The Leuenberg Agreement and church unity: A possible matrix to cross ten seas with?

Author:
Willem A. Dreyer[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Reformed Theological College, University of Pretoria, South Africa

Correspondence to:
Willem A. Dreyer

e-mail:
wadreyer@nhk.co.za

Postal address:
PO Box 2368, Pretoria, 0001, South Africa

Keywords:
Leuenberg agreement; Lutheran Calvinist consultations; southern Africa; cooperation; model for unity

Dates:
Received: 04 May 2009
Accepted: 25 June 2009
Published: 20 Oct. 2009

How to cite this article:
Dreyer, W.A., 2009, 'The Leuenberg Agreement and church unity: A possible matrix to cross ten seas with?, *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 65(1), Art. #195, 6 pages. DOI: 10.4102/hts.v65i1.195

This article is available at:
http://www.hts.org.za

Note:
This article was first presented as a paper at the 11th *Conventus Reformatus*, March 2009.

ABSTRACT

This article gives a short historical background to the debate between Lutherans and Calvinists on unity. It is important that this debate should also start in southern Africa. The focus is placed on the Leuenberg Agreement of 1973 as a possible model of unity not only between the Lutheran and Reformed churches in South Africa, but also between all Protestant churches which have historically been divided on the basis of tradition, language and race.

INTRODUCTION: BACKGROUND

In the year 2009 Reformed Churches all over the world celebrate the 500th anniversary of John Calvin's birth (10 July 1509), as well as his life and work.

The 11th *Conventus Reformatus*, an annual consultation of southern African Reformed Churches, took this opportunity not only to celebrate Calvin's life, but also to stage a first Reformed-Lutheran Consultation as part of the *Conventus*. This was the result of a resolution passed at its previous meeting to include all southern African churches with their roots in the 16th century reformation in the 2009 consultation and in the *Conventus Reformatus*.

Prior to this there have been several Reformed-Lutheran discussions in South Africa. A number of churches from the Reformed tradition participated. In the global context there are several Reformed – Lutheran consultations on track. A lot of positive energy has come from these consultations. The challenge to South African churches is to become part of this global discussion and common witness to the world, as the one body of Christ.

The theme of the 11th *Conventus Reformatus* (To cross ten seas) originated from a remark by John Calvin in a letter to Archbishop Cranmer in 1552 that he would cross ten seas for the sake of the unity of the church.

During the preparations for the *Conventus*, the question rose whether the 1973 Leuenberg Agreement between the churches of the reformation in Europe could be a possible matrix or framework for the Reformed – Lutheran discussion in South Africa. This paper will focus on the Leuenberg Agreement as a possible point of departure for the current discussion on church unity in South Africa.

LUTHER AND CALVIN

When Melanchton announced to the students at Wittenberg that Luther had died, he said without emotion '*Doctor Marthinus Luther ist gestorben*'. But when he spoke of Luther who taught him the gospel, he became extremely emotional.

John Calvin had the same sentiment towards Luther. He regarded Luther as the man who taught him the gospel. He would speak of Luther as an *'insignis Christi apostolus'* whose work restored the pure gospel as well as the *primo aurora exortu* – the bright Morningstar of the Reformation (Balke 1980:1–2).

There can be no doubt that Calvin had the utmost respect for Luther and his theology.

That is why the Reformed – Lutheran discourse on church unity was of the utmost importance to Calvin and his immediate successors. Neither Calvin's attempts to come to an agreement on the understanding of the Lord's Supper, nor Martin Bucer's untiring mediation between the different groups, were unable to prevent the two traditions from gradually hardening into mutually exclusive confessions.

Relations between Lutherans and Reformists have gone through many phases over the centuries. The Reformation movement had different centres from the start, and hopes that they might join to form one movement were quickly dashed. The Marburg Colloquium in 1529 came to the conclusion that the two approaches (Luther and Zurich) could not easily be brought under one roof. Efforts towards unity continued over the centuries, occasionally producing promising results, only to be thwarted again by disappointing setbacks (Vischer 1998).

Sixteenth century efforts to unite the Lutheran and Reformed groups can be illustrated by two examples:

The First Swiss Confession of 1536

Pope Paul III announced that he intended to call a Council together during 1537 in Mantua. He did not succeed in this endeavour. It was only during 1545 that the Council of Trent convened (Bakhuizen van den Brink 1980:81, 221).

The different reformed groupings, however, were under the impression that a Council would convene during 1537. With this in mind, they wanted to formulate a single Confession of Faith, which would give a clear exposition of the true faith. Especially Bucer was eager to establish church unity between the Reformed and Lutheran churches in the German speaking cities in Switzerland, such as Zurich, Bern, Schaffhausen, Mühlhausen, Biel, St. Gall, Basel and Strasbourg (Cochrane 1966:97). The French speaking cities (like Geneva and Lausanne) were not part of this process because of political tension and the war with France. As a result they formulated their own confessions in 1536.

The churches who participated sent delegates to Basel. They convened on the 30th of January 1536. The Convent of Basel requested Bullinger, Myconius, Leo Jud, Megander and Grynaeus to compile a Confession of Faith. Bucer and Capito formulated the articles on Holy Communion (Cochrane 1966:97). As such, we can see that the Convent of Basel was representative of a broad spectrum of reformed churches. The Confession was published in Latin and signed by all the delegates on the 4th of February. Leo Jud translated the First Swiss Confession of Faith into German. The churches of the different cities unanimously ratified the Confession on the 27th of March 1536.

Interestingly enough, Leo Jud attached a paragraph to the German translation which reads, loosely translated, as such:

> *With these Articles we do not prescribe any rule of faith to the different churches. We acknowledge no rule of faith in the same way as the Holy Scriptures. Who ever would accept these Articles of Faith, even if he would use other terminology as these that is used in the Confession of Faith, can be accepted as in accordance with us. We are in the first place concerned with the substance of our faith and the truth, and not with words. Each one will have the freedom to use terminology which is best suited to each individual church. We maintain the right to defend it against every attempt to confuse the true meaning of the Confession. We used this terminology in the present time, to explain our convictions.*
>
> (Original text in Böckel 1847:116)

It is very clear that the First Swiss Confession was an attempt to reconcile the Lutheran and Reformed groups in Switzerland. Differences were minimalised as a matter of terminology and words. Initially Luther accepted the Confession with great enthusiasm. A few years later, in 1544, Luther criticised the Swiss Confession very sharply in his exposition of the sacraments – to the exasperation of Melanchton. Article 22 on the Holy Communion stated that the body and blood of Christ were not naturally present in the wine and blood. It was this formulation that Luther criticised in strong language (see Cochrane 1966:100–111).

Thus the First Swiss Confession of Faith did not succeed in uniting the Reformed and Lutheran groups. It did, however, succeed in uniting the German speaking Reformed Churches in Switzerland. The First Swiss Confession also formed the basis of the Second Swiss Confession of 1566 (Cochrane 1966:98).

The Heidelberg Catechism of 1563

A second example of Reformed-Lutheran discourse can be found in the well-known history of the Heidelberg Catechism.

When Luther died in 1546, much controversy broke out amongst the Lutherans. At the same time, the Baptist and Spiritualists created a lot of tension in the Paltz. The Lutherans and Calvinists were in competition with each other to gain as much power and influence as possible. The celebration of Holy Communion created a lot of tension, especially under the leadership of the Lutheran professor Tilemann Heshusen and the Calvinist deacon Wilhelm Klebitz.

Frederick III involved himself personally in the controversy. It was of political importance to bring stability to the Paltz, but it was also a personal issue to him. On Melanchton's advice he removed both Heshusen and Klebitz from office. He also accepted Melanchton's formulation and exposition of Holy Communion, after hosting a *disputatio* on the subject. The formulation, as put forward by Melanchton, created room for both the Lutheran and Calvinist understanding of Holy Communion.

As a next step, he gave an order for the formulation of a catechism to be used as the standard for preaching in the Paltz. It would also be used as a catechism for the children as well as a Confession of Faith. The choice of Zacharias Ursinus to work on the Catechism was a strategic one, because he had studied at the University of Wittenberg and was a follower of Melanchton, but also studied in France (Greek and Hebrew). On his journey from France he met Calvin, and came under his influence (Oberholzer 1986:2). He also studied in Zurich, where he came under the influence of Bullinger. Because of his knowledge of both the Lutheran and Calvinist theology, Frederick invited him to complete his studies in Dogmatics in Heidelberg and to work on a document which had the express function of reconciling the Lutheran and Reformed groups in the Paltz.

The strategy that Ursinus followed was to utilise the catechisms of Zurich, Geneva, Emden and Strasbourg as well as Luther, Melanchton, Beza, Calvin and Bullinger. He also involved a panel of theologians from different segments of the Church. As such, the Heidelberg Catechism became representative of Lutheran as well as Reformed theology.

The Heidelberg Catechism was presented to a synod on the 13th of January 1563 and was accepted without change. Some of the Lutheran superintendents expressed their misgivings on individual answers of the Catechism. In spite of that, Frederick signed the Heidelberg Catechism and gave orders for it to be used in the Paltz.

It was not accepted universally, and several Lutheran clergy were removed from office before the Paltz became Reformed. In the Upper Paltz, resistance from the Lutheran side was so strong that the Heidelberg Catechism was never accepted. The main objection against the Heidelberg Catechism was against its understanding of Holy Communion and the Two Natures of Christ.

The ongoing discourse

Interest in the unity between Lutheran Churches and Reformed Churches was revived in the early 19th century, when King Frederick William of Prussia issued a manifesto on the anniversary of the Reformation in 1817, calling on the Protestant communities to unite. The call was not only greeted with enthusiasm but widely followed. Unions took place, but at the same time they were accompanied in many places by a hardening of attitudes and the reaffirmation of confessional positions. The arguments over the common worship book for the united churches added fuel to the fire - and the confessional traditions survived.

The discourse on church unity again regained momentum in the 20th century, against the backdrop of the ecumenical movement. One of the results of the renewed interest in church unity was the Leuenberg Agreement.

THE LEUENBERG AGREEMENT

The Leuenberg Agreement was signed by 50 Protestant churches in 1973 and might well be one of the most important theological documents of the 20th century. Since 1973, an enormous number of publications on the implications of the Agreement have been produced. This said, it is a strange realisation that it has received very little attention in the South African context. In Europe it received much less attention than the Barmen Theological Declaration (1934) or the Joint Declaration on Justification between the Protestant and Roman Catholic Churches in the late nineties (Lubinetzki 2009:1).

HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies Article #195

However, the Leuenberg Agreement brought together Protestant churches from all over Europe and from different traditions. Currently 105 churches have signed the Agreement. A lot of these churches are minority churches in their own countries.

The reason for this is to be found in the words 'reconciled diversity'. Reconciled diversity became the dominant paradigm in the late quarter of the 20th century. This avoided the trap of trying to establish full doctrinal and organisational unity. The churches who signed the Agreement do not speak in one voice but they do speak in one Spirit. By accepting the reality of diversity, it creates an environment and a safe space where churches can co-operate on different issues.

Did the acceptance of the Leuenberg Agreement mean that, after 450 years, a decisive step in the direction of unity had been taken? While it has not brought about any spectacular changes in relations between the two traditions, the fellowship between the participating churches had steadily deepened. The Lutheran, Reformed and United churches in Europe drew closer together which also had effects in other continents.

The question is: Can the Leuenberg Agreement provide a point of departure for the discourse on church unity in South Africa?

POINTS OF DEPARTURE

Examining the Leuenberg Agreement we find four main points of departure (Vischer 1998):

- Partners had to take one another, as well as their respective identities, seriously.
- The focus of the Leuenberg Agreement was not on creating a new confession, but issuing a joint declaration on the common understanding of the gospel. The Agreement had to focus on the central core of the gospel and a common witness to the same truth.
- Mutual condemnations expressed in the 16th century were declared as not applicable to the present day situation.
- Finally, there was the legal aspect of what the new fellowship might imply in terms of church law. It was made clear from the outset that acceptance of the agreement did not mean structural unification. Organisational consequences might be drawn from it where these were required for the sake of mutual witness, but there was no compulsion to do so. There were, however, consequences in terms of joint worship, Holy Communion and ministry.

The Leuenberg Agreement had certain theological points of departure which are important to all Protestant churches. By reaching consensus on these points, the churches could move forward on the road of greater unity. Some of these points are (very cursorily) contained in the following:

- Looking at paragraph 2, we find the traditional 16th century terminology and understanding of the Church: The Church is founded on Jesus Christ alone; the marks of the true Church *(notae ecclesiae)* are the right teaching of the gospel and the right administration of the sacraments by which Christ gathers, unifies and sends forth his Church.
- In paragraph 4 we find the affirmation that the Church's life and doctrine are to be gauged by the original and pure testimony to the Gospel in Scripture. The Word of God remains the true authority within the Church.
- We find in paragraph 5 an acknowledgement of the fact that the context has changed radically in comparison to the 16th century. The Church is now faced with modernism and postmodernism, with secularisation as well as the ecumenical and Church renewal movements. Within this new context, contemporary expressions of faith in liturgy, fellowship and ministry have become more important than confessions.
- The Leuenberg Agreement, in Part 2, testifies to the common understanding of the gospel. Consensus was found in terms of justification and preaching, and the sacraments in itself an important historical development, because it was exactly on these points that the Lutheran and Reformed Churches differed.
- It is clear that baptism is important in terms of membership of the Church. Through baptism Christ receives sinners into his fellowship, they become new creatures and by the power of the Holy Spirit they are formed into his community called to a life of faith, repentance and discipleship. The Lord's Supper affirms that we are members of his body.
- In paragraph 29 the Leuenberg Agreement sets out the conditions of Church fellowship. On the basis of the consensus reached on the essence of the Gospel, churches with different confessional positions accord each other fellowship in Word and sacrament and strive for the fullest possible co-operation in witness and service to the world. This is expounded in paragraph 33, where the respective churches are granted table and pulpit fellowship, inter celebration and mutual recognition of ordination.
- In paragraph 35 an important shift is made, in the recognition that Church fellowship is something that is realised in local congregations and churches. Shifting the responsibility for Church unity and fellowship from the macro level to the micro level, it creates the possibility of real unity in Word, sacrament and service.
- It is further stressed that the churches have a common and mutual responsibility in terms of theological reflection and ecumenical fellowship, as well as ministry and witness to the world.
- Lastly it is important to notice that paragraph 42 does not foresee organisational consequences or any specific provisions in terms of Church law. By focusing on the organic union between participating churches (paragraph 44), it is possible to transfer the responsibility to local churches to realise unity in the situation in which they live.

These points of departure still remain useful in the current discourse on church unity – not only in terms of the Lutheran and Reformed traditions, but also in terms of the unity talks between Churches who historically separated on the basis of race.

TEXT OF THE LEUENBERG AGREEMENT

Because the text of the Leuenberg Agreement is not well known in southern Africa, the complete text is reprinted here:

AGREEMENT BETWEEN REFORMATION CHURCHES IN EUROPE 16 MARCH 1973

1. *On the basis of their doctrinal discussions, the churches assenting to this Agreement - namely, Lutheran and Reformed Churches in Europe along with the Union Churches which grew out of them, and the related pre-Reformation Churches, the Waldensian Church and the Church of the Czech Brethren - affirm together the common understanding of the Gospel elaborated below. This common understanding of the Gospel enables them to declare and to realize church fellowship. Thankful that they have been led closer together, they confess at the same time that guilt and suffering have also accompanied and still accompany the struggle for truth and unity in the Church.*

2. *The Church is founded upon Jesus Christ alone. It is He who gathers the Church and sends it forth, by the bestowal of his salvation in preaching and the sacraments. In the view of the Reformation it follows that agreement in the right teaching of the Gospel and in the right administration of the sacraments is the necessary and sufficient prerequisite for the true unity of the Church. It is from these Reformation criteria that the participating churches derive their view of church fellowship as set out below.*

I. THE ROAD TO FELLOWSHIP

3. *Faced with real differences in style of theological thinking and church practice, the fathers of the Reformation, despite much that they had in common, did not see themselves in a position, on grounds of faith and conscience, to avoid divisions. In this Agreement the participating churches acknowledge that their relationship to one another has changed since the time of the Reformation.*

Common Aspects at the Outset of the Reformation

4. *With the advantage of historical distance it is easier today to discern the common elements in the witness of the churches of the Reformation in spite of the differences between them: their starting point was a new experience of the power of the Gospel to liberate and assure. In standing up for the truth which they saw, the Reformers found themselves drawn together in opposition to the church traditions of that time. They were therefore at one in confessing that the Church's life and doctrine are to be gauged by the original and pure testimony to the Gospel in Scripture. They were at one in bearing witness to God's free and unconditional grace in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for all those who believe this promise. They were at one in confessing that the practice and form of the Church should be determined only by the commission to deliver this testimony to the world, and that the Word of God remains sovereign over every human ordering of the Christian community. In doing so they were at one with the whole of Christendom in receiving and renewing the confession of the Triune God and the God-Manhood of Jesus Christ as expressed in the ancient creeds of the Church.*

Changed Elements in the Contemporary Situation

5. *In the course of four hundred years of history, the Churches of the Reformation have been led to new and similar ways of thinking and living; by theological wrestling with the questions of modern times, by advances in biblical research, by the movements of church renewal, and by the rediscovery of the ecumenical horizon. These developments certainly have also brought with them new differences cutting right across the confessions. But, time and again, there has also been an experience of brotherly fellowship, particularly in times of common suffering. The result of all these factors was a new concern on the part of the churches, especially since the revival movements, to achieve a contemporary expression both of the biblical witness and of the Reformation confessions of faith. In the process they have learned to distinguish between the fundamental witness of the Reformation confessions of faith and their historically-conditioned thought forms. Because these confessions of faith bear witness to the Gospel as the living Word of God in Jesus Christ, far from barring the way to continued responsible testimony to this Word, they open up this way with a summons to follow it in the freedom of faith.*

II. THE COMMON UNDERSTANDING OF THE GOSPEL

6. *In what follows, the participating churches describe their common understanding of the Gospel insofar as this is required for establishing church fellowship between them.*

The Message of Justification as the Message of the Free Grace of God

7. *The Gospel is the message of Jesus Christ, the salvation of the world, in fulfilment of the promise given to the people of the Old Covenant.*

8. a) *The true understanding of the Gospel was expressed by the fathers of the Reformation in the doctrine of justification.*

9. b) *In this message Jesus Christ is acknowledged as the One in whom God became man and bound himself to man; as the crucified and risen One who took God's judgement upon himself and, in doing so, demonstrated God's love to sinners; and as the coming One who as Judge and Saviour leads the world to its consummation.*

10. c) *Through his Word, God by his Holy Spirit calls all men to repent and believe, and assures the believing sinner of his righteousness in Jesus Christ. Whoever puts his trust in the Gospel is justified in God's sight for the sake of Jesus Christ and set free from the accusation of the law. In daily repentance and renewal he lives within the fellowship in praise of God and service to others, in the assurance that God will bring his kingdom in all its fullness. In this way God creates new life and plants in the midst of the world the seed of a new humanity.*

11. d) *This message sets Christians free for responsible service in the world and makes them ready to suffer in this service. They know that God's will, as demand and succour, embraces the whole world. They stand up for temporal justice and peace between individuals and nations. To do this they have to join with others in seeking rational and appropriate criteria and play their part in applying these criteria. They do so in the confidence that God sustains the world and as those who are accountable to him.*

12. e) *In this understanding of the Gospel we take our stand on the basis of the ancient creeds of the Church and reaffirm the common conviction of the Reformation confessions that the unique mediation of Jesus Christ in salvation is the heart of the Scriptures and that the message of justification as the message of God's free grace is the measure of all the Church's preaching.*

Preaching, Baptism and the Lord's Supper

13. *The fundamental witness to the Gospel is the testimony of the apostles and prophets in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. It is the task of the Church to spread this Gospel by the spoken word in preaching, by individual counselling, and by Baptism and the Lord's Supper. In preaching, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, Jesus Christ is present through the Holy Spirit. Justification in Christ is thus imparted to men and in this way the Lord gathers his people. In doing so he employs various forms of ministry and service, as well as the witness of all those belonging to his people.*

14. a) Baptism

Baptism is administered in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit with water. In Baptism Jesus Christ irrevocably receives man, fallen prey to sin and death, into his fellowship of salvation so that he may become a new creature. In the power of his Holy Spirit he calls him into his community and to a new life of faith, to daily repentance and discipleship.

15. b) The Lord's Supper

In the Lord's Supper the risen Jesus Christ imparts himself in his body and blood, given up for all, through his word of promise with bread and wine. He thereby grants us forgiveness of sins and sets us free for a new life of faith. He enables us to experience anew that we are members of his body. He strengthens us for service to all men.

16. *When we celebrate the Lord's Supper we proclaim the death of Christ through which God has reconciled the world with himself. We proclaim the presence of the risen Lord in our midst. Rejoicing that the Lord has come to us we await his future coming in glory.*

III. ACCORD IN RESPECT OF THE DOCTRINAL CONDEMNATIONS OF THE REFORMATION ERA

17. *The differences which from the time of the Reformation onwards have made church fellowship between the Lutheran and Reformed churches impossible and have led them to pronounce mutual condemnations related to the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, Christology, and the doctrine of predestination. We take the decisions of the Reformation fathers seriously but are today able to agree on the following statements in respect of these condemnations:*

The Lord's Supper

18. *In the Lord's Supper the risen Jesus Christ imparts himself in his body and blood, given up for all, through his word of promise with bread and wine. He thus gives himself unreservedly to all who receive the bread and wine; faith receives the Lord's Supper for salvation, unfaith for judgement.*

19. *We cannot separate communion with Jesus Christ in his body and blood from the act of eating and drinking. To be concerned about the manner of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper in abstraction from this act is to run the risk of obscuring the meaning of the Lord's Supper.*

20. *Where such a consensus exists between the churches, the condemnations pronounced by the Reformation confessions are inapplicable to the doctrinal position of these churches.*

Christology

21. *In the true man Jesus Christ, the eternal Son, and so God himself, has bestowed himself upon lost mankind for its salvation. In the word of the promise and in the sacraments, the Holy Spirit, and so God himself, makes the crucified and risen Jesus present to us.*

22. *Believing in this self-bestowal of God in his Son, the task facing us in view of the historically conditioned character of traditional thought forms is to give renewed and effective expression to the special insights of the Reformed tradition with its concern to maintain unimpaired the divinity and humanity of Jesus and those of the Lutheran tradition with its concern to maintain the unity of Jesus as a person.*

23. *In these circumstances it is impossible for us to reaffirm the former condemnations today.*

Predestination

24. *In the Gospel we have the promise of God's unconditional acceptance of sinful man. Whoever puts his trust in the Gospel can know that he is saved and praise God for his election. For this reason we can speak of election only with respect to the call to salvation in Christ.*

25. *Faith knows by experience that the message of salvation is not accepted by all; yet it respects the mystery of God's dealings with men. It bears witness to the seriousness of human decision and at the same time to the reality of God's universal purpose of salvation. The witness of the Scriptures to Christ forbids us to suppose that God has uttered an eternal decree for the final condemnation of specific individuals or of a particular people.*

26. *When such a consensus exists between churches, the condemnations pronounced by the Reformation confessions of faith are inapplicable to the doctrinal position of these churches.*

Conclusions

27. *Wherever these statements are accepted, the condemnations of the Reformation confessions in respect of the Lord's Supper, Christology, and predestination are inapplicable to the doctrinal position. This does not mean that the condemnations pronounced by the Reformation fathers are irrelevant; but they are no longer an obstacle to church fellowship.*

28. *There remain considerable differences between our churches in forms of worship, types of spirituality, and church order. These differences are often more deeply felt in the congregations than the traditional doctrinal differences. Nevertheless, in fidelity to the New Testament and Reformation criteria for church fellowship, we cannot discern in these differences any factors which should divide the Church.*

IV. THE DECLARATION AND REALIZATION OF CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

29. *In the sense intended in this Agreement, church fellowship means that, on the basis of the consensus they have reached in their understanding of the Gospel, churches with different confessional positions accord each other fellowship in word and sacrament and strive for the fullest possible co-operation in witness and service to the world.*

Declaration of Church Fellowship

30. *In assenting to this Agreement the churches, in loyalty to the confessions of faith which bind them or with due respect for their traditions, declare:*

31. ***a)*** *that they are at one in understanding the Gospel as set out in Parts II and III;*

32. ***b)*** *that in accordance with what is said in Part III the doctrinal condemnations expressed in the confessional documents no longer apply to the contemporary doctrinal position of the assenting churches;*

33. ***c)*** *that they accord each other table and pulpit fellowship; this includes the mutual recognition of ordination and the freedom to provide for inter celebration.*

34. *With these statements church fellowship is declared. The divisions which have barred the way to this fellowship since the sixteenth century are removed. The participating churches are convinced that they have part together in the one Church of Jesus Christ and that the Lord liberates them for, and lays upon them the obligation of, common service.*

Realizing Church Fellowship

35. *It is in the life of the churches and congregations that church fellowship becomes a reality. Believing in the unifying power of the Holy Spirit, they bear their witness and perform their service together, and strive to deepen and strengthen the fellowship they have found together.*

36. a) Witness and Service

The preaching of the churches gains in credibility in the world when they are at one in their witness to the Gospel. The Gospel liberates and binds together the churches to render common service. Being the service of love, it turns to man in his distress and seeks to remove the causes of that distress. The struggle for justice and peace in the world increasingly demands of the churches the acceptance of a common responsibility.

37. b) The Continuing Theological Task

The Agreement leaves intact the binding force of the confessions within the participating churches. It is not to be regarded as a new confession of faith. It sets forth a consensus reached about central matters, one which makes church fellowship possible between churches of different confessional positions. In accordance with this consensus the participating churches will seek to establish a common witness and service and they pledge themselves to continue their common doctrinal discussions.

38. *The common understanding of the Gospel on which church fellowship is based must be further deepened, tested in the light of the witness of Holy Scripture, and continually made relevant in the contemporary scene.*

39. *The churches have the task of studying further these differences of doctrine which while they do not have divisive force still persist within and between the participating churches. These include:*

- *hermeneutical questions concerning the understanding of Scripture, confession of faith, and Church;*
- *the relation between law and Gospel;*
- *baptismal practice;*
- *ministry and ordination;*
- *the 'two kingdom' doctrine and the doctrine of the sovereignty of Christ;*
- *Church and society.*

At the same time newly emerging problems relating to witness and service, order and practice, have to be considered.

40. *On the basis of their common heritage the churches of the Reformation must determine their attitude to trends towards theological polarization increasingly in evidence today. To some extent the problems here go beyond the doctrinal differences which were once at the basis of the Lutheran-Reformed controversy.*

41. *It will be the task of common theological study to testify the truth of the Gospel and to distinguish it from all distortions.*

42. c) Organisational Consequences

This declaration of church fellowship does not anticipate provisions of church law on particular matters of inter-church relations or within the churches. The churches will, however, take the Agreement into account in considering such provisions.

43. *As a general rule, the affirmation of pulpit and table fellowship and the mutual recognition of ordination do not affect the rules in force in the participating churches for induction to a pastoral charge, the exercise of the pastoral ministry, or the ordering of congregational life.*

44. *The question of organic union between particular participating churches can only be decided in the situation in which these churches live. In examining this question the following points should be kept in mind:*

45. *Any union detrimental to the lively plurality in styles of preaching, ways of worship, church order, and in diaconal and social action, would contradict the very nature of the church fellowship inaugurated by this declaration. On the other hand, in certain situations, because of the intimate connection between witness and order, the Church's service may call for formal legal unification. Where organisational consequences are drawn from this declaration, it should not be at the expense of freedom of decision in minority churches.*

46. d) Ecumenical Aspects

In establishing and realising church fellowship among themselves, the participating churches do so as part of their responsibility to promote the ecumenical fellowship of all Christian churches.

47. *They regard such a fellowship of churches in the European area as a contribution to this end. They hope that the ending of their previous separation will influence churches in Europe and elsewhere who are related to them confessionally. They are ready to examine with them the possibilities of wider church fellowship.*

48. *This hope applies equally to the relationship between the Lutheran World Federation and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches.*

49. *They also hope that the achievement of church fellowship with each other will provide a fresh stimulus to conference and co-operation with churches of other confessions. They affirm their readiness to set their doctrinal discussions within this wider context.*

English translation:

CONCLUSION

The Leuenberg Agreement, in my opinion, makes it clear that a real and meaningful relationship and unity between Protestant churches is possible.

As such, the Leuenberg Agreement could indeed form a point of orientation for Protestant churches in South Africa, navigating the seas of ecumenical relations and church unity.

The other important factor is that the focus is shifted from organisational unity at a macro level to co-operative unity at a local level. In the last two decades, ecumenical bodies have increasingly realised that organisational and structural unity between churches are faced with immense obstacles.

I would suggest that the way forward for South African churches lies in 'structured co-operation'. Structured co-operation is clearly not haphazard, but based on (1) some form of agreement, (2) continued consultation, (3) mutual planning and (4) execution of projects.

In such a way, churches do not necessarily speak with one voice, but in one Spirit.

REFERENCES

Secretariat for Faith and Order, 1967, *Auf dem weg: Lutherisch-reformierte Kirchengemeinschaft: Reports and papers compiled and published by the Secretariat for Faith and Order*, Polis 33, Zurich.

Bakhuizen van den Brink, J.N., 1980, *Handboek der Kerkgeschiedenis III*, De Tille B.V., Leeuwarden.

Balke, W., 1980, 'Calvijn en de theologische stromingen van zijn tyd', paper presented at the University of Pretoria, Pretoria.

Böckel, E.G.A., 1847, *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-reformierte Kirche*, F. A. Brockhaus, Leipzig.

Cochrane, A., 1966, *Reformed confessions of the sixteenth century*, SCM Press, London.

Gerrish, B.A., 1963, *The faith of Christendom: A source book of creeds and confessions*, The World Publishing Company, Cleveland.

Jackson, S.M., 1903, *Huldreich Zwingli*, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York.

Jahr, H., 1964, *Studien zur Überlieferungsgeschichte der Confession de foi von 1559*, Neukirchener Verlag des Erziehungsvereins, Neukircen-Vluyn.

Lippischen Landeskirche, 1938, 'Geschichte des Heidelberger Katechismus', in *Der Heidelberger Katechismus*, Essen.

Lubinetzki, V., 2009, *Not with one voice, but in one Spirit*, paper presented at the 11th *Conventus Reformatus*, Kempton Park, 2–3 March.

Oberholzer, J.P., 1986, *Die Heidelbergse Kategismus, in vier teksuitgawes, met inleiding en teksvergelyking*, Kital, Pretoria.

Polman, A.D.R., s.a., *Woord en Belijdenis, Deel 1*, T. Wever, Franeker.

Pont, A.D., 1981, *Historiese agtergronde van ons kerklike reg, Deel 1*, Kital, Pretoria.

Vischer, L., 1998, A history of the Leuenberg Agreement, viewed n.d., from http://warc.jalb.de.

Vischer, L., 1999, *Rowing in One Boat, John Knox Series no. 9–23*, John Knox International Reformed Centre, Geneva.

Article #195 HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies