

## Becoming a United Church in a World of Division: A Biblical View of Christian Unity

*Our society at large is marked by a pervasive spirit of division. This movement toward division has also influenced the church in ways that we are both aware of and unaware of. Today questions are being asked among us: “Is unity something to which we ought to aspire?” and “To what lengths should we go to maintain the unity of the body?” and “What do we even mean by unity?” Yet a prayer for oneness was the last prayer Jesus prayed before he went to the cross. The purpose of this paper is to enable members of our conference to recover a biblical view of unity in the midst of a culture bent on division. In this survey, we see that unity is not a product of human striving but a gift that God gives and the church receives. The church’s mandate is not to “create” unity, but to cultivate a spirituality that is able to receive unity and then maintain that which has been given. We then consider the resources that will enable us, in a Mennonite perspective, to maintain unity in the body as central to our effective witness in the world. These resources include our confession that Jesus is Lord, our desire to be obedient to Scripture, our respect for our Confession of Faith, and a desire to be guided by the Holy Spirit. How we think about each of these resources will make a difference in how we relate to each other, particularly when we disagree from congregation to congregation. Finally, we offer a set of foundational commitments for the members of our conference to consider as a way for us to seek the unity that God wishes to bestow on us.*

### **Contextual Pressures that Urge Us toward More Discernment**

The last prayer Jesus prayed before he was arrested was a plea on behalf of us, those who would come to believe because of the testimony of the apostles – that we would all be one as Father, Son, and Spirit are one (John 17:21). At the annual meeting of Central Plains Mennonite Conference in 2010, the delegates received this appeal: “We ask each other to be the living fulfillment of Jesus’ prayer by doing the hard work of remaining in relationship even when we disagree.”<sup>1</sup> A pervasive theme arising from the delegate feedback was a question that begs an answer: What do we mean by unity? This paper is an attempt to rediscover the biblical basis for Christian unity.

We live in a context marked by pluralism and ambiguity. North American culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century poses unprecedented challenges to unity. Although a core value of the United States is *e pluribus unum* (out of many one), the cultural context in which we find ourselves is marked by increasing polarization, radical individualism, rights entitlement, and profound mistrust of the “other.”<sup>2</sup> In short, we live in a culture of deteriorating unity. These trends in our society also influence the church. The unity of our church is being challenged as we disagree about issues such as homosexuality, women in leadership, immigration, national allegiance, military enlistment, stewardship of creation, and the claims we make about Jesus as Savior and Lord in an increasingly pluralistic religious context.

This emerging cultural reality is not surprising. It is a product of the myths by which our society lives: that decisions made by simple majority will result in unity; that changing a culture is a simple process of convincing enough people to support a cause; that unconditional acceptance is the same as unconditional love; that tolerance and unity are the same thing; and that unity is most efficiently achieved by forceful persuasion.<sup>3</sup>

The conventional wisdom in our society suggests four foundations on which unity might be built:

- a) **Sameness.** Sameness implies that conformity is the path to unity. The church in many places mirrors the broader culture in which people are becoming less loyal to historic roots and, instead, gather into like-minded communities defined by common taste in music and worship arts, political party, race, and class. Seeking unity on the basis of sameness places unity in opposition to diversity.
- b) **Niceness.** In an attempt to hold people together, it is believed that unity will be the outcome of our niceness. We see this tendency when we cut off important conversations

because we “agree to disagree,” when we pretend that differences do not exist, and when we avoid topics because someone’s feelings might get hurt.

- c) **Tolerance.** Some in our culture suggest that unity is found in our ability to tolerate “the other” as long as “the other” doesn’t limit our own rights and freedoms. Setting the bar for unity at the level of “tolerance,” however, implies that mere tolerance results in a whole relationship. But there is a power issue in this view that undermines unity. For example, if I “tolerate” you, you are present in my circle because I *allow* you to be. This basis for unity presumes the one who is tolerated is “less than” the one who tolerates.
- d) **Coercion.** “Unity” in our culture is built on a belief that if I can force you to act like me, we will get along. When one group wins the culture or international war, we will have peace and can live as one people. This leads to a world where people believe that the ends justify the means.

While all these foundations for unity operate in our culture today, they do not equal the unity reflected in the prayer of Jesus; that is, they are not the foundations of Christian unity. As Christians, we are concerned with unity because this was the hope of Jesus for the church.

### **Unity in the Biblical Story: The Basis for the Making of a People**

#### *Old Testament: Unity is Born of a Covenant that God Initiates*

In the Old Testament, God’s invitation to form a people is offered as a gift before the people do anything to deserve it. In the call of Abram, with no initial qualifications God “**puts**” a covenant in place with Abram to create a people (Genesis 6:18; 9:9,11,12,13,15,16,17; 12:1-3; 15:1,18;17:1,2,4,7,9,10,11,13,14,19, 21). The covenant is received through the sign of circumcision. The purpose of this covenant was to return the world to a lived experience of God’s blessing: “I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing ... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:1-3).

Following Israel’s deliverance from Egypt, God renews his covenant to create a people by saying, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt” (Exodus 20:2). In bringing Israel up out of the land of Egypt, God “redeemed” this people. God’s decision to redeem is motivated by the cry of God’s people for help (Exodus 3:7-12). God’s redemption did not depend on the people’s obedience. The commandments and the law became the basis for going forward. In other words, the commandments are a description of what the people of God look like *once redeemed*.

After the Exodus, the covenant remained in effect, but was framed in conditional terms. The language is, “If you will ... then I will” (for example, Deuteronomy 28:9: The LORD **will** establish you as his holy people, as he promised you on oath, **if** you keep the commands of the LORD your God and walk in his ways). But even as the covenant to make a people moves forward based on obedience, obedience is never coerced (“**choose** life,” Deuteronomy 30:19; Joshua 24:15).

In 2 Chronicles 30:21, we see an example of unity born of the covenant God put in place. When King Hezekiah revived the observance of the Passover, “Also in Judah, the hand of God was on the people to **give them unity** of mind to carry out what the king and his officials had ordered, *following the word of the Lord.*” The unity of the people came *from the hand of God*.

Further on in the Old Testament, we see that when justice-making is absent among the people, unity is not possible. Injustice disrupts the unity that God offers. For example, Jeremiah says, “From prophet to priest everyone is dealing falsely. They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace” (Jeremiah 8:11).

In the Psalms we see that unity is a much-prized, even awesome spectacle: “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity.” This condition of unity is “ordained of God’s blessing” not created through human initiative or competence (Psalm 133:1,3).

### *Gospels: Unity Is Born of Discipleship*

In the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), John the Baptist calls for **repentance** as preparation for receiving the reign of God. The ministry of Jesus begins with a call to repentance (Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:15; Luke 5:32). So “repentance” is a first step toward life in the kingdom of God. Repentance in the Hebrew (*shub*) and in the Greek (*metanoia*) means “to turn” or “to turn around” or “to turn away from.” **Baptism** upon one’s repentance is the sign that seals this covenantal relationship and marks entrance into the reign of God. The community that Jesus is creating to be “one” is the community that has “turned.” The Synoptic Gospels seem to emphasize that the “turning from” and a “turning toward” are complementary actions. To do one is to do the other.

In the only two references to the church in the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus makes the **discernment of sin**, binding and loosing, central to the church’s work (Matthew 16:18-20; 18:15-20). In these passages, the work of discerning sin is a pathway to unity. The church is the community that seeks to “turn from” sin and “turn toward” the reign of God. Binding and loosing is how the church’s life is aligned with how things are in heaven (Matthew 16:18-20). Correcting a brother or sister who has sinned is the means of restoring a breach in fellowship (Matthew 18:15-20) and therefore restoring unity. The binding and loosing of sin is how life in the church fulfills the prayer of Jesus that God’s “kingdom would come and God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

Presumed to be the latest, the Gospel of John is written to the most diverse audience of any of the Gospels. Willard Swartley has said that the Gospel of John “draws heavily on Jewish traditions, transforms them in Jesus, and seeks to win both Jews and Gentiles as believers.”<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, the word “repent” doesn’t show up in the Gospel of John. In the Gospel of John, the ministry of Jesus begins when Jesus says, “Come and see” and “follow me” (John 1:39,43). John’s emphasis seems to be on the **“turning toward.”** In chapters 13–17 in the Gospel of John, we see the most explicit description of how the community looks when it is living together in God’s reign.

In the Gospel of John, unity is born of **obedience** to — a turning toward — a new commandment (John 13:34-35). We are together “in Jesus” and “in the Father” when we keep his commandment. Jesus says, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you” (John 15:12-14). Obedience to this commandment indicates that the life of the disciple community will be shaped by the cross. Obedience to this commandment is born of a spiritual connection to the source of all life rather than born of human ability (John 15:1-11), “I am the vine, you are the branches, my Father is the vinedresser.” Jesus describes this organic connection between the vine and branches at the same time that he promises that the Spirit will come and guide his disciples. The connection between vine and branches is spiritual, rather than human in origin.

Jesus envisions a community of people who are united in their obedience to his command to “love one another as I have loved you.” In his final prayer before he goes to the cross, he is explicit about his hope for the community of his followers (John 17:20-23). Jesus longs for his followers to be one in the same way the Trinity (Father, Son, and Spirit) are one. In the Gospels, God “puts” an offer of covenant literally on the table in the flesh and blood of Jesus to be received apart from the readiness or ability of the disciples to honor it (Matthew 26:26-28, Mark 14:22-24, Luke 22:17-20, John 6, 13).

At the heart of Jesus’ longing for this oneness of his followers is his **concern for the world**. In fact, the oneness of the community will itself be an agent of mission: “I in them and you in me,

that they may become completely one, *so that the world may know* that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:23).

Interestingly, when Jesus commissions the disciples in the Gospel of John, he refers to the binding and loosing of sins found in the Synoptic Gospels and he applies this practice to mission: “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’” (John 20:21-23). It is important for the church in all ages to understand that the binding and loosing of sin *is contingent on the conscious presence of the Spirit within the community of disciples*. The Gospel writers are consistent in their conviction that **forgiveness of sin and moral discernment** are “an essential aspect of the church’s mission in the world.”<sup>5</sup>

*Epistles: We Maintain the Unity of the Spirit with Hearts Shaped by Yieldedness, Forbearance, Mutual Submission, and the Law of Love*

In Acts and the Epistles we see the church struggling mightily with the practicalities of what it means to be one. We see this struggle in the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15); in the struggle for leadership authority (1 Corinthians 3:5); and in the struggle over lifestyle issues (for example, Gnostics among them who separated body and spirit: 1 Corinthians 3:16; 8; Colossians 2:20; 1 Timothy 4:6-8).<sup>6</sup>

As a church that takes discipleship seriously, we can soon slip into the belief that becoming a church “without spot or wrinkle” will occur *if we strive hard enough to be faithful*. This is a short leap to “**works righteousness**” rather than a **reconciliation** that is born in us through the work of the Spirit of Jesus, who joins us together into a holy temple where God chooses to dwell (Ephesians 2:21).

According to Paul, the church participates in the Trinity and by doing so becomes a sign of God’s transforming work in a broken world. The church is not the transformer of the world’s brokenness. The church is a sign to the world that God can transform death to life, brokenness to wholeness. The biblical story is the story of God’s response to a broken world. The world’s brokenness is not only our problem, it is God’s problem. How does God respond to the brokenness in this world, which was created “very good”? The biblical story from Genesis to Revelation highlights God’s movement toward our brokenness for the purpose of restoring us. Instead of moving *away* from the brokenness of humanity, God chose to move *into* the brokenness of the world to make all things new. **God’s response to brokenness is not withdrawal but incarnation**, God entering human experience and dying human death in order to be raised to new life.

Paul writes, “For our sake, God made him [Jesus] to be sin, who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). God’s movement toward brokenness is for the purpose of reconciling the world to himself through Christ. Restoration, redemption, renewal, transformation, and new creation are words used in the biblical story to describe the purpose of God’s movement toward brokenness.

As a practical outgrowth of the enmity that was destroyed in the cross of Jesus (Ephesians 2:14-16), the church is called to **seek unity** in the bonds of peace (Ephesians 4:3) and to **maintain** that there is one body and one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is above all and through all and in all (Ephesians 4:4-6). Maintaining the oneness of this body is our spiritual calling. It makes the church a sign that “reveals the mystery hidden in the ages” to the “rulers and authorities in the heavenly realm” (Ephesians 3:10). The mystery is that in Jesus, God is gathering up all things, “things in heaven and things on earth” (Ephesians 1:10). The New Testament ends with the declaration “Behold, I [the triune God] am making all things new” (Revelation 21:5).

Since God always moves toward brokenness for the purpose of transformation, the faithful church aligns with this same movement. Jesus' prayer that the church may be one in the midst of a broken world helps us understand biblical unity as transformation not isolation, engagement not protectionism. In the midst of a broken world, unity in the body of Christ becomes a powerful and visible sign of God's redeeming and transforming work through Christ.

In the Epistles, we see that unity *is not constructed by people but a result of* participation in the life of the Father, Son, and Spirit who are at work within us, in the church, and in the world. Unity is brought about by the Spirit in the life of the church. As such, unity is a gift. It is something that the church "receives" or is "given." Unity is a result of the transforming presence of the Spirit of Christ. The church is called only to "maintain the unity of the body in the bonds of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). Rather than "**create**" unity, the church prepares itself to "**maintain**" unity through attitudes characterized by humility, gentleness, patience, mutual submission, and forbearance in love" (Ephesians 4:2, 5:21-33; Colossians 3:12-17; 1 Peter 3:8). The Spirit gifts leaders to equip the church for ministry to keep us from being "tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine." "Speaking the truth in love" enable us to grow up and to be knit together in Jesus" (Ephesians 4:12-16).

When the church moves toward brokenness, it demonstrates profound **trust and faith in God**, who is making all things new. Adopting this level of trust and faith in God who is making all things new will lead the church into yieldedness, mutual submission, and forbearance which parallel the new commandment of Jesus (John 13:34,35). The early hymn quoted in Philippians 2:4-5 asks that we champion the interests of others over our own: "Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus who, though he was in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited." Second Corinthians 10:4,5 asserts, "We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle ... and we take every thought captive to Christ." **Yieldedness and mutual submission** are strongly implied in the call to the stronger brother or sister to restrain their liberty for the sake of the weaker brother or sister (1 Corinthians 8).

Similarly, a spirituality of **forbearance** is offered as a means of maintaining unity: "Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, you must forgive each other" (Colossians 3:13). Here we see a parallel to the command to love in the way of the cross. Philippians 3:15,16 hearken to patient forbearance: "Let those of you who are mature, be of the same mind; *and if you think differently about anything*, this too God will make clear to you. Only hold fast to what we have attained." Here we see the church called to exercise patience, waiting to see how God will make things clear to us.

Throughout the record of the early church we hear an appeal to leniency and the **law of love**. Following the Council of Jerusalem, the many requirements of obedience were reduced to merely three (Acts 15:20). The recurring appeal throughout the Epistles is to the fulfillment of the law of love (Romans 13, 1 Corinthians 13, Galatians 5:14, Colossians 3:14, James 2:8). The witness of the Epistles is that love both fulfills the requirements of the law and covers a multitude of sins (Romans 13:10; 1 Peter 4:8).

In Revelation, we see the seven churches having reached some level of maturity. But for five of these, Jesus also points out how they have been compromised. There is room for correction in discerning the common life commitments of the church. Though Jesus indicates the possibility of "spitting" Laodicea out of his mouth, his hope is for the church to endure in faithfulness. We are nevertheless reminded in Revelation 1 that the risen Jesus chooses to stand among the churches (represented by lampstands). Even as John received this message as a "direct" or "special" revelation from the Spirit, the fate of churches is decided by Jesus alone. Compromised as these churches may be, words of correction are not offered with a foregone conclusion of separation but in the hope that the church will endure together in faithfulness.<sup>7</sup>

## **Implications for a Church that Seeks to Embody Unity as Common Life Experience**

*Unity is Expressed in the Body in these Ways:*

- As a reflection of the dynamic unity in the Trinity.
- In a spiritual life characterized by yieldedness, mutual submission, patient forbearance, and the law of love.
- In a common mission to announce redemption from sin within the church and in the world.
- Christian unity rejects seeking the lowest common denominator and instead lives in obedience to Christ, in hope of becoming a church without spot or wrinkle as we anticipate the fulfillment of all things. (Ephesians 5:27; Revelation 19).

*Ends of Unity: The Church is a Sign that God has Accomplished all that is Necessary for the Reconciliation of all Things*

The Scriptures do not give us only one image for the unified church. Indeed, Scripture has multiple ways of describing the hope of unity and why it matters. In all cases, unity in the body points to **the fulfillment of all things**.

- The unity of the church both anticipates and expresses a longing for the reconciliation of all things in creation (Ephesians 1:10, Revelation 19).
- Central to the mission of the church is the binding and loosing of sin within the body and in the world, for the sake of the world (Matthew 16:18-20; 18:15-20; John 20:21-23).
- Love is the unifying element among all material and spiritual elements (1 Corinthians 13; Colossians 3:14).
- We experience unity as we seek spiritual transformation from one degree of glory to another (2 Corinthians 3:12-18).
- The earthly aim of Christian unity is to become a place for the Spirit of God to dwell (Ephesians 2:21-22; 1 Peter 2:4; Revelation 7:15-17; 21:3-4).
- The unity of the church bears witness to the principalities and powers that the reconciliation of all things in Jesus has already been realized (Ephesians 1-3; Colossians 2:15ff).

*Resources for Maintaining Unity as Common Life Experience in the Church:*

- Centered-Set Commitments:<sup>8</sup>
  - Jesus is Lord
  - Authority of Scripture
  - Attending to *The Confession of Faith in the Mennonite Perspective*<sup>9</sup>
  - Prayerfully seek the Holy Spirit's guidance<sup>10</sup>
- Tending to these four commitments enables us to maintain the unity of our fellowship as a conference of congregations. Beliefs, statements, and confessions that contradict these four commitments are not normative for the members of this body and present a challenge to Christian unity.
- Interpreting our Commitments. Other than the foundational claim that Jesus is Lord, these commitments are not listed in order of importance. Rather they should be seen as four commitments held in tension as we discern together.
  - Jesus is Lord. The church seeks unity which reveals the fullness of Christ to the world: "Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love" (Ephesians 4:15,16).

- The basic drive of the Christian church is to stand as close together as possible under the Lordship of Christ.
  - Confessing the Lordship of Jesus is the most foundational claim of the church.
  - Our current struggle to do this is not so much disagreement over whether to embody the “ends” of unity as described above. We struggle most to embody the “means” of unity. In other words, we can agree that God desires unity in the church, but we may disagree on *how* we become unified.
- Scripture is our authority. Reading the Bible together is the means by which the community comes to know the Lordship of Jesus and the nature of God’s reign.
  - Other claims on our faith and practices, though relevant, are subordinated to Scripture as a primary way of knowing.<sup>11</sup>
  - Anabaptists read the Bible through the lens of Jesus, working within a hermeneutic of obedience.
  - To read the Bible is to interpret it. Biblical interpretation requires diligent practice.
- Confession of Faith
  - The confessions of the church are where we find what the church has said before.
  - Confessions are descriptive rather than prescriptive. That is to say, confessions describe current belief for a particular time and context.
  - Rather than describing the boundaries of orthodoxy, confessions describe a set of common life commitments that are used to instruct people in discipleship and explain our common life to others.
  - Confessions are an important point of accountability for teaching in the congregation.<sup>12</sup>
- Prayerfully seeking the Spirit’s guidance
  - We discern the Spirit’s guidance best when we prayerfully seek the Spirit’s guidance corporately.<sup>13</sup>
  - Robert Suderman has suggested that prayerfully seeking the Spirit’s guidance will lead us to three possible outcomes:<sup>14</sup>
    - The church can repeat what it has said before.
    - The church can modify what it has said before, given some new spiritual understandings. This would normally mean that it can move further but in the same direction that it has moved before.
    - The church can change what it has said before because new perspectives have become apparent and compelling, and shifting the relative authority of canonical voices has been discerned to be necessary.
  - We can be assured that the Spirit will not lead the church to say something new that *does not sound like Jesus*.
  - There is also a fourth possible outcome:
    - The community may decide not to speak a definitive word, waiting in patient forbearance for clearer guidance.
    - “And if you think differently about anything, this too God will make clear to you. Only hold fast to what you have already attained.” (Philippians 3:15,16)

- This is the Gamaliel principle at work: “For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God” (Acts 5:38-39).
- This option requires a high level of trust among conference congregations.
  - Trust that all are oriented toward a common center.
  - Trust that God will make all things clear to us as we wait in patient forbearance.

### *The Limits of Unity*

- Is separation from the larger body ever advisable or permissible? This conversation must begin with confessional humility. Though the 16<sup>th</sup> century Anabaptists did not intend to begin a new church, the Mennonite Church exists today because these believers chose a dissident position that the established church would not accommodate. The story of the early church describes conflicts that resulted in division among individuals and the possibility of member expulsion.<sup>15</sup> We do not find evidence in the biblical record of the early church of congregations being expelled from the larger body. While in our human perspective we may come to places where we see no way forward as one body, the default or “reset” mode of our discernment is to maintain the unity of the body in the bonds of peace. Seeking first the unity of the body parallels seeking first the kingdom of God since there is one body and one Lord.

### *Unity as the Practice of Common Life Commitments for the Sake of Witness to and in the World*

- To have a common life suggests a description of centered-set commitments that enable the church to be one body for the sake of witness to the world.
- These common life commitments will move from more specific to less specific as we move from considering local expressions of the church to less local expressions of the church. For example, Mennonite World Conference is made up of different denominations that describe their common life commitments differently, but can be unified in a broad tradition for the sake of translating an Anabaptist vision of the church in the world.
- The question that the church is always left to struggle with is a “means” question: *How* do we establish covenantal/common life commitments for discipleship and witness so we reflect the fullness of Christ to the world?
  - Because Jesus hopes that the church will be unified, the church should assume that in its corporate discernment (at any level) all hearts turn toward the hope of oneness under the Lordship of Christ.
  - Separation is never celebrated. It is a sign of failure in our corporate *spiritual* life. It is a sign of human failure to find a common path to the way of Jesus under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
    - When a congregation is unhappy about the decision of a sister congregation, the congregation’s leaders should communicate directly with the leaders of the congregation with whom they disagree. The purpose of the conversation will be to restore the unity of the body in the bonds of peace. To leave the body without good-faith participation in this conversation is to be considered as variant as any position adopted by another congregation.



- Conference leaders may be called on to facilitate this conversation but should not become surrogates for either congregation in the conversation.
- As participants in this conversation, an important role that conference leaders can play is to articulate how the tradition of the church makes sense relative to the issue that is the focus of disagreement.
- We would do well to ask the questions, “How is it that we know so much more about the things that bring disunity than the things that bring unity?” “How is that we have so many more stories of division in the body than stories of reconciliation in the body?” Clearly one of the “means” of bringing unity in the body is to share and reflect on stories that represent the reconciling work of Jesus in the body.
- Though unity is not “created” by the church, the church *prepares to receive and maintain the unity of the body* by drinking deeply of the one Spirit in which we are baptized and by cultivating practices among us that result in humility, gentleness, yieldedness, patience, and forbearance.

*So, how then shall we live toward the unity that God wishes to bestow upon us?*

Given this review, might we make some common commitments as member congregations of Central Plains Mennonite Conference? Below are some thoughts from the paper to get us started.

1. We commit ourselves to stand as close together as possible under the Lordship of Jesus.
2. We commit ourselves to seeking and then telling stories of the reconciling work of Jesus in his body.
3. We commit ourselves to take seriously the faith and practices described by the church in our Confession of Faith, believing that there is wisdom in how our commonly held faith and practices have been described.
4. We commit ourselves to the diligent, corporate interpretation of Scripture in matters of faith and life, seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit as we discern the way of Jesus.
5. We commit ourselves to becoming a learning community as a conference, seeking opportunities to reason together in biblical discernment to develop a clearer witness to the reign of God in the world.
6. We commit ourselves to fostering trust among our congregations, believing that each congregation is sincere in its desire to be faithful to the way of Jesus and that the congregation is the best place for discerning specific matters of discipleship and witness in the local context.
7. We commit ourselves to attitudes of mutual submission and patient forbearance in matters where we have congregation-to-congregation disagreement.
8. We commit ourselves to trust in God that, when we disagree, God will make these matters clear to us in God’s *kairos* (time) and in our *chronos* (time)<sup>16</sup> even though these do not always run on the same schedule.

## Endnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> Unity Task Group. (2010). Proposed Central Plains Mennonite Conference unity process. Presented at the Annual Meeting of Central Plains Mennonite Conference, Mt. Lake, MN.
- <sup>2</sup> Hunter, J. D. (2010). *To change the world: The irony, tragedy, and possibility of Christianity in the late modern world*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> Swartley, Willard. Email communication on January 21, 2011.
- <sup>5</sup> McDougal, Kent. (2010). *The rule of Christ in his church: "Binding and loosing" as ethical discernment in Matthew's Gospel*. McDougal writes, "There are two aspects to the meaning of these terms: forgiveness and moral discernment. Matthew's usage reflects both meanings and indeed it has been argued that the two meanings are inseparable. (His overall usage emphasizes moral discernment.) So for example Matthew 18 envisions an ecclesial process where there is an attempt to restore a wayward sinner. But it also is a process by which the community of Christ engages in ethical discernment.
- <sup>6</sup> The early church struggled with teachers who embraced a worldview called "Gnosticism." Gnostics taught that salvation was achieved by separating the spirit of a person from the imprisoning flesh. Two teachings on this matter threatened to divide the church. One, certain teachers suggested that since the spirit is the only "good" part of a human being; what one did in the body was of no consequence. We see Paul hinting at this view in Romans 6:1, "What then are we to say? Should we continue to sin in order that grace may abound?" The other Gnostic teaching suggested that since the flesh held the spirit captive, the only way to salvation was to discipline the flesh to the point that the flesh became aligned with the "good" spirit. Paul addresses this teaching in a number of places, perhaps most clearly in 1 Timothy 4:3, where he describes teachers who "forbid marriage and demand abstinence from food, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth."
- <sup>7</sup> Jesus addresses the church at Laodicea, "because you are ... neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth" (1:16). Note that Jesus does not say, "I am going to spit you out," but gives the church advice on how to remain faithful, saying, "I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me." As always, the Lord pursues relationship and reconciliation with his people; this is his way of correcting them. The very presence of Jesus is the catalyst that cleanses away sin (John 15:2-3), and an example of his entering our brokenness to bring right relationship and redemption from sin.
- <sup>8</sup> Unity Task Group. (2010). Proposed Central Plains Mennonite Conference unity process. Presented at the Annual Meeting of Central Plains Mennonite Conference, Mt. Lake, MN.
- <sup>9</sup> In 1995, MC/GC delegates at the convention in Wichita adopted not only the *Confession of Faith in Mennonite Perspective*, but also a document entitled *Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love*. While these two documents serve different functions in discernment they are intended to be held together in the discernment process. *Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love* outlines our commitments to love one another when we disagree and serves as our guide for how we dialogue in discernment and when we disagree.
- <sup>10</sup> "Through the Bible, the Holy Spirit nurtures the obedience of faith to Jesus Christ and guides the church in shaping its teaching, witnessing, and worship." (*Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, article 4, p. 22.)
- <sup>11</sup> "We acknowledge the Scripture as the authoritative source and standard for preaching and teaching about faith and life, for distinguishing truth from error, for discerning between good and evil, and for guiding prayer and worship. Other claims on our understanding of Christian faith and life, such as tradition, culture, experience, reason, and political powers, need to be tested and corrected by the light of Holy Scripture." (*Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, article 4, p. 22.)
- <sup>12</sup> "Confessions of faith provide guidance for belief and practice. In this connection, a written statement should support but not replace the lived witness of faith." *Confession of Faith in Mennonite Perspective*, p. 8
- <sup>13</sup> "We know from Scripture that the Holy Spirit continues to reveal God's will to us (1 Corinthians 14:26-33). The Spirit of God is not silent in the present. However, this new revelation will not contradict what we know of Christ's way in Scripture (John 14:26). So we can open ourselves to revelation and prophecy, provided we test them in the community of faith by the norm provided in Christ through the Scriptures." (*Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, article 3, p. 20)
- <sup>14</sup> Suderman, Robert J. (2009). *Being a faithful church: Testing the spirits in the midst of hermeneutical ferment*. Presented at the General Assembly of Mennonite Church Canada.  
Jack Suderman gives us a helpful paradigm:
- a. The church can repeat what is has said before
    - **Example from the Bible:** Jesus' reference to part of the *shema* as the greatest commandment: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, and with all your strength, and your neighbour as yourself."

- **Example from church history:** Mennonites reaffirming their understanding of pacifism in spite of the persecution against them from without, and the pressures from within in the 16th century and during World War I and II.
- b. The church can modify what it has said before, given some new spiritual understandings. This would normally mean that it can move further but in the same direction that it has moved before.
- **Example from the Bible:** Jesus' desire to fulfill and not to abolish the law with his six references to: "You have heard that it was said, . . . . But I say to you. . . ."
  - **Example from church history:** Mennonites slowly moving from an understanding of "non-resistance" to "non-violent resistance."
- c. The church can change what it has said before because new perspectives have become apparent and compelling, and shifting the relative authority of canonical voices has been discerned to be necessary.
- **Example from the Bible:** The understanding of the "chosen people" to include the Gentiles in a new way, which in turn changed the understanding of circumcision and food laws in affirming what "seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us."
  - **Example from church history:** The church's defense of slavery not being justifiable.
- <sup>15</sup>Two examples that suggest a precedence for separation that might be considered further:

- 1 Corinthians 5

In this story of the son who is having an affair with his father's wife, Paul reprimands the congregation saying, "Drive out the wicked person from among you." We note that while Paul speaks to the individual situation, his larger concern is with the congregation's lack of attention to housekeeping. The larger issue for Paul is the boastfulness of the congregation that has chosen tolerance as the sign of unity. He suggests that if the congregation does not attend to their housekeeping, he will come and tend to it personally. We note that Paul's counsel for separation is a pastoral response to an individual in the congregation. We do not find evidence in Pauline theology for an intent to separate congregations from the larger body. We understand that the congregation heeded Paul's warning and managed to resolve the situation prior to his return (2 Corinthians 1–2). In 2 Corinthians, the congregation is now reason for Paul to "boast" (2 Corinthians 1:14; 7:14).

- Acts 15

The disagreement between Paul and Barnabas "became so sharp that they parted company." The decision to part company is described as a divergent sense of call in mission. For Paul, the conflict was framed in terms of differing views on mission and witness rather than lifestyle and behavior. Barnabas wanted to retrace the same route and build up the churches they had started. Paul wanted to strike out into new territory and advance the witness of the Gospel to new frontiers. But like most conflicts, the underlying conflict is more complex than it would appear at first glance. Willard Swartley says, "The conflict was actually over whether Mark would come along or not. Mark was trained as an official transmitter of the Jesus tradition by Peter. John Mark was a cousin of Barnabas (Colossians 4:11, and seems to be with Paul in prison). Still later, in 2 Tim. 4:11, both Luke and Mark are to be with Paul — likely for Gospel writing). Behind the squabble was the Peter-Paul tension and in that, the issue of circumcision of new Gentile converts (so then comes Acts 15). Mark was caught between Peter and Paul, so he ended up going elsewhere. Eventually Paul affirms him, and Peter of course does also." (see Swartley's *Mark: The Way for All Nations*. Herald Press, 1981, for a more complete background on the role of John Mark in the ministries of Peter, Paul, and Barnabas). It would appear from all biblical evidence that God blessed both ministries of Paul and Barnabas. And we see evidence that Paul and Barnabas continued to believe that their separation was not the end to which they were aiming (1 Corinthians 9:6; Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11).

<sup>16</sup>Suderman, Robert J. (2009). *Being a faithful church: Testing the spirits in the midst of hermeneutical ferment*. In his conclusion, Suderman writes, "Strengthening our capacity to discern together is a way of taking seriously our vocation as God's people in this time and place. It is a way of engaging God's *kairos* (time) within our *chronos* (time). This is a vocation to which the church has been permanently called. This is one opportunity (among many) for our generation to demonstrate that the church can "be worthy of the calling to which we have been called" (Eph. 4:1). It is our vocation to be the church, and when we face this vocation squarely, God's Spirit will guide us and "make peace" among us (Eph. 2:14). We cannot predict *how* God will do this work among us, but we can be confident that he *will* do this work among us."

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David Boshart  
Executive Conference Minister  
Central Plains Mennonite Conference