

## A LETTER FROM JOHN CALVIN

*Stellenbosch Moederkerk: Sunday, 30 August 2009*

FROM: John Calvin , saved by the grace of God; died into a blessed eternal life; now a member of the cloud of witnesses, and one of your grateful forebears in the holy faith.

TO: All Christian men and women in South Africa, gathered in humble commemoration of the good work which God elected to establish through my life and ministry.

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, and from our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

RE: “Let this mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus...” (Phil 2:5)

### INTRODUCTION

Not in my wildest dreams could I - and those who fought for the reformation of the medieval Catholic Church - have foreseen the many epistles of Christ around the world that grew from our ministry.

These epistles are the churches (whether officially called Reformed or not) in which the true gospel is preached, and in which the sacraments as installed by Christ are celebrated.

The spread of the true gospel through the Europe we knew, and later to the new world of the Americas, into Africa and the East, is a sign that these letters were written not with ink, but by the Spirit of the living God.

These churches are to be known in the first place not as Calvinist (God forbid!) or Reformed, as this might suggest that the church is proceeding from the plans of humans. No, these churches are indeed epistles of Christ (2 Cor 3:3) – they are **Christian** churches.

We have witnessed over the last 500 years that God who has begun a good work in you (and in those who stood in faith prior to you), is indeed completing it until the day of Jesus Christ (Phil 1: 6).

With St Paul, I pray that you will grow in love and knowledge so that you may discern the signs of the times, and focus on those things that are close to the mind of God (Phil 1:9-10).

The mind and holy will of God is no secret beyond human understanding. It has been revealed in and through Christ Jesus. Therefore I join brother Paul in calling upon you to adopt the mind of Christ. Christ's mind is expressed in a glorious manner in the hymn of the early church:

*He was in the form of God, but did not cling to his status as equal with God. He humbled himself, he made himself of no reputation, by becoming a human being, serving others like a slave. He humbled himself even further and was obedient to God to the point of death, the cursed death on the cross (Phil 2:6-8).*

But why would St Paul call on the Christians in Philippi to embrace the mind of Christ? As a discernment of the times in Southern Africa and the world today, I wish to point out that the mind and the attitude of Christ make possible – amongst others - **unity amongst believers** and **justice in the world**.

St Paul had a very special relation with the Christians in Philippi. It is in that city that he and Silas were put to jail for bringing unrest via their preaching. In that city their prayers and worship miraculously opened the doors of captivity and they were set free to continue the work of Christ. Being sensitive not to appear to preach the gospel for own material gain, Paul rarely received gifts and stipends from local churches. His special relation with the Philippians is evident in their continued material support for him (4:10-20) – even sending a congregant, Ephaphroditus, to Rome (2:19-30). At the time of writing the letter, Paul was under house arrest in the palace of the Roman emperor. He writes this letter partially as a thank you for all the support he received.

## UNITY

But messages and rumours of disunity amongst the Philippians also reached Paul. He refers to this several times in this short letter – naming Euodia and Sintiche amongst others as partial to divisions in the body of Christ (4:2). He calls on them to stand fast in one spirit against false teachings (1:27), and to fulfil his joy by being like-minded – sharing one love, one heart, and one striving (2:2).

Paul then points to the reasons for disunity and name them in unambiguous terms: Disunity arises from selfish ambition, the seeking of honour for the self, from looking out for and promoting own interests, by striving to build a reputation or a name for yourself (2:3-4, 7).

Yes, unlike the common idea that disunity in the church and amongst churches as a rule arise from deep theological convictions, Paul points to minds focussed on the self in stead of adopting the mind of Christ. (One needs only read the origins of the Church of England to understand this).

You may accuse me and other reformers of being part to one of the greatest schisms in the history of church. Let me remind you that neither Luther, nor I, nor any other reformer ever in principle sought a schism in the church. In fact, we appealed to the authority of church and state at the time to hear us as people with no intention of bringing disunity, but as proclaiming the basic truths of the gospel openly. (My letter to the king of France printed in the Institutes is there for all to read. So are my comments on the unity of the universal catholic church...)

Even if disunity is humanly speaking forced upon us in a situation in which the very gospel itself is at stake as in our case back then, or when a state of confession (*status confessionis*) is declared, we should never accept the outcome as normal – even if history proves us to be on the right side of the terrible battle between Christian and Christian.

In most cases, however, disunity arises from matters of culture, language, property ownership and pension funds. To hide these obvious matters of self-interest, we couch them in theological language so as to pretend that what divide us are matters of grave doctrinal concern. We find a theological reason which - taken by itself - looks important, but is only hiding the real reason for in-fighting and schism: the desire to further or maintain our own

interests which can even find expression in the pious-looking intent to build a missionary reputation for our denomination, be it Catholic, Dutch Reformed, Methodist or Lutheran.

Those who promote disunity inside congregations or amongst churches are enemies of the cross. They are spiritually immature, says St Paul. They are in the graphic description of St Paul people whose god is their belly (3:19) – that is they eat and eat to serve their own body and reputation. Their glory is in their shame, i.e. they turn what should be shameful into glory (literally: they practice a scandalous doxology).

Why would they do such foolish things? one may ask. The answer is clear: “they set their mind on earthly things” (3:19). In stead of adopting the mind of Christ, they think and act through selfish ambition.

Where Christians act outside and against the mind of Christ, there cannot be one love (because love of the self obliterates love of the other); and there cannot be one mind (because each mind focuses on the flourishing of the own ambition). Sadly for those outside the church, there is then also no longer one Christ, and the very mission of the Son is obscured and rendered incredible (John 17).

The way to unity is thus via a deep self-knowledge that arises from being known by God, as I wrote at the very beginning of my Institutes. Like Isaiah who saw the Lord and fell to the ground declaring: “I am finished!” we see our true selves only in the light of God’s revelation.

Then, seeing Christ, one reckons the things that you are proud of - the factors on which your identity is built; the things on which your confidence is grounded – as nothing, as rubbish, in order to gain Christ (3:4-8).

Then Christ restores us to use our diverse gifts and histories – not as building blocks for our own reputation – but as means by which we follow Christ’s mind in serving others (HC, Belhar 2).

Every act of unity is therefore a sign of Christ’s mind. Indeed, Christ cannot be divided. God cannot be torn into different parts (Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians 5:5)

We humble ourselves before others from whom we are removed. We do not cling to our status as something we need to protect. We put our name and reputation and history and hymn book and liturgy and church law and theology to the service of others. We become slaves, willing to give up our very own lives as we actively seek their interest above our own, and as we actively love them more than we love ourselves.

This is the mind of Christ.

Insofar as South African churches in the Dutch Reformed family still remain divided – no matter which intricate histories lie behind this schism – so far the full consolation of Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit is withheld from South African society. If you claim to stand in the tradition of the reformation gospel for which I and others have toiled under difficult circumstances, you will urgently and continuously strive to unite. You will enter into a pious conspiracy (*pia conspiratio*) to cultivate peace amongst yourselves (Preface to the Catechism and the Confession of faith 1538).

This you will only do if you esteem the other better than yourself; if you strip yourself of pride and have a lowliness of mind about your own reputation, and if – by the powerful work of the Spirit – you adopt the service-oriented mind of Christ.

My great wish for the churches of the Reformation all over the world is that their conduct toward one another would be worthy of the gospel of Christ (1:27). It would reverberate in the heavens if you could all become one, and – by the grace of God – re-unite even beyond your own confessional boundaries so that the glory of God be known in all the earth.

## JUSTICE

Let me hasten to say a few words about justice, specifically social justice.

You would understand that I was a refugee myself and worked as pastor amongst those who fled their homelands due to religious persecution. We knew how it felt to be on the margins of society. Like many South Africans in the 20th century, we understood how political, economic and ecclesial power can combine into a seemingly omnipotent ideology, crushing beneath its feet those who dare to resist.

In your societies marginalization has taken on new forms: huge inequalities, human rights on paper with no power to effect them; poorer nations outwitted in a global trade regime where “centre” and “margin” are clearly defined in euphemisms like developed and under-developed nations, indigenous peoples (the few that are left in some cases) robbed of land and dignity, women and children living in fear of sexual and physical violence, and the almost obscene Olympian ideal of human beings rich, self-made, and seemingly free to choose what to consume and where.

Let me then remind you that Paul himself wrote this letter from a prison. His preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ brought him huge suffering and humiliation. Although a Roman citizen, he had little power over his own destiny. That is why he writes in such glowing terms about Epaphroditus:

Here is a man with a Christ-like mind. He left the security of his home town to come to dangerous Rome where his visit to a political prisoner in the house of the emperor was a life-threatening act. On top of that, he fell seriously ill to the point that Paul and others thought he could die in his mission to support a marginalised prisoner. For the sake of the work of Christ – serving others in need, seeking the interest of the lowest – Epaphroditus came close to death, not regarding his life in service of others (2:30).

To become servants of justice, requires a radical redefinition of the life of faith. Before recounting the visit by Epaphroditus, Paul tells the Philippians: Your faith is a sacrifice in service of God. His own life is poured out as a drink offering. God granted them the privilege not only to believe in Christ, but also to suffer for His sake (2:17; 1:29).

I am not suggesting that we constantly seek martyrdom in a masochistic sense of the word. But Christians and Christian churches who understand the life of faith as cheap grace (our brother Bonhoeffer saw this rightly); who see religion as social gain, will rarely -if ever - leave the comfort of their middle or upper class status for the sake of others.

They are so used to being served, that the very idea of discipleship and suffering do not even occur in their minds.

In stead of seeing themselves as stewards of God's gifts and blessings so richly bestowed upon them (Calvin: Commentary on Gen 2:15), their very religious life becomes a means not to serve others but to build a reputation of a successful church. Sadly, such "success" is measured in terms of the flesh (the market ideology of the day) and not in terms of the mind of Christ.

Sadly, a church can herself become party to a beast that eats and gobbles up the poor and suck their blood, in stead of helping them and looking on them with fairness (Calvin: Sermon XLIV on the harmony of the gospels).

I am amazed as to how many Christians make the will of God a difficult question. Scripture is the full revelation of God's will and states plain and simple: Gifts to those who suffer; visits to those in prison, generosity to strangers as if they were angels, helping the widows and the orphans, are acceptable and pleasing sacrifices to God. These acts of service and discipleship are like a sweet-smelling aroma rising up to God's throne (Phil 4:18).

It is indeed not difficult to know what pleases God. It is only difficult if your religious life is a means to please yourself. The churches in South Africa are ideally placed by God to be living testimonies of doing justice in the world. Grasp this unique opportunity to live as self-donating churches that – in the words of the beautiful African confession (Belhar) - stand where God stands: against injustice and in a special way for the oppressed and the poor.

## JOY

What will the mood and atmosphere be in churches that adopt and live by the mind of Christ? Many have turned my so-called "Calvinist" heritage into a very dark and almost depressive church. "Calvinist" means strict adherence to man-made laws and a frown on the forehead to show how serious Christians really look.

This can never to be case. My symbol of faith was nothing other than a burning heart!

No other letter in the NT speaks so much about joy as this one. (Knowing the circumstances, it is not to be humanly expected). "Rejoice in the Lord!" is a recurring theme in the letter (Phil 3:1 et al).

Yes, where churches follow the mind of Christ in uniting with one another, making peace, and overcoming even ages of separation, immense joy returns to the church.

Where churches follow the mind of Christ in serving others beyond their own boundaries, giving themselves away as slaves, risking their very own existence, there immense joy takes hold of the church.

This is the paradox of the gospel of Jesus Christ: Unlike the false prosperity gospel that proclaims cheap psychology and material reward for being faithful, Christian joy lies in the opposite direction of self assertiveness and self-preservation. Joy is a gift of the Spirit to the church who walks in the Spirit (Gal 5).

Contrary to those who believe joy can be “produced” by changing the means of the liturgy (new instruments and new media), Scripture teaches that unity and justice are the sober, but truthful and lasting building blocks of joy.

## HOLY COMMUNION

It is time to close.

I am pleased that you will celebrate holy communion tonight. As you know, I called on the church to celebrate the Supper of the Lord on a weekly basis.

The DRC family experienced the pain of separation at the table after 1857. This separation and enmity led to exclusion at the ecumenical table in Ottawa in 1982. The heavens were quiet at the pain of those events. What should be a celebration of the one body of Christ – breaking one bread and drinking from one cup – has been deformed in history.

The way back toward one another is exactly via the regular celebration of the Lord’s Supper. The table is the place for sinners and schism-makers to meet each other in the presence of the Lord who gave his body so that we would be one.

Scripture is also clear that Holy Communion and justice belong together. We shall not eat the bread as long as others are hungry. We shall not drink the

wine as long as others are thirsty. The table is the place to be reminded that all of creation is a theatre, reflecting the glory of the Lord. This glory shines forth if we strengthen our faith at the table to once again adopt the mind of Christ so that the weak will benefit from our generosity.

I thank you for the commemoration of God's work in my life. All honour belongs to Him alone.

May I remind the churches in South Africa that God shall supply all your needs according to his riches in glory by Jesus Christ (Phil 4:19).

Together with all the witnesses in heaven, we wish you peace and justice and joy in the Lord.

I sign this letter with my own hand.

AMEN

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