



Holding fast to Unity in Diversity

Sermon on the occasion of the closing service of the General Assembly of the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) in Sibiu 2024

Sunday, 1 September 2024

Sermon text - Ephesians 4:1-15

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: "When he ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people." (What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe). So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.

Dear sisters and brothers

"The diversity of the churches is not a tragic accident but a gift, an enrichment...It is therefore particularly important today that we churches in Europe strengthen our fellowship. Unity in reconciled diversity! Where others break off communication, the Protestant churches remain in conversation with each other."¹ This is what the Bishop of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Württemberg, Ernst Wilhelm Gohl, preached in 2023 in his sermon at the festive service to mark the 50th anniversary of the Leuenberg Agreement.

¹ epd documentation, p. 61. Bishop of the Württemberg Regional Church, Ernst Wilhelm Gohl, in his sermon at the festive service to mark the 50th anniversary of the Leuenberg Agreement on 7 October in Ulm.



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And until a few weeks ago, I would have enthusiastically agreed with this somewhat wholehearted self-assessment. Europe is struggling not to break apart. Coping with the threat posed by Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, the question of how to deal with the many migrants streaming into Europe, the gap between prosperity and poverty — these and many other things are leading to confrontation and division. The CPCE churches are part of this Europe and are not beyond the problems and challenges. But they stand on a different foundation: we, the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe, believe in “unity in reconciled diversity”, even if we have not yet achieved it.

At this Assembly, however, we had to learn humility. The void caused by the absent Hungarian-speaking churches is painful. Their voice was missing in the discussions on the controversial topics of gender, sexuality, family and the other important study documents. They were also not involved in the decision on where the CPCE's journey should go in the next six years. Although we can look back with a certain pride on 50 years of successful fellowship, which has brought us closer together. At the same time we know that nothing can be taken for granted and that nothing is set in stone. Our community is not a “Mighty Fortress” (which already Martin Luther recognized not in the church, but in “Our God” alone). Our fellowship requires sustained and continually renewed efforts with and for one another in order to hold together. All the Hungarian Reformed churches of the CPCE, whose absence we deeply regret, fortunately emphasize that the decision to be absent from the General Assembly in Sibiu does not call their membership of the CPCE into question. That gives us hope.

So we now look back on seven intensive days here in Sibiu. We have celebrated, debated, voted and decided. And we have eaten together, drunk beer, laughed, made and deepened friendships. We have experienced church fellowship in all its facets. The time we spent together did us good and strengthened and confirmed us on our path. We are looking forward to the next six-year stage of our fellowship with the discussions and projects that we decided on yesterday. We hope and pray that the resolutions will lead to a steadfastness and deepening of our fellowship in the future. And we hope and pray that we will soon be able to celebrate, discuss and make decisions together again. Because holding on to fellowship is our most important task in the church. The words from the fourth chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians have been given to us as travel provisions that provide encouragement and a vision for our journey.



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On our journey into the next 6 years, I would like to unpack three pieces from the rich textual provisions that this excerpt gives us.

1. *“There is one body and one Spirit” (verse 4)*

We have just remembered our baptism together at the font and equipped one another for the service to which Christ has called us. We have immersed ourselves in the unity that has been gifted to us. In the one baptism that we all carry with us as a sign, we are incorporated into the body of Christ. “[O]ne Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all” (verses 5 and 6). Unity is given to us through baptism into the triune God.

Dear sisters and brothers, the order is reversed from what we usually demand:

First is the unity that God creates through his Spirit. The unity into which we are received through baptism and grace. And then comes the struggle to make this unity visible. Just as the study document “Church Communion”, which we adopted in Basel, calls for: in the celebration of services, in shared teaching through theological work, in the shared witness of ministry in today’s Europe and in shared ecumenical responsibility.

Unity is not a question of convictions that have to be handed over like tickets for entry to a club. Unity is not something that we can produce, but something that is given to us and to which we can only respond through a mutual attitude of respectful attention.

The institutionalized church misleads us to a notorious confusion between what Christ brings about and what we can produce and do.

This should make it clear that the unity of which our bible text speaks does not appeal to our abilities and actions, and does not present a church agenda that can be operationalized. Rather, Paul is talking about what we cannot and will never be able to achieve and what will nevertheless happen if we allow it to, instead of constantly interfering. The unity of the church in Christ does not happen through, but precisely despite our abilities and possibilities. *“There is one body and one Spirit”* (verse 4). Period. We want to and should hold on to this as we continue together to walk the CPCE path that we have begun.

2. *“Be patient, bearing with one another in love” (verse 2b)*

The indicative: “There is one body” is at the same time an imperative: bear with one another! The fact that we are one body does not mean that we are all the same. Let us think of the image from the Epistle to the Corinthians (12:12): “Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ.” This is why unity is not just a state but also a task: bear with one another! “Bearing”



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does not sound like a Sunday stroll. It sounds like rubbing against each other, getting upset at and enduring one another. Anyone who undertakes the journey in and for the church cannot avoid differences of opinion, disagreements and conflicts.

“Bearing with one another in love” — What if we understand this challenge, addressed to us, in this way over the next six years? If we take “bearing” seriously by going to the very places and seeking serious discussion where disagreements are inevitable and unavoidable? If we decide to sit together and listen to each other precisely where everyone is really hurting? Perhaps you’re thinking now: this is one of those typical Sunday speeches, pastoral church-speak to soothe tempers and cover up serious conflict with the “little cloak of love”.

But bearing each other is only one side of the imperative that follows the indicative. The other side follows in verse 15:

3. *“Speaking the truth in love, we will grow”* (verse 15A)

Dear sisters and brothers, it is as the outgoing Executive President of the CPCE, John Bradbury, said in his jubilee presentation in Warsaw in May 2023: “We are not worried that the church Communion could break down over Christological differences or even over differences in the understanding of the Lord’s Supper. Rather, we are worried that questions of church and politics or ethical differences will lead to a split in the Communion”²

The challenges for us have not become smaller: they have become different. And we do not wish to ignore the differences that divide us on ethical, peace policy and theological issues. We wish to struggle with each other for the truth, argue fairly, explain to each other honestly why we see things the way we do. And in doing so, we hope for the miracle of the working of the Holy Spirit, who can create a third, still unforeseeable opinion in the encounter between two pointed opinions.

However, we must remain aware that disputes — however seriously they are meant and however truthfully they are conducted — do not create the church, do not sustain the church and do not protect the church. This is not a plea against having a disputatious church, on the contrary! It is about having a correctly disputatious church that knows what it is arguing about and that does not fall into the error of denying the unity of the church in Jesus Christ.

² epd documentation p. 22.



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Dear sisters and brothers,

You are one body — bear with one another in love — and hold on to the truth. We wish to take this threefold provision with us on our onward journey. But how can we do that? Hold on to unity, bear with one another and struggle for the truth at the same time?

Here is a little anecdote: A famous rabbi was asked to settle a long-standing dispute between two philosophers. After listening carefully to the first philosopher's position, he replied after careful consideration: "You are right." After listening to the second philosopher's impressive refutation, he replied: "You are right." Later, his wife angrily confronts the rabbi: "You agreed with both philosophers, even though they totally contradicted each other. They can't be right at the same time." To which the rabbi replied: "You are right too."³

What a crazy story! What does the rabbi do? He listens: first to the first philosopher, then to the second philosopher and finally to his wife. On closer inspection, however, he doesn't just *listen* to what the three of them have to say, he *listens attentively* to them by agreeing with all three of them. He enters into a relationship with them and is connected to each of them through his "being with" them. This is why he can agree with all of them in good conscience. He is neither indifferent nor does he lie to any of the persons. His agreement is considered, honest and convinced because it is not based on theoretical insights, but on his relationship with each of the persons.

This is — admittedly — an unusual attitude, but a thoroughly biblical one! "There is one body", therefore 'bear with one another in love' — this is the foundation of relationships in the church. In contrast, the demand of "speaking the truth in love" describes the task that follows from a relationship and does not establish and justify the relationship:

I am happy to be on the same journey with you, strengthened by the General Assembly and the travel provisions provided by the Epistle to the Ephesians. May our journey, our trust and joy in one another, our suffering and learning together leave an impression. May our adherence to unity without giving up the struggle for truth have an impact on the societies in which we bear witness, in societies. For these threaten to break apart into parallel worlds. And democratic processes are being attacked by hatred and discrimination. This is precisely the time into which Christ has called us. And in this time, we wish to hold on to unity without giving up truthfulness.

Amen.

³ Cf. Amélie Rorty, 'A Plea for Ambivalence', in Peter Goldie (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Emotion*, Oxford 2009, 425-444 (444).