

Is there any hope for church unity? Some perspectives on the causes of the Reformed Churches split since the Reformation and its impact on church unity discussions today

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Abstract

This article gives some perspectives on the causes of the Reformed Churches split since the time of reformation and how these divisions impacts on church unity discussions today. Since reformation, church divisions took place in various forms and discussions about church reunification became a focal point in the reformed world. These splits amongst reformed churches seem to have caused traumatic stress and inflicted deep wounds that are very difficult to heal in full, especially in the context of South Africa. This article briefly looks at some causes of split in the reformed world by paying attention to the work of Lukas Vischer and also by sketching some few causes of church split within the Dutch Reformed family of churches in the South African context. This article does not really pay attention to an in-depth discussion on church unity, rather, it places the interest on issues of church divisions which impact negatively on the true unity of the church. A question can be asked: can we really hope for a genuine unity of the church given the history of these splits? Put it differently: Is there any hope for an authentic church unity amongst reformed churches locally and globally? The article argues that the history of these divisions makes it very hard if not impossible to hope for an authentic church unity, given the currently lived experiences of divisions, the irreconcilability of people and the unhealed wounds inflicted in the past. For an authentic church unity to be achieved and lived positively, the article suggests that injustices of the past needs to be addressed, especially between the Dutch Reformed family of churches.

Keywords

Church, divisions, justice, reconciliation, Reformed, unity

1. Introduction

It is already over 500 years since 31 October 1517 when Martin Luther posted his 95 theses on the door of a church in Wittenberg, Germany and rejected several teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, and in particular, he disputed the view on indulgences. The posting of the 95 Theses was therefore considered by many as the formal beginning of the Protestant Reformation. This attempt by Martin Luther to reform the Catholic Church led to a schism in the church. In his recent article titled: *Reformation and transformation today: Essentials of reformation tradition and theology as seen from the perspective of the South*, the South African reformed missiologist and dean of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria, South Africa, Jerry Pillay, says the 16th century Protestant Reformation is one of the greatest turning points for him in the history of Christianity. It is described as a “theological revolution” which led to the emergence of the Protestant movement and the separation of the Church.¹ For Pillay, the very heart of the Reformation the intension was to reform, revive and even renew the church. The Reformers never intended to establish a new church, rather, to reform the whole church as in their minds they realised that the church is not standing up to the realities of its time in confronting financial corruption, sexual immorality and political power. Hence Luther, Zwingli, Calvin and many others perpetuated for the so-called “reawakening” of the Church to address these issues.² In fact, until this day these issues mentioned above still continue to divide the churches worldwide. These are not new challenges for the Church, but it seems they continue to take advantage of an already divided church.

Since the 16th century Protestant Reformation, church division among Reformed Churches respectively continued to take place. Unity amongst reformed churches cannot be witnessed and publicly claimed. There is always a fear whether the unity which is already achieved by some reformed churches at local and even at global level can ever last. In most cases church schisms have a tendency of protraction and this result to more unresolved divisions. This being said, schism amongst reformed churches became

1 See Pillay, J. 2017. *Reformation and transformation today: Essentials of reformation tradition and theology as seen from the perspective of the South*. In: *HTS Theological Studies* 73(3):a4815. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.4815> 2017, 1.

2 See Pillay, J. 2017. *Reformation and transformation today*. 2017, 1.

a tendency as well as an ongoing process for decades as it took place in different forms, Lukas Vischer said.³ The divisions since reformation perpetuated more split of the reformed churches and divisions in various societies. It can be said that the split of the reformed churches had negative impact in various communities in Europe and in Africa. In South African context the segregation policy of apartheid caused lasting divisions until this present day. The focus on South African context will be dealt with later in this article. In the following section I pay attention to some perspectives on the actual causes of church split since the Reformation period and how these divisions escalated the tendency of church schisms around the world.

2. Some perspectives on the causes of church division since Reformation

In one way or the other, the history of Reformation is seen as the one that opened the door to the continuous split of the reformed churches. However, it is also because of this history that the reformed churches are engaged on church unity, rather, church reunification discussions today worldwide. As mentioned earlier, the split of the reformed churches took place in different forms. There were disagreements on certain aspects of the reformed tradition activities and the way the church should function. The disagreements on how the church should function is an ongoing debate within the reformed world, especially with regard to the recent discussions on whether LGBTQI community ministerial candidates can be licensed and ordained as ministers of the Word in reformed churches or not. With no tangible reasons, there is already a growing tension and fear of church schism regarding the ordination of the LGBTQI candidates to serve as ministers. In most cases the discussion on licensing and ordination of the LGBTQI candidates takes place at the synodical level rather than within local congregations who call ministers to serve them.

3 For further reading about the causes of church division during the Reformation period, See, Vischer, L. 1993. *Mission in Unity: Towards deeper Communion between Reformed Churches worldwide*. In: *Witnessing in Unity*. John Knox Series No. 8. 1993, 5–8. See also, Vischer, L. 2002. The Church and Being the Church in Reformed Perspective: In: *The Church in Reformed Perspective: A European Reflection*. John Knox Series No.13. 2002, 42–44.

However, the late Swiss Reformed theologian Lukas Vischer mentions at least four key causes of the reformed churches split, namely: Reformation debates, church witness in society, missionary movement, and migration.⁴ These four causes cannot be taken lightly as their impact left the churches and societies with deep divisions and unhealed scars for many years. The following section will pay attention to all these causes and how they impacted on the life of the church.

2.1 Reformation debates

It is fascinating why Lukas Vischer calls it reformation debates, for many the word “debate” can be misleading and can result to a negative outcome, while “discussion” opens the door for mutual agreement at the end. It must be noted that during the Reformation issues pertaining to church structure, how the church should look like, the form of ministry that is required within the church and the relations between the church and state were raised. The confessions of the reformed tradition and the authority of the Scripture formed part of these debates.⁵ The outcomes of these debates in most cases led to schism in the church. Vischer underscores that within the reformed family, what is found in the churches is the emphasis of the permanent role of the reformed confessions of the 16th and 17th centuries.⁶

Linked to this view of Vischer, the Dutch Reformed theologian and ecumenist Martien Brinkman critically argues against the lack of unity of the reformed churches irrespective of their claim for confessing such unity within their own confessions. Brinkman says, up to this time, reformed people have taken pride in always having confessed their faith in their own way. He argues that reformed people do not take the confessions as a weakness in terms of their faith confession as they always claim that authentic confessing will always take place and it will always be contextually determined. He concludes that, nevertheless these confessions are of a certain time and place, people blame the reformed Christians of

4 See Vischer, *Mission in Unity*, 1993, 5–7.

5 For some recent interesting reading on these debates regarding the authority of the Scripture and confessions read: Pillay, J. 2017. *Reformation and transformation today*, 2017, 1–6.

6 See Vischer, *Mission in Unity*, 1993, 5.

their lack of unity beyond their own region and their own time.⁷ In this case Brinkman's argument can be strengthened by reference to the lack of visible and authentic unity within the context of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) versus its call to embrace the Belhar Confession (1986)⁸. The lived experience of internal unity within this church is in opposite to its own confession which calls for unity that embraces both, reconciliation and justice. The roots of this lived disunity within the reformed churches in South African context can be traced back not only during apartheid regime, but also from the history of irreconcilability between different races since the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck in the Cape Colony in 1652. In this case the Bible was therefore "misused" to endorse racial divisions.⁹ This history of division had devastating consequences that lasted for many decades. Lukas Vischer states that the disputes over the nature and the authority of the Bible led to lasting division in the reformed churches.¹⁰ Up to this day the disputes over the nature and authority of the Bible still causes church splits all over the world, not only amongst the reformed churches. This weakens the credibility of the church and its witness in the world.

7 See Brinkman, M. 2004. Unity: A contribution from the Reformed tradition. In: Best, T.F. (ed.) – *With Demonstration of the Spirit and of Power: Seventh International Consultation of United and Uniting Churches*, Faith and Order paper no.195. Geneva: WCC Publications. 19.

8 The Belhar Confession (1986) was originally drafted in 1982 in (Afrikaans language) at the Synod of the then Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) of mainly (Coloured) people in South Africa. This confession was adopted at its Synod in September 1986, and later accepted as the fourth confession of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) on 13 April 1994 when the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) of mainly (Black) people united with the DRMC to form the new church, namely, the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). For further reading of this history: See Cloete, D. and Smit, D.J. (Eds.). 1984. *A Moment of Truth: The Confession of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church 1982*. Michigan: William B. Eerdmans.

9 See Mahokoto, S. 2017. The mission of the Dutch Reformed Church as mission for colonization and division of the Reformed Church in South Africa (1652–1982). In: Mary-Anne Plaatjes van Huffel and Leepo Modise (eds.), *Belhar Confession: The Embracing Confession of Faith for Church and Society*, Stellenbosch University, South Africa: African SUN MeDIA. 97–117.

10 See Vischer, Mission in Unity. 1993, 5.

2.2 Church witness in society

The second cause of the church split is related to church witness in society. In this case Vischer points out that churches parted ways because of their witness against issues such as slavery, race discrimination, recognition of dictatorial rule and fight against communism. Further to these, Vischer's suspicion and fear was much more on issues pertaining to the voice of feminists in the church.¹¹ Although the voice of feminists in the church is in most cases silenced, at least they have platforms where they address their concerns. The church needs to avail spaces where women can partake fully as members of the body of Christ within the churches and ecumenical structures of the church. I have discussed somewhere in my dissertation that the differences that splits the churches also hinder their common faith, witness and service in the world. This being said, individual Christians and churches are also marked by differences while they also have different views on the nature of the church, its identity, as well as its boundaries. And this eventually led churches to have different understandings on their involvement on socio-ethical concerns and this kept them apart.¹² These socio-ethical issues can bring further split in the churches and yet some churches are still not willing to address these complicated issues. This is the same regarding the concerns of the LGBTQI community today.

The issue of language and power struggle is another factor that contributed greatly to the split amongst reformed churches. The South African reformed theologian Daniël Louw gives a hunch to the question that this articles wrestles with when he says South Africans society needs to wrestle with the challenge whether it is possible to find a way whereby those who were forced split along racial lines by apartheid government can live together in common society and whether the church can play a remarkable role to bring them together.¹³ Here the misuse of power during separate development in

11 See Vischer, *Mission in Unity*. 1993, 6.

12 See Mahokoto, S. 2014. *Church Unity and Social Context: The Ecumenical Debate on Ecclesiology and Ethics*, Stellenbosch University <http://scholar.sun.ac.za> 2014, 38. (Unpublished dissertation).

13 See Daniel Louw, 2003. The unity of the rainbow versus the diversity of cultures? In search of a common ground and an integrative factor: In: Eddy Van der Borght (ed.) *Affirming and Living with Differences. Studies of the Reformed Theology* 12. Zoetermeer: Meinema. 44.

South Africa is very clear. For Louw, one cannot really separate challenge of unity and diversity from the tension of the use and the misuse of power. He argues that when it comes to theology, the notion of power is immediately linked to the understanding of God's power.¹⁴ The question of language and power struggle is a very sensitive one. Within the unity of the URCSA these are key issues that this church struggles with for years, and its recent Cape Regional Synod held at Fort Hare University, Eastern Cape on 24 June – 1 July 2018 can be one example to strengthen this argument. Leadership positions, especially at URCSA synodical level is very much contested between Afrikaans and isiXhosa speaking leaders and ordinary members. In many cases, the debates during moderator elections seem to be an issue of power struggle rather than anything else in the church. If not considered carefully and that the decision taken by the synod already on moderator representation, this may result to another split within URCSA Cape Synod. This is the same pertaining to language issue within URCSA. Although Afrikaans and isiXhosa are official languages of this church, but isiXhosa speaking members feel being misused when it comes to translation and interpretation during gatherings at the Cape Synod, whereas at the General Synod level of URCSA the main language used is English. If this issue is not properly addressed, it will leave many members uncomfortable and may lead to an undesired split.

Church and World study document underscores that language as a way of communicating with one another can shape, share and defend the identity of individuals and communities including Christians and Christian communities. *Church and World* further says that particular languages may have forms and be used in ways which either include persons or groups within or exclude them from community.¹⁵ The issue of language and power is not only a threat to church unity, but also to various areas of life and engagement with others. In fact, all of the above factors need to be discussed if we are serious about church unity and our witness in society.

14 See Louw, *The unity of the rainbow*, 2003, 43.

15 See *Church and World: The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community*. A Faith and Order Study Document. Faith and Order Paper No. 151. 1990. Geneva, Switzerland: WCC Publications. 1990, 65.

2.3 Missionary movement

In one way or the other, the missionary movement also contributed to church divisions. Lukas Vischer recalls that in the last two centuries some individual reformed churches and mission agencies worked together in the same country without co-ordinating their efforts with the work of other churches.¹⁶ Due to this very reason, many reformed churches came into being. Vischer states that missionaries were very much in favour of church planting in different countries. Combining services with other pre-existing reformed churches was not on their agenda. These reformed churches knew exactly that they are related, and they belong to one another. As Lukas Vischer puts it, “these churches never separated; rather, they became separated by birth”.¹⁷

Francis Amenu alludes to the same problem of missionaries who created division amongst Ghanaians by establishing churches along tribal or ethnic boundaries.¹⁸ Of course the South African Dutch Reformed family of churches faced similar challenge as they were forced to separate worship services on racial lines after the infamous decision of the White Dutch Reformed Church Synod of 1857.¹⁹ It was after this synod when the mission congregations became a supplement of the white congregations. In fact, the South African church historian Richard Elphick argues that even before and after the 1857 Synod, there were schisms in the Dutch Reformed Church and the new churches like the *Volkskerk*, the *Nederduitsch Hervormde*

16 See Vischer, *Mission in Unity*. 1993, 6.

17 See Vischer, *Mission in Unity*. 1993, 6.

18 See Amenu, F. 2004. The Ghanaian ministry for London: A Case Study on Unity. In: Best, T.F (ed.), *With a demonstration of the Spirit and of Power: Seventh International Consultation of United and Uniting Churches. Faith and Order Paper no 195*, Geneva: WCC Publications, Geneva. 34.

19 *Acta Synodi NG Kerk 1857*, 59–60. The English translation of this 1857 Synod decision from Chris Loff reads: “The Synod considers it desirable and according to the Holy Scripture that our heathen members be accepted and initiated into our congregations wherever it is possible; but where this measure, as a result of the weakness of some, would stand in the way of promoting the work of Christ among the heathen people, then congregations set up among the heathen, or still to be set up, should enjoy their Christian privileges in a separate building or institution.” See Loff, *The history of a heresy*, 1983, 19.

Kerk van Afrika and the *Gereformeerde Kerk* emerged.²⁰ These reformed churches were separated by birth on racial lines. Hence the interest of this article wishes to explore the possibility of an authentic church unity of the reformed churches after such a painful, yet unhealed relationships of the past in various contexts. Whether a genuine church unity can be established even amongst reformed churches in the South African context, this remains a crucial challenge which needs to be tested.

2.4 Migration

Migration is believed to have a contribution on church split. Vischer in this case discovered that the reformed churches of different countries when they come to one country because of immigration they do not gather in one reformed church to form union. He states that in most cases these churches establish different reformed churches according to their ethnic groups. These factors contributed greatly to church division including the moral failure which Lukas Vischer sees as the other contributor to church division.²¹ In this case Christopher Magezi in his recent article titled: *Migration crisis and the church: A response to lacunae and considerations for Christian ministry engagement*, states that migration confronts both migrants and migrants' hosting nations with various challenges. For him, migrants face discrimination in various ways on the one hand, because some hosting nations do not recognise the foreign qualifications of migrants which result in migrants accepting low-paying jobs as means to survive. On the other hand, the migrants' hosting countries face the challenges of the cost of resettling and integrating migrants.²²

Given these various reasons above, one wonders whether the possibility of genuine unity of reformed church on local and global levels can really materialise. If Vischer argues that the issue of moral failure substantially contributes to church split, then it also makes sense when Magezi argues that some migrants faces some challenges of discrimination in foreign

20 See Elphick, R. 2012. *The equality of believers: Protestant Missionaries and the racial politics of South Africa*, KZN, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press. 44–51.

21 See Vischer, *Mission in Unity*. 1993, 6–7.

22 See Magezi, C. 2017. Migration crisis and the church: A response to lacunae and considerations for Christian ministry engagement, *Verbum et Ecclesia* 38(1):a1671. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v38i1.1671> 2017, 2.

countries. As a result, this is what we actually witness when it comes to the question of moral failure especially with the recent xenophobic attacks in South Africa and unjustifiable treatment of immigrants even in Europe. Of course the possibilities of having joint worship service and one reformed church becomes a crucial challenge in this regard. The following section deals with reformed church split within the South African context.

3. The Dutch Reformed family of churches split – a South African perspective

The South African Dutch Reformed family of churches' case of split has a very long history that stretches back to the apartheid era which the White Dutch Reformed Church condoned. Until this day, one can only say this was and still is a very complex history of church split. The South African reformed theologian Dirkie Smit who is currently based in Princeton in the United States once wrote:

Reformed Theology in South Africa is a story of many stories ...
The stories one heard would therefore depend on the people whom one asked and could be radically different stories. What constituted adventures and what misfortunes would depend on the social locations, the traditions and communities, the experiences and perspectives of those telling the story.²³

In fact the decision of the Dutch Reformed Church 1857 Synod²⁴ open the door to an already visible church split and while in many cases it is

23 See Smit, D. J. 2009. *Essays on Being Reformed: Collected Essays* 3. Stellenbosch, South Africa: African SUN Media. 217.

24 To read more of this history of church divisions in South Africa on the basis of colour prejudice please read: Loff, C. 1983. The history of a heresy. In: *Apartheid is a heresy*. In John W. De Gruchy & Charles Villa-Vicencio (eds.), Cape Town: David Philip Publishers. See also Adonis, J.C. 1982. *Die afgebreekte skeidsmuur weer opgebou: Die verstrengeling van die sendingbeleid van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika met die praktyk en ideologie van die apartheid in historiese perspektief*. Editions Rodopi B.V, Amsterdam 1982. Netherlands. This history of division lasted for many years until this day in South Africa. Discussions on church unity and the unity between the families of the Dutch Reformed churches is still stark in this history of racial division and apartheid in South Africa.

regarded as the beginning of this division.²⁵ As Giliomee puts it, “In the aftermath of the 1857 Synod Huet (1860a:28–53) analysed the objections he had encountered to the presence of non-whites in the church. One was a biblical justification for the exclusion of “Basters” and another was a form of biological racism, which propagated keeping brown and Black people separate because they represented a different human species marked by their colour and hair”.²⁶ The late Reformed Church historian Johannes Adonis pointed out that some white congregants of the DRC refused that black congregants should worship in a separate building alone. Contrary to this hopeful plea for true church unity, for various other white congregations this kind of practice became a challenging reality. For instance, in Calvinia some white congregants protested against the black congregants who were using their church building.²⁷

Since this decision, reformed churches in South Africa were kept apart and this created lasting tension and animosity between different racial groups in communities. Apartheid system and segregation policy played a major role in furthering these divisions with the help of the White Dutch Reformed Church that eventually claimed in its official church newspaper, *Kerkbode*, that apartheid can be rightfully called the church policy after the National Party won national elections in 1948.²⁸ I must say that racism in South Africa which was endorsed by the Dutch Reformed Church left deep scars amongst members of the reformed churches and communities. Even the unity that was achieved by the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) and the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) on 14 April

25 See Giliomee, G. 2003:2.83. “The weakness of some”: The Dutch Reformed Church and white supremacy. In: *Scriptura, International Journal of Bible, Religion and Theology in South Africa*, 2003:2. 83. 2003, 220–221. This is a year where the Synod of the DRC decided to separate the building for worship and that the DRC White members were not comfortable in using the Holy Communion simultaneously with the Black congregants. The practice of separate churches for Coloureds, Bantu and Indians came to existence, and many Dutch Reformed congregations were established for each racial group.

26 See Giliomee, “The weakness of some”. 2003, 220.

27 See Adonis, J.C. 1982. *Die afgebreekte skeidsmuur weer opgebou: Die verstrengeling van die sendingbeleid van die Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid – Afrika met die praktyk en ideologie van die apartheid in historiese perspektief*, Editions Rodopi B.V. Amsterdam, 1982, 52–53.

28 See Villa-Vicencio, C. 1983. An all-pervading heresy: Racism and the ‘English-speaking Churches.’ In: Apartheid is a heresy: in John W. De Gruchy & Charles Villa-Vicencio (eds.), Cape Town: David Philip Publishers. 59.

1994 to form the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) is infected by apartheid and its racism in South Africa. After 25 years of unity, the URCSA still struggles with issues pertaining to language, power struggle (with regards to office bearers with the so-called 50/50 rule adopted by its synod) during the election of the moderator leadership. The most disappointing reality in all these years is that most URCSA congregations are still deeply divided on racial lines since the establishment of this church. The history of these divisions on racial lines and the current struggle for internal unity in the URCSA conceal the hopes for genuine church unity while at the same time enhancing the doubts for effective unity of the Dutch Reformed family of churches in South Africa, especially when in the context of unhealed relationships, injustices and irreconcilability between the members of these churches.

The reformed pastor of the URCSA, Daniël Kuys recently reminded us that the internal unity in URCSA was at stake from its establishment. He states that the Moderamen took note of the complaints of the DRCA regional synods of the Free State and Phororo regarding church unification.²⁹ For him, the main challenge to the unity of the URCSA internally was the process that led to the unification which failed to adequately take into account our divided history in South Africa – our shared horrific, racist apartheid history of separation. He concludes that the theology of apartheid and ideology engineered our minds, attitudes and thoughts to conform to what the apartheid system wanted us to be and to believe about ourselves and other people.³⁰ Truthful as this argument may be, the question remains whether members of the URCSA themselves are able to change their minds, attitudes and thoughts about each other after the collapse of apartheid so that they embrace each other as the Belhar Confession teaches them to live a unity that is not disconnected to reconciliation and justice.

One of the critics regarding the unity of the URCSA is that this church did not have enough time to deal with the past properly, especially with regards to the negative experiences which inflicted physical wounds and

29 See Kuys, D. 2017. The Belhar Confession and internal unity. In: Mary-Anne Plaatjies van Huffel and Leepo Modise (eds.), *Belhar Confession: Embracing Confession of Faith for Church and Society*, Stellenbosch: SUN Media. 307.

30 See Kuys, 2017. *The Belhar Confession and internal unity*, 308.

psychological damage on many people, especially with regards to human identity and human relationships. If these issues are not dealt with first and in a proper way, no genuine church unity can ever be achieved. Possible schisms might take place again in future and yet we will blame the past and say history repeats itself. Church unity is in many cases romanticised by reformed churches, even within URCSA and as well as on church unity debates with the DRC. The focus of these churches even for URCSA is much concerned with unity in Christ and less concerned with the relationship with one another as individual members of the same body of Christ.

The members of URCSA need to ask themselves an important question, not a question related to Christ's relationship with them as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Russel Botman would say: Who is Jesus Christ for us (*today*)? Rather, we need to ask ourselves a different question: Who are we as Christians of today in church and society in relation to who Jesus Christ was and is for us as a reconciler and peacemaker in church and the world? Further questions could therefore be asked: What impact does church division have towards its own members and the community? Is it possible to achieve genuine church unity after this traumatic history of a racially divided church and society in South Africa? Is it possible for Dutch Reformed family of churches members to live with their differences in the church? These questions require us not to give theological answers to them, rather, we need to deal with them by giving honest answers from human conscience.

4. Is there any hope for church unity?

For the South African context, it seems as if racism that which was championed by the apartheid regime in church and society cannot be uprooted easily in the life of the Dutch Reformed family of churches. In fact, racism and apartheid contaminated the *esse* (the being) of the church and the meaning of good life in South African society. Whether the unity of these churches will be achieved and contribute positively to South African society remains unclear, given the long existing tensions since the time of apartheid era. This being said, there is hope for church unity because it is a gift from God. The unity of the church has its origin in God. We become united with Him. The church cannot proclaim its unity if it is not connected to God. The church cannot face the challenges of the world if it

is not united with God. Unity with God also means unity with each other as members of the church.

In the Reformed world church unity is regarded as a dream, a gift and a calling that we have to accomplish. It is an already given gift to the church, however, it is awaited of the church to take this calling and face the world and its challenges. This dream of Jesus for His church to be one in (John 17:22) is regarded as the founding dream. It incorporates both, a calling and mission for the church to the world. Vischer draws us closer to this fact when he recalls how the Reformed church struggle for church unity since the 16th and 17th centuries. He recognises the work done by the reformed church father, John Calvin who tried to keep this bond of unity in the Reformed church. He says that Calvin expended many efforts to achieve at least the unity of the Reformed camp, following his example, there have been efforts throughout history to bridge division through dialogue.³¹ This can be seen in his work, the commentaries and the letters³² he wrote to maintain peace and unity during hostilities in some of the Reformed churches around Europe.

However, the reformed ecumenist Odair Pedroso Mateus alludes to the fact that John Calvin was by all means maintaining the unity of the church and keeping the word of God as the guide for church unity and discipline. As Mateus puts it:

31 Vischer, L. 1999. The Reformed Tradition and its Multiple Facets: In: Bauswein, J.J. and Vischer, L. (eds.) – *The Reformed Family Worldwide: A Survey of Reformed Churches, Theological Schools and International Organizations*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 1.

32 In his work we see his commitment, his faithfulness to his calling, and his service as a unifying factor in the Reformed world. In his letter from Strausbourg to André Zébédée on the 19th May 1539, with high commitment to unity, Calvin wrote: “For we should not lightly separate ourselves from those with whom the Lord has united us in fellowship in his work. Especially I ask of you that, as you hold fast to the truth in which you have hitherto been so steadfast, you do not give the appearance that you are intentionally seeking disunion with those whose you cannot accept, for you and all the good must respect them as the vanguard amongst Christ’s servants. Great God, what does this bring back? In the past we had to separate ourselves from servants of Christ with a feeling no different than if our heart were being torn from our body. And now it should be like a game to cut off not just any member, but the most important vital organ from our communion.” See Vischer, L. 2000. *Pia Conspiratio Calvin on the Unity of Christ’s Church*. John Knox Series, no.12. Centre International Réformé John Knox, Geneva. 2000, 22.

The maintenance of the unity of the church through order and discipline was, in the eyes of Calvin, of first importance. For this reason, he severely condemned those who encourage schism from motives other than those which proceed from absolute obedience to the Word of God.³³

The Word of God for Calvin was much more important than anything else. He believed where the Word of God is preached and heard, and the sacraments administered, that is where the true church is found and exist. Calvin prohibited church divisions as he regarded divisions as against God's will.³⁴ It is clear that for Calvin, as it is also stated in the Belhar Confession, that church unity is a gift and an obligation for the church of Jesus Christ³⁵, so that it becomes a visible sign of unity in the world marked by differences, injustice, disunity, enmity and hate. The image of the body of Christ in (I Corinthians 12:12–27) strengthens this reality and serves as an example not only for unity in diversity, but also for an authentic unity of the church. Although the many parts of the body are different and having different responsibilities within the body, their diversity is not merely a weakness in the body, but the power of true unity and justice is exposed in various ways. After the fall of apartheid, the Dutch Reformed family of churches could use the image of the body as strength in search for an authentic unity in their diversity. There is a growing attitude of seeing diversity as division and weakness rather than strength for celebrating God's gift of unity. I suspect this trend is much influenced by the past experiences of church and social divisions caused by the apartheid government in South Africa.

In the South African context, although some members of the White Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa are keen for church unity, the discussions on whether to join the URCSA and become one church, we cannot ignore the fact that many of them resist and even contest over the acceptance of the Belhar Confession. This alone clearly indicates their unwillingness to overrule the DRC 1857 Synod decision on church split. Apartheid and

33 See Mateus, O.P. 2005. *The World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) and the Modern Ecumenical Movement*. Studies from the WARC 46. Published by WARC, Geneva. 139.

34 See Mateus, *The World Alliance of Reformed Churches*. 2005, 139.

35 Botha, J. and Naudé, P. 2011. *Good News to Confess: The Belhar Confession and the road of acceptance*. Wellington: Bible Media. 19.

church division in South Africa has caused a lot of damage in the life of the church and in society. The Dutch Reformed family of churches have much work to do with regard to reconciliation and justice in order to achieve genuine church unity that could make a tangible difference in South Africa. Church unity is possible, but it will require these churches to be honest to God and to one another with the hope that God will heal their painful memories and create a new church of significance. The unity of these churches will serve as credible witness for unity, peace, reconciliation and justice in South African society and the world. If the church is united it can be a powerful witness in the world that is full of enmity, anger and violence. The church should not only hope for genuine unity, but it must strive to live the achieved church unity in a genuine, unhypocritical and meaningful way which reflects the indispensable quality of life together in Christ within the household of God.

5. Conclusion

This article tried to look at some of the causes of church split since the time of reformation and how the reformed churches in the world continued to split until this day. Some of the causes of church division in relation to church unity discussions, church witness in society, missionary movement and migration were discussed. Amongst these, the South African Dutch Reformed family of churches split on racial lines and the apartheid theology which was endorsed by the White Dutch Reformed Church is briefly explained. The struggle for internal unity within the URCSA also informs the advanced struggle for church unity with the White Dutch Reformed Church. It must be noted that negotiations for church unity between the URCSA and the DRC take place often in the absence of other sister churches, namely, the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) and the Reformed Church in Africa (RCA). This alone seems to be a challenge if not a problem regarding genuine church unity discussions going forward. The article emphasises the need for dealing with the past negative experiences as a way of healing the wounds and relationships with each other. The Dutch Reformed family of churches need to deal with sensitive issues of justice that seem to impede church unity. This article demonstrates that church divisions seem to have no end, and that in the South African context the history of racial division in the heydays of apartheid remains

the key factor that keeps the Dutch Reformed family of churches apart. The gift of diversity is often understood on the basis of dividing Christians and communities rather than celebrating God's gift of the unity of His body.

The late South African reformed ecumenist and former Rector and Vice Chancellor at Stellenbosch University, Russel Botman helps us on the way forward regarding our discussions on genuine church unity as the Dutch Reformed family of churches when he says we need to unlock the metaphorical locking devices when dealing with the past. He says in referring to justice issues "emotional", "sensitive", and "delicate" these words became metaphorical locking devices and were used to close the debate rather than to open concrete issues to public discussion. Botman further says those who fought against contextual theology used these metaphorical locking devices even in their local faith communities and local churches. Ministers were effectively silenced, while issues of justice in their own churches were made invisible, and the bodies who make decisions were made prophetically blind, deaf and mute. For him, and I think he is quite correct, the danger of this is that theology is born and nurtured in the local community, and it is sometimes also locked up there.³⁶ If my suspicion is correct, this is where the internal unity of URCSA is locked up, the same is true regarding the unity discussions between URCSA and the DRC. I want to propose that for a genuine church unity of these churches, the metaphorical devices need to be unlocked, issues of justice must be addressed as means of finding true unity that leads to reconciliation.

Speaking about church unity, Dirkie Smit warns the Dutch Reformed family of churches about the challenges leading to an authentic unity of the church. Smit says church unity is an issue where Christians turn to fight and have debates over it. For him church unity is a faith issue and it is self-evident.³⁷ Smit appeals to Christians to learn to believe in church unity, to learn dream of church unity, and learn to miss church unity, and learn to pray for church unity.³⁸ To achieve true unity of the church,

36 See Botman, H.R. 1996. Narrative Challenges in a Situation of Transition. In: Botman, H.R. and Petersen, R. (eds.), *To Remember and To Heal: Theological and Psychological Reflections on Truth and Reconciliation*. Human & Rousseau, Cape Town, South Africa, 1996, 38.

37 See Smit, D.J. 1991. Gedagtes Rondom Kerkeenheid. *Polumnia*, 1991, 16.

38 See Smit, Gedagtes Rondom Kerkeenheid. 1991, 17.

members of the Dutch Reformed family of churches have no choice but to deal with sensitive issues of justice in order to make peace with each other. This justice will enable them to reconcile with each other, not only with God who calls them to participate in this unity in Christ within the household of God.

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