instead, he gave himself away, granting sight to the blind, feeding the hungry, liberating the oppressed, affirming the dignity of women, children and others who were marginalized in Jewish society. Rather than imposing security by repression and death, Jesus took on the scornful cross in loving sacrifice. In so doing, he unveiled as deceitful the powers of death that held humanity estranged from God, from one another and from the rest of creation. Jesus, our peace, effected salvation, granting new life to the dead, healing from enmity to a broken humanity and restoration to the entire created order. A core mark of the Good News of Christ is this re-definition of peace, *Pax Christi*.

Far from merely a repressed lack of disturbance, God’s peace is dynamic, life-granting, wellbeing. And as Jesus preached and so fully embodied, peace never shows up where her sister, justice, is absent. Jesus made peace by doing justice. And the entire account of God’s dealings in human history reveals God as the Lord, who acts with steadfast love, justice and righteousness on earth, for in those things God delights (Jer 9.23-24). For God’s people, called to make God and God’s good purposes known among the nations, doing justice then is not some marginal, optional, addition to the agenda. Neither is it some human, ideologically inspired, social or political program. It is not a reduced social gospel. Justice is a passion that grows out of the very heart of God. And justice, in God’s dictionary, is defined as redemptive restoration of all things that are wrong. Justice sets things right; it vindicates the victims of natural disaster and human oppression: widows, orphans, foreigners with no chance to earn a living, even criminals in need of a second chance --and the 25,000 children who are dying this very day in our world from preventable diseases.

As the visible face and tangible force of love, justice brings peace, wholeness of life, because it sets things right between people and God, people and other people, people and creation – as it was in the beginning. The fruit of justice is shalom, peace, the flourishing of life, and the realization of God’s good purposes. Injustice and oppression, poverty, hunger, and homelessness, none of these are God’s intent. God, the loving-community of three, is pained when God’s image in the women and men God so lovingly created is effaced by any of these humanly inflicted evils. God, the reconciler, suffers when abuse of power, unequal opportunity, greed or indifference mar the relationships between God’s children. Furthermore, God, the Creator, sustainer of all life, mourns when the garden God planted, the skies God painted, the waters God released, and the multiplicity of living beings God filled God’s earth with are ravaged and exploited with no concern for their health and wellbeing.

“Make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of Peace.” The apostle Paul is writing from prison to followers of Jesus in the port city of Ephesus and in the broader Asia Minor region. Through time – by conquest, colonization, and emigration-- Greeks, Persians, Romans and Jews had been added to the

indigenous inhabitants of Anatolia – Bythinian, Mysians, Phrygians, and Lydians. Diverse cultural, linguistic, socio-economic and religious expressions mixed and clashed, forced together by the hegemony of Rome. Traditions were being challenged, identities were shifting, and many felt uprooted, at a loss – especially the people at the bottom of the totem pole.

It is into this scene that Paul’s words are read to the growing community of Christ-followers, most of them, gentiles. “Make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of Peace.” Unity, he urged, not uniformity. Because, you see, there were those for whom “we are all equal but some are more equal than others”. Proud of their lineage and heritage –after all, they were direct descendants of God’s people of old, the chosen nation of Israel – and marked by the “might makes right” imperial culture, they rested assured of their belonging and believed they owned the right to determine who was in and who was out of the new community being forged by the apostles’ teaching. “Become like us, the true believers; look at the world through our lenses and organize your experience into our categories. Otherwise you’ll only ever be second-class. We can tolerate a little colour here and there, a token representative of minority groups. But they must be willing to blend in, to accommodate to our standards and expectations, our jargon and our styles. Again, any similarity with current experience is pure coincidence!

This sort of alienating inclusion and “invisibilizing” uniformity was common currency in the Roman Empire. People were forced into conformity with the powers that be, even if that meant losing identity, denying their rich distinctiveness and being melded into an amorphous blob easily manipulated for the purposes of the powerful. Yet such uniformity is far from the unity God exemplifies and God’s people are called to embody. The Creator fashioned every human being, women and men alike, in God’s very image, equal in worth and dignity yet also uniquely particular and marvellously distinctive. Christ’s reconciling ministry breaks down all humanly constructed walls and spiritually bolstered exclusions to make unity possible. And the Spirit weaves together a community whose members are diversely gifted for the building up of that community and for works of peace and justice far outside its bounds. The unity Jesus prayed for among his disciples was this one, grounded in the very being of the triune community of love. Formal linkages and mergers of structures and institutions may follow, but the essential unity that makes God’s love known in God’s world is the one lived out by a human community grounded on God’s word and into which God’s Spirit breathes the mutual enjoyment and concert of purpose that characterize God-community.

“Make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of Peace.” Paul’s call was not one he issued lightly. Years earlier, as a radical defender of the Jewish faith, he had actually gone on murderous rampages with the pious intent of eradicating the pernicious sect that dared question religious practices of exclusion and oppression and challenged the imposition of legalities over and against the value of human life. Paul was fully aware of the imprisoning effect of pride and the deadly impact of prejudice. But once Jesus had torn off his blinders, and the Spirit had reoriented Paul’s will, he had become known as the apostle to the Gentiles. And today he was enduring prison under the accusation of taking non-Jews into the Temple, beyond the wall built to keep the ins in and the outs out! His conviction regarding God’s cosmic reconciling purposes in Christ propelled him –against all odds—into a life mission marked by sacrificial efforts to breed unity, peace and justice within the new community. When both legalistic interpretations of Jewish law and imposed Roman decrees prescribed submissive acquiescence on the part of women, children and slaves to oppressive relational patterns in family and work, he daringly preached mutual submission to all, particularly to the powerful – men, fathers, employers – and he acknowledged the anointed leadership of women, young people and non-Jewish Christians in the early church.

“Make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of Peace.” Historical coincidences and official stories aside, to what are we called as Reformed Christians in God’s world today? In times when globalizing forces and ramped-up military campaigns seek to win hearts and minds, and guarantee but a façade of peace and security, while actually threatening the identity, the livelihood and, in many cases, the very life of people, are we ready to make every effort to seek justice for all people so that bountiful peace may be engendered? Or must we confess that we are often far too comfortable with things as they are and far too indifferent to the cries of those 25 thousand children whose deaths could be prevented today, their AIDS-widowed mom’s, their refugee dads, their sex-trafficked sisters, their unemployed siblings, their drug-imprisoned cousins? In times when institutionalized pride and prejudice, spiced with a fair amount of greed and self-interest, have dug deep trenches between churches and denominations over theologies and ideologies, doctrines and dollars, are we ready to make every effort to maintain the unity of God’s people so

that God's love may be known in God's world? Or must we confess that we are often far too comfortable with things as they are and far too indifferent to women and men crying out for authentic love, for visible expressions of forgiveness and restoration, for communities of belonging marked by hope beyond hope? In times when, victims of unrestrained agro-industrial exploitation, many lands no longer yield fruit and others could soon disappear under the sea, when fellow creatures are being choked by oil spouts, smothered by smog, plucked and plundered at will, deprived of their natural habitats – from Brazil to Papua New Guinea, are we willing to make every effort to safeguard the diverse forms of life on God's earth so that God's intent of abundant life for all of creation may be fulfilled? Or must we confess that all too often we are far too comfortable with things as they are and far too indifferent to the depredation of nature and its devastating impact on the most vulnerable inhabitants of God's earth?

As we come together during this Uniting General Council, and we depart from here as members of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, may we not merely celebrate that our merger increases our number, grants us greater power of convocation, or access to more advantageous positions in the public square. Instead, may we see ourselves as fruits and agents of *Pax Christi*, as a community brought together by God's reconciling will in Christ and sent as such into the world by the power of God's Spirit to incarnate God's good purposes for the entire cosmos. So while we're here and as we go forth, let us grant brothers and sisters from areas of the world some dismissed as remote or insignificant their rightful place at our communion table; let's give full credit to voices from Haiti, Indonesia, Mali... No means perhaps there for global conferences on beautiful campuses with tailored lawns. No prestigious speakers flown in for grand occasions. But yes, believe it or not, something good can come from Nazareth! Let us tear down the walls of self-defence, security and prosperity that our greed, pride and prejudice have built, and take the risk of becoming welcoming communities –even to people who are different than us. Let's pledge ultimate allegiance not to the Caesars of the day but to the Lord of history, the only Prince of Peace. Let us fervently promise today to "Make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Amen.

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