

One Saviour one Church Reconciliation as justification and “new creation”

Flip Theron

Introduction: Alienation and reconciliation

The immense amount of attention South Africa attracted since the sixties of the previous century, is presumably indicative of the fact that the world realizes that the South African situation is symptomatic of an universal predicament.

Living in a falling (not merely fallen) world, means living in a creation that is alienated from the Creator. Falling from the Father his creation is falling apart. Reconciliation requires much more than reparation, be it renovation (restoration) or compensation (satisfaction). It involves a re-creation in which the Potter reshapes the clay (Jer.18: 4) of the shattered pottery (Isa.30: 14), which he pronounces unacceptable, into something fundamentally new.

This new creation comes about through God’s judgment that brings about vindication of the Creator and justification of creation. It entails the completion of God’s eschatological purpose (Eph. 1:10:) “to put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment – to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.” This unification of creation He has accomplished on the cross. Col. 1:20 (*Good News*): “Through the Son, then, God decided to bring the whole universe back to himself. God made peace through his Son’s sacrificial death on the cross and so brought back to himself all things, both on earth and in heaven.”

Following the meeting of the WCC in New Delhi during the early sixties of the previous century, the “cosmic Christ” became a favourite theme in ecumenical circles. Unfortunately, there was a tendency to emphasize the incarnation at the expense of the crucifixion. It resulted in an optimism alien to the critical character of a *theologia crucis*.

This paper argues that as fruit of the cosmic reconciliation through Christ crucified, the unity of the church is a promise of the eschatological peace i.e. the union of the disintegrating creation in the death of the Son, to the Father, through the Spirit, so that God will be all in all (1 Cor.15: 28).

Reconciliation in the South African debate

Under the caption, *First reconciliation, then reunification*, a recent issue of *Kerkbode*¹, official magazine of the *Dutch Reformed Church*, carries a report of a meeting by leaders of the indigenous *Dutch Reformed Family of Churches*, which are constituted, predominantly, along racial lines.² According to *Kerkbode*’s account, the tension at times ran high especially between the *Uniting Reformed Church* and the remaining black *Reformed Church in Africa* that did not take part in merging with the previously brown *Dutch Reformed Mission Church* forming the *Uniting Reformed Church*. In some places

¹ “Eers versoening, dan kerkhereniging”, *Kerkbode*, 178/7 (11 May 2007), 1,

² *Dutch Reformed Church* (predominantly white), the *Uniting Reformed Church* (predominantly brown, but also black), the *Dutch Reformed Church in Africa* (predominantly black) and the *Reformed Church in Africa* (predominantly Indian).

these two churches are embroiled in bitter court cases relating to church property. Nevertheless, the article mentions that hopes are high that the process of reconciliation is still on course. Consequently, they decided that for the immediate future reconciliation should be given priority.

In post-apartheid South Africa, reconciliation, which is a core concept in the church's vocabulary, tends to become a buzzword in socio-political discourse. The *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* has captured worldwide attention. On the question whether it has fostered or frustrated unity, opinions are divided. Nevertheless, it remains irrefutable that any reconciliation that ignores the truth, is fake. This holds good for society in general, and the church in particular.

In the period prior to the political disbanding of apartheid, reconciliation was a crucial theme in theological debate. Already during June 1968, the *South African Council of Churches* declared in *A Message to the People of South Africa*,³ that “a policy of separate development...rejects as undesirable the good reconciliation and fellowship which God is giving to us by his Son.” Jaap Durand⁴ recalls discussions held with theological students studying for the ministry in the *Dutch Reformed Mission Church*⁵ during 1978 in which it became clear that reconciliation was the central issue in South Africa. It gradually dawned on them that all talk of reconciliation was meaningless within the social context of apartheid since the latter's ideological point of departure was the conviction that people were *in principle* irreconcilable. Russel Botman⁶, ‘n member of the class of 1978, remembers how they “had spent many hours...debating the ethical injustices of apartheid and now wanted to trace all that knowledge to its theological center.” Since apartheid departs “from the irreconcilability of people”, it became manifestly clear “that apartheid was inherently against the gospel”.

The same sentiment was sounded in the so-called *Open Letter*⁷ (1982) that was signed by 123 signatories and caused quite a stir in South Africa and abroad. It maintained that the church should proclaim that no structuring of society should take as starting point the “*fundamental* (my italics) irreconcilability of people or groups of people” (2.1.2). Following Hendrikus Berkhof and echoing Barth's principle of analogy between *Christengemeinde* and *Burgergemeinde*, the church is called to be the “experimental garden” (*proeftuin*) of God to demonstrate the unity, mutual love, peace, justice, etc. that He intends for the whole of society (2.1.3). Defending the *Open Letter*, Durand claims that society, comprising believers and non-believers, should be structured on the model of reconciliation.⁸ Being God's “demonstration model”, his “example” for the world, the church should declare that, *per analogiam*, the basic structure of society should reflect God's reconciliation of people.

³ See Jaap Durand, “How I changed my mindset from eternal truths to contextualized metaphors”, in *Ned Geref Teologiese Tydskrif* 43 (2002), (64-70), 67.

⁴ Jaap Durand, “How I changed my mindset” 67f.

⁵ Nowadays part of the *Uniting Reformed Church*.

⁶ H. Russel Botman, “Narrative challenges in a situation of transition”, in H. Russel Botman & Robin M. Petersen (Eds.), *To Remember and to Heal. Theological and Psychological Reflections on Truth and Reconciliation*, Cape Town, Pretoria, Johannesburg (Human & Rousseau) 1996, 40.

⁷ See D.J. Bosch, A. König, W. Nicol, *Perspektief of die Ope Brief*, Kaapstad, Pretoria, Johannesburg (Human & Rousseau) 1982, 13-17.

⁸ J.J.F. Durand, “The prophetic calling of the church” in: *Perspektief op die Ope Brief*, 74f.

At the General Synod of 1978 the *Dutch Reformed Mission Church* rejected apartheid as in conflict with the gospel since it subscribed to the belief of the *fundamental irreconcilability* of people.⁹ That decision was decisive at the meeting of the *World Alliance of Reformed Churches* (WARC) in Ottawa, 1982.¹⁰ Allan Boesak, the best-known exponent of *Liberation Theology* (respectively: *Black Theology*¹¹) in South Africa, played a major part at this meeting where he was elected President. Botman¹² remarks that Boesak confronted the *World Alliance* “with the logical conclusion to be drawn from the decision of the synod of his church.” Consequently, the theological defense of apartheid was declared a heresy, and the membership of the *Dutch Reformed Church* was suspended.¹³

According to Durand the acceptance of the *Confession of Belhar* (General Synod 1986) formed the climax of this process.¹⁴ Although the term “apartheid” is not mentioned in this confession Durand maintains that the authors “wanted it in this way to underline the fact that it concerns itself in the first place with the *heretical church doctrine* (his italics) that underlies the entire apartheid system.”¹⁵

Continuity between creation and re-creation

It should be noted that not the theological defense of the *irreconcilability of people* was proclaimed a heresy, but the theological defense of apartheid as such. The latter was apparently so patently identical with the former that it could be taken for granted.

However, for the sake of “truth and reconciliation” it must be pointed out that, as theologically precarious, flawed, unimpressive and even spurious the theological defense of apartheid might have been, the *Dutch Reformed Church* never defended a view claiming the irreconcilability of people. As a matter of fact the anthropology behind the theological defense of apartheid was not an extremely pessimistic view of humanity¹⁶ but tended precisely in the opposite direction.

A neo-Calvinistic interpretation of the old adage, *gratia non tollit sed perficit naturam*,¹⁷ was essential. In an article, “Continuity between creation and re-creation”¹⁸ one of the stalwarts of the theological defense of apartheid, puts it in a nutshell: “Recreation does not

⁹ Cf. *Handelinge van Sinode* van die NG-Sendingkerk, 1978, 399f.

¹⁰ *Called to Witness to the Gospel Today*, World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Geneva, 1983, 29

¹¹ See W. D. Jonker, “The Gospel and Political Freedom. Aspects of a South African Debate” in: A. van Egmond & D. van Keulen (eds.), *Freedom. Studies in Reformed Theology I*, Baarn (Callenbach) 1996, 243-262.

¹² H. Russel Botman, “Narrative Challenges”, 40.

¹³ *Called to Witness to the Gospel Today*, World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Geneva, 1983, 29: “We declare with Black Reformed Christians of South Africa that apartheid (‘separate development’) is a sin, and that the moral and *theological justification* (my italics, PFT) of it is a travesty of the Gospel, and in its persistent disobedience to the Word of God, a theological heresy.”

¹⁴ Jaap Durand, “How I changed my mindset”, 68. In the *Accompanying Letter* to the Confession, point 3, is stated: “This confession is not aimed at specific people or groups of people or a church or churches. We proclaim it against a *false doctrine* (my italics, PFT) against an ideological distortion which threatens the gospel itself in our church and country.”

¹⁵ . J. J. F. Durand, “A Confession – Was it really necessary?”, G. D. Cloete & D. J. Smit, *A Moment of Truth*, Grand Rapids (Eerdmans) 1984, 36 (33-41).

¹⁶ Cf. Durand’s interpretation of apartheid. He refers to the “negative approach to humanity and society” reflected in the concepts “apartheid” and “separate development”. “The prophetic calling of the church”, 69.

¹⁷ **Grace does not destroy but perfects nature.**

¹⁸ F. J. M. Potgieter, “Kontinuiteit tussen skepping en herskepping. ‘n Reaksie op die Ope Brief”, in D.J.Bosch, A. König, W. Nicol, *Perspektief of die Ope Brief*, Kaapstad, Pretoria, Johannesburg (Human & Rousseau) 1982, 106-113.

mean the annihilation of creation and providence (read, history PFT) because also these works of God are only good.”¹⁹ After all, should the splendid pluriformity of creation not be reflected in, for instance, a pluriformity of churches in which the precious variety of languages, customs and cultures should be accommodated? Did the abundant fruit of the family of Reformed churches in South Africa and abroad, not provide proof of the value of this policy? Was church polity in this regard not the precursor – if you like, the “experimental garden” preceding political policy?

Far from being pessimistic, apartheid, or separate development as the proponents of this policy preferred to call it – was an impossible political pipedream built on unfounded optimism that it would safeguard racial and cultural identities in an equitable way, establish economic stability, and secure neighbourly peace. It was the panacea that served as social solution for church and society. The alien (*paroikia*) character of the church as divine institute signaling the coming of God’s eschatological Kingdom, was not acknowledged. The fundamental difference between reconciliation as a theological concept on the one hand, and reconciliation as a social and political settlement on the other, was not conceded.

Clearly, there is a deep-seated difference between reconciliation, say, between Muslims and Christians within the same society, and “Jews and Gentiles” within the one body of Christ. The indiscriminate way in which the word “reconciliation” (respectively: “irreconcilable”) was used in the period preceding the dismantling of apartheid, suggests that the theological proponents and opponents of apartheid were not theologically worlds apart. Whoever dared to draw attention to the difference between church and state, concurring with Calvin that one should distinguish between Christian freedom and civil freedom,²⁰ were liable to be labeled an adherent of a modern two-kingdom doctrine denying the universal kingship of Christ, tending towards *docetism* and *gnosticism*.

In post-apartheid South Africa, with its religiously “neutral” state, a clear distinction between reconciliation in the church and the state has regained respectability. Whilst describing apartheid as “a crime against humanity”, one of the signatories of the *Open Letter*, Dirkie Smit, argues in 1995 that the religious and theological truth-guilt-confession-reconciliation complex has not a great deal to say for the South African society. He continues:

In the first place, society is not the church. Its citizens are not identical with the Christian believers. South Africa is not the kingdom of God. We do not have a theocratic form of government. The logic of Christian confession of guilt and forgiveness is not the logic of the public, political and economic world. The grammar of Christian contrition, confession and absolution is not the grammar of public jurisprudence. In the public sphere Smedes’s

¹⁹ F. J. M. Potgieter, “Kontinuiteit tussen skepping en herskepping”, 108.

²⁰ J. Calvin, *Institutes* 4, 20. There is a close material relationship between *Institutes* 3, chapter 19 that deals with “Christian Freedom” and *Institutes* 4, chapter 20 that treats of “civil government”. In the 1536 edition the part dealing with Christian Freedom (in substance the same as (3, 19) “was followed in the same long chapter by a section on ecclesiastical power and one bearing the title of the present chapter (4, 20, PFT) and essentially of the same content. Subsequent revisions widely separated these parts of the original ch.vi, but IV.xx is in a real sense a continuation of III.xix.”. John T. McNeill (ed) translated by Ford Lewis Battles, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Volume 1, Philadelphia, London, (Westminster, SCM) MCMLX, 1485.

logic²¹ probably makes more sense than that of Matthew 18 does. Religious forgiveness is not amnesty.²²

Nowadays one even gets the impression that in certain theological circles, separating church and state is the intention. Advocating the abolishment of all public religious holidays (Easter weekend, Christmas, even Sundays) in a country where 80% claim to be Christians, is a case in point. In such a situation the danger of uncritical *negative collusion* (Oliver O'Donovan²³) with the religiously "neutral" state, looms large. At a time when talk of theocracy in whatever form is tantamount to political heresy, it might be worthwhile to recall the famous hymn of Venantius Fortunatus (535-609), *regnavit a ligno Deus*, God reigns from the cross.²⁴ Denying the fundamental meaning of the cross is the very essence of *docetism* and spiritualism, for nothing is as painfully concrete as the cross on Calvary.

It is hard to suppress the suspicion that the accusation of heresy was little more than a strong-arm ploy on a par with the theological support for apartheid. Botman²⁵ maintains that the *Kairos Document* took the issue of "irreconcilability" further. It served the political strategy to demonize the opponent: "The God of the enemy is not only an idol, it is Satan, the anti-Christ." It corresponds with the political pressure to persuade the so-called "world community" to declare apartheid a "crime against humanity",²⁶ the very opposite of the "silent (read: soft) diplomacy" employed by the South African government against Zimbabwe.

With regard to the accusation of heresy, a statement by Russel Botman, is rather revealing:²⁷ "Although the heresy theme captured most of the attention within the debate among Dutch Reformed Churches, reconciliation became a flagship, a 'liberating metaphoric device'".²⁸ He adds that the pregnant meaning of the *word itself* (without its theological-soteriological content, PFT) aroused hope. It would seem that not the atonement as the heart of the gospel was crucial, but socio-political motives. Clearly, the accusation of heresy should not be taken theologically too seriously.

²¹ Namely, that one must forgive for the sake of one's own spiritual health and future. Smit refers to Lewis Smedes, *Forgive and Forget*, San Francisco (Harper Collins), 1984.

²² Dirkie Smit, "The Truth and Reconciliation Commission – Tentative Religious and Theological Perspectives" in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 90, (1995), 3-15, quotations on p. 12.

²³ "The peril of the Christendom idea – precisely the same peril that attends upon the post-Christendom idea of the religiously neutral state – was that of negative collusion: the pretence that there was now no further challenge to be issued to the rulers in the name of the ruling Christ." O. O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*.

Rediscovering the roots of political theology, Cambridge (University Press) 1996, 213.

²⁴ That is an allusion to Ps. 96: 10. See A. Noordegraaf, "'t Is van het hout, dat God regeert...'. Enkele overwegingen over de prediking van het koninkrijk Gods en de verzoening", K.A. Deurloo, L.J. van den Brom, A. Noordegraaf, H.J. de Jonge e. a. *Verzoening of Koninkrijk. Over de prioriteit in de verkondiging*, Callenbach 1998, 32-47.

²⁵ H Russel Botman, "Narrative Challenges", 40-42.

²⁶ In 1973 20 dictatorships in East Europe led by the Soviet Union, signed the *International Convention on the Suppression of the Crime of Apartheid*. Cf. Hermann Giliomee, "Nazi-argument dryf rede by die agterdeur uit" in: *Die Burger*, 31 Mei 2007, 22. For an excellent rebuttal of the accusation of a "crime against humanity" see Herman Giliomee's presidential address at the meeting of the *South African Institute of Race Relations* on 15 February 1996. Hermann Giliomee, *Liberal and Populist Democracy in South Africa: Challenges, New Threats to Liberalism*, Johannesburg, 8-11. Of great importance is also his article, "Rediscovering and Re-imagining the Afrikaners in a New South Africa: Autobiographical Notes on Writing an Uncommon Biography" in *Interario* XXVII (2003) 3/4, 9-47.

²⁷ Russel Botman became a leading figure in the SACC and is at present rector of the University of Stellenbosch.

²⁸ H. Russel Botman, "Narrative Challenges", 40.

Two Soteriologies

In his study *The Kingdom of God – the Destiny of Jesus* Heinz Schürmann²⁹ rejects what has become customary in certain theological circles i. e. to drive a wedge between the post-Easter *staurological soteriology* of the apostle Paul in which the cross is at the core of the proclamation, and the *eschatological soteriology* of Jesus in which everything centers on the coming of God's Kingdom. According to the latter, Jesus proclaimed the liberating Kingdom, but, following Paul, the confession of the church deformed it into the vicarious suffering of the Saviour. That reminds Schürmann of the modernist, Alfred Loisy's one-liner that Jesus proclaimed the coming of God's Kingdom and what actually came was the church.³⁰

The paradigm-switch from Cross to Kingdom favours a reshuffle of priorities. Christ's vicarious suffering should be substituted at the center by the resurrection. The latter is not the revelation of Christ's cross as the justification of sinners (Romans 4: 25)³¹, but should be seen as the vindication of Christ's pre-Easter message of the imminent Kingdom. The preaching of Jesus (*subjective genitive*) replaces the preaching about Jesus (*objective genitive*).³² Not dogmatics but ethics has the priority. Reconciliation is no longer linked to expiation. God's mercy is taken for granted. "God Himself" should substitute his crucified Son as the pivotal point of the Gospel. Obviously, this has profound implications for "God Himself" as expressed in the Trinitarian confession of the church.

The crucified Christ as foundation and consummation

The doctrine of the Trinity is historically and systematically mainly a matter of soteriology. Due to the focus on the immanent Trinity this fact has often been obscured. Long before the so-called "Rahner rule"³³ in a lecture as early as 1909 (published 1910) Noordmans warns against a fatal duplicating³⁴ in which we try to find the immanent Trinity behind, instead of within, the economic Trinity.³⁵ For sure, Scripture is not shallow. Behind the Lamb slaughtered on Calvary, is the Lamb slaughtered from the beginning of creation (Rev. 13:8).³⁶ The way in which He is slaughtered from eternity is, however, in this dispensation for us inconceivable.³⁷

²⁹ Heinz Schürmann, *Gottes Reich – Jesu Geschick. Jesu ureigener Tod im Licht seiner Basilea-Verkündigung*, Freiburg, Basel, Wien, Herder, 1983.

³⁰ 11-13

³¹ The translation: "He was delivered over to death for (dia) our sins and was raised to life for (dia) our justification" suggests that his death and resurrection have different meanings. According to this interpretation the first dia has a causal and the second a final connotation. Budiman prefers to give also the second dia a causal meaning: Because of our justification on the cross, Christ was raised to life. This interpretation is supported by 1Cor. 15:17: "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins." Rudy Budiman, *De Realisering der Verzoening in het Menselijk Bestaan. Een onderzoek naar Paulus' opvatting van de gemeenschap aan Christus' lijden als een integrerend deel der verzoening*. Delft (Meinema), 1971, 112f.

³² H. J. de Jonge, "Eerherstel voor het koninkrijk" in K.A. Deurloo, L.J. van den Brom, A. Noordeggraaf, H.J. de Jonge e. a. *Verzoening of Koninkrijk. Over de prioriteit in de verkondiging*, 1998, 9-17.

³³ "The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and vice versa". K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations* IV, 79, Kuschel, 416.

³⁴ O Noordmans, "Het getuigenis van Dr. de Hartog", VW 1, Kampen (Kok) 1978, 139

³⁵ See note 26, "Het getuigenis van Dr. de Hartog", 149. Also "Het getuigenis van Dr. de Hartog. Waardering en kritiek", VW 1, Kampen (Kok) 1978, 161f.

³⁶ See O. Hofius. Also Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Born before all Time. The dispute over Christ's origin*, London (SCM) 1990.

³⁷ "Het getuigenis van Dr. de Hartog", 162.

Depicting the economic Trinity as the shortest summary of God's historical revelation, Noordmans uses the striking image of a swooping eagle with outstretched wings³⁸ following his plummeting creation down into the deep. Right at the center, between the wings, we observe the downward thrust of the body (cf. Phil. 2: 6-8) in the form of the suffering Servant as the concrete "body (or form³⁹) of God" (Gods *Gestalte*).⁴⁰ As God's "expressed image"⁴¹ Christ the Saviour forms the proper substance (body) of the confession whilst Father and Spirit are like wings extending from creation to consummation. Noordmans finds this figure also in the *Apostolic Confession*, and hears its swooping sound in the songs of Luther and the preludes of Bach: *Vom Himmel hoch da komm Ich her*, in between *Gott Vater in Ewigkeit*, and *Komm, Schöpfer-Geist*.

On Calvary God has caught up with his falling creation. Christ's cry of God forsakenness, testifies to the fact that in his Son, God has completely identified Himself with his alienated creation in accordance with his eternal counsel. Thus we can say that creation itself is a pre-figuration of its consummation in the suffering Servant. As the omega Christ is also the alpha. As the climax of God's covenant⁴² the Crucified is also the foundation of creation. He is (Col. 1: 15-17) the firstborn (πρωτοτοκο") of creation in whom all things were created and in whom all things hold together (συνεσθῆκεν). "The Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world" (Revelation 13: 8), holds the key to the mystery of history (Revelation 5).

To quote Noordmans in this regard:

*Every unbroken form of creation that we leave behind, overtakes us and defiles the Gospel. The creation accompanies us until we come to Calvary and what remains there of its appearance and glory we may pronounce – no sooner. Paradise is close-by the cross. And the Adam and Eve we see going in and out, are the murderer and Mary Magdalene. Whatever does not take part in the procession to the cross...is not creation, but paganism.*⁴³

The Unity of the Corpus Mysticum in the Corpus Crucifixum

Of the many metaphors the New Testament uses for the church, the "body of Christ" has attracted the most attention. No other image expresses the unity of Christ with the believers in a comparable way. It is closely connected with the expression "in Christ",⁴⁴ which has a corporal-local connotation, and is a favourite and fundamental formula of the apostle Paul.⁴⁵ Rom. 12: 5: "*In Christ* we who are many form *one body*, and each member belongs to all the others". Incorporated in Christ the church is included in the history of Christ⁴⁶ in whom an "inclusive place-taking"⁴⁷ transpired. 2Cor. 5: 14:

³⁸ O Noordmans, VW 2, 224

³⁹ *morphe Theou*, Phil. 2: 6.

⁴⁰ See VW 8, part II, 1: "Gods gestalte".

⁴¹ "Het getuigenis van dr. de Hartog", 162

⁴² N.T Wright

⁴³ *Herschepping*, VW 2, 257.

⁴⁴ Outside Paul seldom. Dunn more than 80 times in Pauline corpus. According to Büchsel it occurs 165 times if related expressions are added. (Budiman, 20).

⁴⁵ H. Ridderbos, Paulus, 441.

⁴⁶ F. Neugebauer, "Das Paulinische 'in Christo'", *New Testament Studies*, 1958, 132.

⁴⁷ O. Hofius, "The Fourth Servant Song in the New Testament Letters" in Bernd Janowski & Peter Stuhlmacher (eds.), *The suffering Servant. Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*. Grand Rapids (Eerdmans) 2004, 163-188.

Because “one died for all...therefore all died”. That could only occur because of the Creator’s incarnation in creation, uniting and incorporating it in Himself.⁴⁸ In Paul’s presentation participatory and juristic conceptions coincide.⁴⁹ Christ’s death *for all* implies the death *of all*.

Following Dorothy Sölle it has become customary to distinguish terminologically between a “representative” (*Stellvertreter*) and a “substitute” (*Ersatzmann*).⁵⁰ Neither of these concepts describes the mystery of Christ adequately. Also Christ as “mediator” may be misunderstood since it suggests a third independent party between God and humanity. Although every representative includes, in a sense, those he/she represents by excluding them, it is true of Christ in a fundamentally realistic and inimitable way. In the human Son of God as representative, the Creator and his creation are, so to speak, present-ed. Incorporated in the *corpus crucifixum*, the church is the *corpus Christi* who is the *corpus Dei*. Reconciled by “Christ’s physical body through death” (Col. 1:22) the church participates in the Trinitarian unity of Father and Son through the Holy Spirit.

The connection between the church as body of Christ and Christ’s own crucified body is so close that, sometimes, it is difficult to distinguish them. In a context that refers to Christ himself as our peace (Eph. 2: 14), it is hard to decide whether (vs. 16), *this one body* in which the reconciliation to God took place, refers to Christ or the church.⁵¹ In 1Cor. 11: 27 sinning against the *body and blood of the Lord*, obviously means sinning against the *corpus crucifixum*, but in vs. 29, not recognizing (*diakrinein*) *the body*, seems to refer to the church especially in light of vs. 31: “But if we recognized (*diakrinein*) *ourselves*, we would not come under judgment”?⁵²

The unity of the church is grounded in the justification wrought in Christ’s death that the Spirit imparts (imputes) to us in baptism. When there is disunity because some claim to be of Paul, others of Apollos, others of Cephas and still others of Christ (1Cor. 1: 12), Paul exclaims in exasperation (vs.13): “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?” Being baptized *into* (*eis*) Christ means being baptized *into* his death (Rom. 6:3). Similarly, Paul opposes Peter when the latter separates himself from the Gentiles to please those belonging to the circumcision group (Gal.2: 12) because it amounts to a denial of dying with Christ in baptism. Gal. 3: 27f. “For all of you who were baptized *into* Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one *in* Christ Jesus.” Therefore Paul could exclaim (Gal. 6: 14): “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the (old, falling) world has been crucified to me, and I to the world”. After all (Gal. 6: 15), “neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything;

⁴⁸ E. Jünger, *Das Evangelium von der Rechtfertigung*, 137: “Dazu bedarf es...einer Gegenwart, in der die ganze Schöpfung present ist. Und das kann nur heißen: dazu bedarf es der Gegenwart des göttlichen Schöpfers in der Gestalt des Geschöpfes.”

⁴⁹ E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism. A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*, London (SCM) 1977, 472.

⁵⁰ Cf. the discussion by Rudy Budiman, *De Realisering der Verzoening in het Menselijk Bestaan. Een onderzoek naar Paulus’ opvatting van de gemeenschap aan Christus’ lijden als een integrerend deel der verzoening*. Delft (Meinema), 1971, 20f. of the pastoral letter, *De Tussenmuur weggebroken*, ’s-Gravenhage 1967, of the General Synod of the previous Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk.

⁵¹ Cf. H. Ridderbos, *Paulus*, 421.

⁵² See also Rudy Budiman, *De Realisering der Verzoening in het Menselijk Bestaan. Een onderzoek naar Paulus’ opvatting van de gemeenschap aan Christus’ lijden als een integrerend deel der verzoening*. Delft (Meinema), 1971, 137f.

what counts is a *new creation*.” This the Creator has accomplished in Christ the eschatological Adam. 2Cor. 5: 17: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a *new creation*; the old has gone, the new has come!”

Reconciliation as new creation

Although the author of the letter to the Ephesians does not use the concept of the church as *kaine ktisis* (new creation), the idea is prevalent. Eph. 2: 10: “For we are God’s workmanship, (ποίημα) *created* in Christ Jesus...”; Eph. 2: 15f.: “His purpose was to *create* in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross...”; Eph. 4: 24: “...and to put on the new self, *created* to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”

According to Eph. 3:4,6 the “mystery of Christ” is the mystery that the Gentiles are *συνσωμα* (joint-body) and *συνμετοχα* (joint-shares) of the promises *in Christ*. The unity of the church is a sign of God’s eschatological purpose (Eph. 1: 10:) “to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.” God has already (vs. 22), “placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way”.

In Christ both church and creation have the foundation and destination, but only the church is called his body. As such the church is a sign of the eschatological destiny of the entire creation. The cross signifies the *breach* between the church and the world, and is at the same time the *bridge* between them.

It is sometimes intimated that uniting the Dutch Reformed family of churches, means returning to the one church that existed before the policy of different churches for different races started in the 19th century. However, that is not only impossible but also undesirable. It is impossible to restore a broken marriage, or a broken friendship, to the situation that obtained before the break occurred. That might be possible in merely impersonal, legal relationships by merely compensating for losses sustained, but in personal relationships that possibility is precluded as Vernon White⁵³ has conclusively demonstrated. Dealing with the painful past is indispensable for a promising future. To start anew something new must be created out of the past with its pain. The pain must be transformed into something positive, the bad must be transmuted into something good, the old must be recreated into something new.

That is precisely what the justification of the wicked involves. God’s judgment re-creates good out of evil, life out of death, unity out of separation, and reconciliation out of alienation. When God’s Trinitarian history crosses our sinful history, He crosses the minus into a plus. In the final analysis Christ’s cross is a positive sign (+) planted in the midst of creation proclaiming the Creator’s “Yes”⁵⁴ to his promises. It signifies God’s self-sacrificing, unifying love in Christ his Son and our Saviour.

And the unity of the church, grounded in the Crucified Christ, is, albeit unimposing and still soiled with sin, already a sign of what God has in store for the whole of creation in his eschatological new creation.

⁵³ Vernon White, *Atonement and Incarnation. An essay in universalism and particularity*, Cambridge, New York, Post Chester, Melbourne, Sydney (Cambridge University Press) 1991, chapter 7: “A moral demand: conditions for real reconciliation.”

⁵⁴ 2Cor. 1: 20.

Concluding propositions

1. In a falling world that is falling apart, “apartheid” is the inevitable result. That is also apparent in the fragmentation of the church as a reflection of society.
2. If proponents and opponents of the theological defense of apartheid had taken human greed, fear, pride, appetite for self-aggrandizement, passion for power, etc. more seriously, they would have heeded the *Heidelberg Catechism’s* warning that we are prone by nature – that means, rather fundamentally! – to hate God and our neighbour. In short, the critical character of the doctrine of justification of the Godless would have played a more prominent part in their theology.
3. Neither the distinction between church as *institute* and *organism* (Kuyper), nor the Barthian distinction between *Christengemeinde* and *Bürgergemeinde* takes the theological distinction between church and society seriously enough.
4. Only when the eschatological character of the church is reflected in the church’s striving towards truth, reconciliation and (institutional) unity, can the church be called the salt of the earth and the light of the world.