

The ministry of reconciliation: why the churches owe the message of reconciliation to a divided world

O ministério da reconciliação: porque as igrejas devem a mensagem de reconciliação a um mundo dividido

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Abstract

The theme of the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches reads: *Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity*. This subject is obviously a lot timelier than those who chose it may have thought. In these days, what would our world need more than reconciliation, peace and unity? And not only the world is in need of reconciliation, but also the Church. Many of the traditional schisms still exist, but even in the family of Orthodox churches which always has been proud of preserving the unity of the Church there is a deep split. One part of it is of the opinion that the allegiance to the nation and its war is more important than the unity and loyalty with a sister Church. Therefore, the question arises: is it true that "Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity"? This article examines what the Bible really says about reconciliation and unity and the effect of Christ's love in view of the Church and the world.

Keywords

11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches. Reconciliation. Unit. World divided. Bible.

Resumo

O tema da XI Assembleia do Conselho Mundial de Igrejas diz: *O amor de Cristo conduz o mundo à reconciliação e à unidade*. Este tema é obviamente muito mais atual do que aqueles que o escolheram podem ter pensado. Nestes dias, de que precisaria o nosso mundo mais do que a reconciliação, a paz e a unidade? E não só o mundo precisa de reconciliação, mas também a Igreja. Muitos dos cismas tradicionais ainda existem, mas mesmo na família das igrejas ortodoxas, que sempre se orgulhou de preservar a unidade da Igreja, existe uma divisão profunda. Uma parte é da opinião de que a fidelidade à nação e à sua guerra é mais importante do que a unidade e a lealdade com uma Igreja irmã. Portanto, surge a questão: é verdade que "o amor de Cristo conduz o mundo à reconciliação e à unidade"? Este artigo examina o que a Bíblia realmente diz sobre reconciliação e unidade e o efeito do amor de Cristo perante a Igreja e o mundo.

Palavras-chave

XI Assembleia do Conselho Mundial de Igrejas. Reconciliação. Unidade. Mundo dividido. Bíblia.

INTRODUCTION²

The notion of reconciliation comes from the social and political field. It means the restitution of a broken relationship between individuals or groups which was destroyed by guilt

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or hate. It tries to overcome hostility and enmity and to heal shattered relations by acknowledging fault, forgiving, and building up new trust. It is much more than a kind of armistice or even an arduously negotiated peace treaty. It acknowledges the past wrong-doing, and its consequences are mentioned and accounted for. This provides a solid base for future togetherness and cooperation. One needs to differentiate between reconciliation and atonement, although signs or acts of atonement can be part of the process which leads to successful reconciliation.

1 THE MESSAGE OF RECONCILIATION

In the Bible the concept of reconciliation as a description of God's salvation for humankind is only found in the Pauline writings – at least when we confine ourselves to looking at the respective terminology. In substance the concept may be found at many places where the Bible speaks about peace and peace making. But obviously the theme we are contemplating here relates very much to the Pauline witness and so we will limit ourselves to these texts.

The first time Paul speaks about reconciliation he does this in a very fundamental and concise way including all important aspects of the concept. It is the famous passage in II Corinthians 5,17-21:

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So, we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ: be reconciled to God. For our sake God made the one who knew no sin to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

In contrast to the rivalry which threatens to split the Church in Corinth Paul describes a new reality “in Christ”, a reality in which love prevails. God is the author of this new reality, and the presupposition of this statement is that the reality in which human beings lived till now was characterized by hate, guilt and hostility against God. But “in Christ”, i.e. where he, his life and his death, determine life, God creates a new reality by reconciling himself with his enemies. It is very important to realize: Not Christ had to reconcile God – as it is often said in traditional preaching or in older hymns – but God himself reconciled the world in and through Christ. He did this “not counting their trespasses against” the people who have sinned, but also not neglecting the power of sin and what had happened. To the contrary: “For our sake God made the one who knew no sin to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2Cor 5,21). This *admirabile commercium* (a *joyous exchange* according to Luther) is the base of reconciliation and the new reality which is in place “in Christ”.

Very important is the twofold description of those who are reconciled: God reconciled *us* to himself, and he reconciled *the world*. Obviously, there is a common denominator between both, but also an important difference: From God's side reconciliation is accomplished for both, and his peace is valid and real. But peace is not imposed, humankind is not pacified but invited and summoned to be reconciled. To speak of a God who is "entreating" people was a very strange expression in the view of the religions of the ancient Near East and the Greco-Roman world. But that is the way how God reconciles the world to himself. He wants real peace and genuine reconciliation.

And therefore, he has given to the Church *the message of reconciliation* and entrusted those who have accepted this message for themselves with *the ministry of reconciliation*. They are called to be *ambassadors for Christ*, offering to the world the peace of God which Christ himself has accomplished. One might exaggerate this somewhat by saying: the task of Christ's love in this world has been delegated to those who themselves live by this love.

I sometimes compare this with reports we could read in the seventies of the last century in our newspapers. Several years after World War II, some Japanese soldiers were found on a far-off island in the Pacific where they were still hiding and defending themselves because they had not heard that the war was over. And obviously it was not easy to persuade them that they could live in peace. Only when one of their former commanders approached the island, they were ready to believe that they were safe and could live in peace. Peace and reconciliation were real even for them, but they didn't accept this reality till they trusted the message of peace!

But there are other places where Paul speaks about reconciliation with a slightly different emphasis, e.g., in Romans 5,8-11:

But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely, therefore, since we have now been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

The focus in this passage is clearly on those who accepted and believed in the message of reconciliation. After having spoken extensively about God's justifying action through Christ in chapter 1-4 Paul tries to assure his readers that they can trust to be at peace with God: "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." (Rom 5,1). To give his words the needed certainty Paul emphasizes the love of God as the moving cause for God's reconciling action and at the same time the "price" which God had to pay in order to achieve true reconciliation: the death of his Son! When we read that "we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son" and "by his blood, we will be saved from the wrath of God", it may appear as if after all it was God who needed to be reconciled. But on the

contrary even here it is God who remains the author of reconciliation through Jesus Christ, it is *his* love which is the basis of all what happens in favor to our reconciliation.

Very powerful is the parallel which Paul draws between justification and reconciliation as base for a new relation! Obviously both terms describe different aspects of the same process: establishing a new relationship between God and human beings. And it shows that justification is not only about overcoming past wrong-doing but also opens the door to a new relationship with God, and reconciliation is not only the path to future peace but also includes settling and rectifying what caused the enmity of the past.

We find a different perspective in the Letter to the Colossians, maybe not written by Paul himself but by one of his pupils on his behalf. He quotes in Colossians 1,15-20 an early hymn about Jesus Christ, who is praised as “the firstborn of all creation” and “the firstborn from the dead” and therefore will “have first place in everything”. And the hymn states the reasons for this assertion:

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased *to reconcile* to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace *through the blood of his cross*. (Col 1,20).

Here obviously the universal perspective prevails. God was pleased – and this obviously means he has already accomplished – to reconcile to himself all things, not only on earth, but also in heaven, an aspect which is rather important for the Colossians who were anxious about hostile heavenly powers (2,15-19). But also, with this emphasis it remains clear: that was done “through the blood of his cross”. By his death Jesus not only “erased the record that stood against us”, but also “disarmed the rulers and authorities” by nailing their claim to the cross (2,14). It is clear that according to this hymn this is accomplished once and for all. But how does it become apparent in our reality? Is this a hymnic anticipation of an eschatological reality? And would such a final reconciliation mean a kind of universal salvation? These are open questions.

A new aspect of the theme of reconciliation is found in Ephesians 2,14-18. Here we read:

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us, abolishing the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might *reconcile* both to God in one body *through the cross*, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near, for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.

That Jesus “is our peace” has a clear and distinct meaning in this context: It embraces particularly the reconciliation between Israel and those who come to Christ from the Gentiles. And even here it is the death of Jesus Christ on the cross which puts an end to the hostility

which has hurt and poisoned the relationship between Jews and Gentiles for so long! Here a reality is assumed which was denied by Christian churches through many centuries. It seems especially tragic that the death of Christ was no longer seen as sign of reconciliation but as reason for – often deadly – accusations against Jews charging them being “murderers of God”. When one reads Romans 11 or Ephesians 2 carefully it is difficult to understand why Christian antisemitism could ever emerge and take its fatal toll.

We can summarize at this interim state the following: God reconciled the world; this is a reality not only for those who accept it but for all human beings – in certain respect even for the whole creation. God’s love has reconciled the world and “us” – the emphasis on such a double purpose of God’s reconciling action is not tautological although “we” are part of the world. It provides a creative tension between the universal scope of God’s love and the necessity of a personal realization of God’s love (the same tension in the famous statement in John 3,16: “For God so *loved the world* that he gave his only Son, so that *everyone who believes in him* may not perish but may have eternal life.”).

It is important for the whole testimony of the New Testament: there is no cheap reconciliation – reconciliation has its price. God in his love is willing to pay the price himself by sharing our iniquity through the death of his son Jesus Christ and assuming liability for the deadly damage of our enmity against his will and our assignment within his creation. His love and – equal in substance – Christ’s love made reconciliation possible.

The reconciliation which has taken place on the cross becomes a living reality in faith and love for those who accept being reconciled as foundation of their lives. Reconciliation is more than just an offer by God himself; on the other hand, it is not a reality which is effective for all human beings just like the sun is shining and the rain is pouring down on all whether they believe it or not (Mt 5,48). It is a reality which finds its realization in a living relationship.

The reconciliation with God is the foundation of the reconciliation between humans – in the New Testament paradigmatically shown by the relationship between Jews and Gentile Christians and tragically not realized by the later Church! The reconciliation of different groups within the Church is not an explicit theme in the New Testament although in many of the epistles the threatened unity of the Church is dealt with extensively. But the debate about it is characterized more by the struggle for the truth of the Gospel or – in the later epistles – by the admonition to leave or expel those of different opinions. In I John 4, however, the lack of love of those who left the communion is deplored.

Only in Galatians 2:1-10 where Paul describes the positive result of the apostolic council in Jerusalem, we have a striking example of a “reconciled diversity” as base of the unity of the Church. Although the agreement is not described with these words it is clear: despite the fact that “the gospel for the uncircumcised”, which has been entrusted to Paul, and “the gospel for the circumcised” which has been entrusted to Peter were different it was acknowledged that God’s grace worked in both and therefore James, Cephas and John gave Barnabas and Paul “the

right hand of fellowship”, affirming their unity in Christ. However, the incident which occurred a little later in Antioch questioned the unity from both sides and shows that it is important not only to offer one another the hand of fellowship but to agree on the terms how the mutually declared unity is put into practice.

According to the testimony of the New Testament the first Christians were not very concerned about the reconciliation and the unity of the world besides proclaiming the reconciliation God is offering to all. Some passages in the Revelation of John even may indicate that they saw the unity which was achieved under the leadership of the Roman Empire with its tendency to deify its own power and to persecute those who denied this as a great danger (Rev 17-19). They hoped for the creation of a reconciled and united humankind at the end of history when God’s journey with this world would reach its goal (Rev 7,9-17).

But the tragedy till today is that people who are very eager to preach the reconciliation by God are not always – to say the least – interested in reconciliation with others and rely more on weapons and war than on peace making and reconciliation. A lady running for governor in one of the USA stated on her campaign bus what her priorities would be if she would be elected: *Jesus, guns, babies!*

On the other side many who may yearn for more reconciliation among people don’t bother very much about their reconciliation with God and even do not realize that it may be important for them. How can we deal with this problem?

2 THE VITAL NECESSITY OF RECONCILIATION

That we are in urgent need of reconciliation is obvious. The war in the Ukraine has stopped all our dreams that just by negotiating trade agreements we can secure peace in these parts of the earth. The commercial unity of the earth we were led to believe in by the growing worldwide mutual dependency of our economic systems is now questioned by the sudden end of globalization through COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine. And it is difficult to see how this development can be reversed soon.

The situation between churches is not easy to assess. There were great changes with a positive impact in their relationship since the days of my childhood seventy and more years ago. The Second Vatican Council opened the door to growing understanding and ecumenical cooperation between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox churches on the one and the Protestant churches on the other side. The *Joint declaration on the doctrine of justification* is an astonishing result of many and intense dialogues between the churches of the Reformation and the Catholic Church, still disputed and suspected by some theologians but nevertheless a sign of reconciliation regarding one of the most dividing and fiercely contested questions of the Reformation. I have always believed the radical change which happened in the council to be a miracle wrought by the Holy Spirit and the love of Christ.

Therefore, at least in most parts of Europe and many other regions of the world there is no longer any hostility between churches to be deplored, instead we experience more or less intense acts of cooperation, although there still may be some exceptions of some groups who think they are the only true believers.

Unfortunately, there may be other experiences in other parts of the world where churches or Christian movements still fight against each other – hopefully no longer with the sword or with guns, but often with great hostility and hateful attacks in the so-called social media. And the deadly conflicts within the Muslim community between Sunnites and Shiites may remind us how inclined human beings are to see their most dangerous enemies in those who seem to be closest to them, especially when it comes to religious beliefs.

But even where we can enjoy friendly relationships between churches there is often more competition than cooperation. According to my observations their rivalry is increasing as more churches are under pressure by losing ground with the population. To reach out to the few who may share some religious interest becomes more and more difficult. This may cause some to look warily or enviously on others and their “success”, and it is not so easy to “celebrate when other churches are growing” as the Synod of the Evangelical Church in Germany stated in a resolution in 1999.

But the situation turns out to be even more complicated. We still face traditional conflicts and unresolved disputes between churches regarding the petrine ministry for instance or the question of ordination as obstacles to achieving full communion and unity. Additionally, new conflicts and disagreements are emerging, some of which are not even around theological questions.

It is quite surprising to realize that Christian nationalism is still a problem, even after all the difficult experiences the Church has gone through in recent history. One could not really expect that the Russian Orthodox would condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine. But that patriarch Kyrill declared it solemnly a holy war and by this caused a deep conflict not only with the autonomous Ukrainian Orthodox Church but also with the Ukrainian branch of his own Church is deeply disturbing and ruins the possibility that the churches may be an instrument of reconciliation in this conflict.

There are other reasons for new splits of churches. My own Church, the United Methodist Church is suffering a major schism. The so-called Global Methodist Church is disaffiliating itself from this Church which came into being by a series of Church unions as in many mainline Protestant churches. The cause of disagreements and a decade long struggle centers around the question how to assess the demand of full inclusion of people with homosexual orientation into the Church.

It is difficult to understand why it is specifically this question that is so divisive. I think the reason is a deep fear of anything different from “normal” behavior, combined with the impression that this is the last stronghold where it can be decided whether Scripture is still the

guiding principle for everyday questions. In my opinion there is a principal challenge behind this actual problem: the tension between the necessity to protect and uphold convictions that support your own identity and the willingness to acknowledge the otherness of others.

Jesus seemed to be aware of this conflict. He not only admonished his people to love their enemies. He also told them:

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and one's foes will be members of one's own household. (Mt 10,34-36).

There are conflicts which are unavoidable if we don't agree to everything but insist upon the truth and take a stand for justice and freedom. And within the Church we are confronted with the question: which dissociations are necessary for the sake of a clear testimonial of the truth of the Gospel, the love of Christ, the dignity of human beings and the integrity of creation? And which divisions are in reality overcome by Christ and his love? The "old believers" separated from the Russian Orthodox Church in the 17th century because they opposed a new rite regarding the position of the fingers during blessing with the sign of the cross and endured prosecution and martyrdom. For them (and for their opponents in the official Church) to uphold the tradition as they understood it meant the *status confessionis*! But already the First Letter of John asked for brotherly and sisterly love even when difficult theological questions are debated! But to be honest: it would have been helpful to find clearer examples of the loving acceptance of religious enemies in more writings of the New Testament – the Second Letter of Peter or the one from Jude are not exactly commendable in this respect.

Therefore, the question remains: what kind of reality is described when the theme of the general assembly of the World Council of Churches states: *Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity*?

3 THE REALITY OF RECONCILIATION

As we have seen, for Paul and other New Testament authors the reality of the reconciliation God has established through Jesus Christ is experienced at first in the assurance that those who trust this message are really reconciled and live at peace with God. "Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 5,1). And this leads to the certainty that they will be saved even in the last judgement: "If while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life" (Rom 5,8).

But not many people – at least in the North and West of the globe – care about the outcome of the last judgement or whether they have peace with God. Therefore, it is so difficult to make them listen to the message of reconciliation. This may be different in the global South where there is a much greater openness to the Gospel. But is it rather not more a kind of health-
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and wealth-Gospel that attracts many than the assurance of reconciliation? As I am living in a part of the world where most people enjoy a good health system and have their decent level of living, I am very cautious to criticize this; people hope for what they need most. But nevertheless, the question remains: how important is the message of reconciliation still for people of today?

Is one of the reasons for this indifference that western exegetes and theologians, especially those who refer to the theology of the Reformation, restrict their exegesis and their preaching to the individual and do not take the ecclesial, social and cosmic dimension of the message of the New Testament into account? “The introspective view of the West” is often deplored, and not without reason. There is more at stake in the Gospel than the salvation of our individual soul! Therefore, in this article we will also ask about the importance of the message of reconciliation for the Church and the world.

But having read the text of the New Testament many times it is still my conviction: at the heart of the Gospel is the good news that through Jesus Christ we as an individual human being are invited to live in a new relationship with God, a relationship which heals all that is damaged in our life and puts it on a new and solid ground for the future. Therefore, the first paragraph in this chapter reads.

3.1 Reconciliation with God and one's own heart

Most modern people don't care about the outcome of the last judgement we are told. But often they have delegated the “last judgement” to the verdict of their peers or suffer under the condemnation by their own heart although there are many ways to try to drown out the voice of our conscience that accuses us.

The good news of the message of reconciliation is: whatever damnation I may suspect by others or hear from the depth of my soul God is not against me despite my shortcomings and failures. In a very pastoral way the First Letter of John says: “And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us, for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything” (1Jo 3,19).

And Paul assures: “Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8,1) and adds: “If God is for us, who is against us?” (Rom 8,31). The message of reconciliation and justification coincide in the assurance God says *yes* to us.

A song of the German Catholic priest Diethard Zils captures precisely the yearnings and needs that people have today to which the message of reconciliation may be the answer: *say yes to me when everyone says no to me, because I failed so often*. I think it is still a basic need of human beings to find a counterpart and partner who says *yes* to us and to our life despite all our shortcomings and mistakes. And the good news which is conveyed through the entire Bible and brought to the point in the doctrine of justification and reconciliation is: God says *yes* to you! Through life and death of Jesus Christ he has proven that this is true for you no matter how

many “*nos*” you may hear around you and even within you. This speaks to people in different situations in very specific and relevant way.

God says yes to you! That is true for the elderly, for the handicapped and for all who no longer function as before. He says *yes* to those who in our society have the impression that their life is of no use and worthless, who say: I don't belong anymore. The message of reconciliation tells them: God accepts and honors you, therefore you belong to *him*.

God says yes to you! That is true for all who failed and find themselves guilty. It is true for those who destroyed something in the life of others which cannot be repaired and for those in whose lives something is broken which cannot be healed. It is true for those who quarrel with God, because he seems to have destroyed the dream of their life. The message of reconciliation assures: God says *yes* to you and has taken upon himself the burden of your guilt and your suffering, every fault and failure of yourself or of others that poison your life.

God says yes to you! That is true for all the young people who often look with anxiety into the future and ask themselves: does my life matter at all? Will I amount to anything? It is true for those who struggle often desperately for recognition and appreciation in their peer group, not always by healthy methods. But the message of justification and reconciliation tells them: God says *yes* to you. He knows your weaknesses and focuses on your strengths. He wants to use the gifts he has put in your life to develop something that is helpful for others and gives joy and meaning to you and honors Him.

God says yes to you! That is also true for those who have accomplished and achieved something in their lives. Performance is not belittled by the message of the Gospel. The question is only: what do your achievements and your success and your money do to yourself? God says *yes* to you – not because you are so efficient, so successful, so rich or so attractive, but because you are his beloved child. Therefore, he rejoices with you when your competence, your skills and your success are the source of joy and gratitude in your life and that of others.

God says yes to you! That holds true even for those who are dying, those at the end of their life. No matter how they judge the balance of their life, be it positive or negative, decisive is: God says *yes* to you. You can trust Him; your life is secure in his love even when you die.

To sum up: the message we want to share with the people of today is: *because God says yes to us, we can live*. And we invite them to respond to God's *yes* with their own *yes*. That is the meaning of God's appeal through the ambassadors of Christ with their urgent plea: be reconciled to God! And to trust the peace which God has made with us will open up a whole new world to experience the power of his love even in our relationship with others.

3.2 Reconciliation of the churches

Having said this it is obvious that those who are entrusted with the message of reconciliation have to live as reconciled people not only in their relationship to God but also in their communion as the Church of God and the body of Christ. Although nowhere in the New

Testament the exhortation to preserve and to restore the unity of the Church is dealt with under the theme of reconciliation it is clear that given all the traumata and historical debt which were caused by the separation of churches reconciliation is one of the most important tasks of the churches in our time. Therefore, at first glance, as the theme of an Assembly of the World Council of Churches we would expect: Christ's love moves his Church to reconciliation and unity.

Christ's love moves the Church to unity! Not there is necessity to form larger and more powerful units or to close ranks against a hostile world, it is the love of Christ which urges and motivates, empowers and enables the churches to overcome their hostility, to forgive mutual faults and to find ways to a common witness. The foundation of the unity of the Church and its different "branches" is not an organizational scheme but their identity in Christ they all have in common.

And indeed: Christ's love has worked among the churches. The emergence of the ecumenical movement and the ecumenical "turn" of the Roman Catholic Church which took place during and after Vatican II are expressions of the work of the Holy Spirit and his pouring out of Christ's love. As an old man I still remember the situation before this development and despite all shortcomings and in view of all that is still not achieved, I am grateful for the partnership and cooperation between the churches which at least in my part of the world is now a self-evident fact.

But there still seems to be some work to do for Christ's love in the churches and their communion! And of course, in the context of our theme we may first think of a more thorough reconciliation between the churches. But as far as I see in many churches and Church families the first aid which would be needed is reconciliation and more unity within their own ranks. I don't think that there are many of them which aren't troubled by deep trenches and threatened by great dissent and even schism. There may be different issues: discussions around human sexuality in Protestant churches, the struggle about the inclusion of women into the ordained ministry in the Roman Catholic Church or the problem of autocephaly and canonical oversight in the Orthodox communion. But all are in need of reconciliation and greater unity.

These differences within the churches also have an impact on the relationships between the different denominations. Some of the classical controversial questions, especially between the churches of the Reformation and the Roman Catholic Church seemed to be resolved by numerous and intense dialogues. The most important surely is the *Joint declaration on the doctrine of justification* from the year 1999 which originally was negotiated and signed by the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation followed by the World Methodist Council (2006), the World Communion of Reformed Churches and the Anglican Communion (2017). The importance of this document lies in its double achievement. Through the method of a "differentiated consensus" it reached an agreement on the "basic truths" about a doctrine which was highly controversial since the times of the reformation, and this without denying the

different emphasis in some details which are important for the different traditions. And it is – to my knowledge – the only result of an ecumenical dialogue which was officially received and accepted by the decision-making bodies of its sponsoring churches.

But it is now more than twenty years since the *Joint declaration on the doctrine of justification* has been signed and many are asking: did it change anything in the relation of the churches that signed the agreement? One should have expected that there would be much greater joint efforts on different levels to promote the message of God's justifying and reconciling love in Jesus Christ and its liberating meaning for people of today. But not much happened. Was this agreement really more than a cleaning up of the rubble of past controversies? This situation may be also a sign of the fact that the questions behind the message and the doctrine of justification seem no longer to be the questions that concern people of today. They seem to have different worries. But would it not have been worth the joint effort to try to translate the meaning of this doctrine for today's people as was promised at the end of the *Joint declaration on the doctrine of justification*?

But whereas still many others of the old controversies hinder a full union of churches there are new controversial issues which deepen again the trenches separating them – some of them concerning the same questions that threaten to split the denominations themselves: many of them relate more to ethical problems as the debate on sexual orientation, preimplantation genetic diagnosis (PGD), the appropriate answer to climate change or to the war in Ukraine. How will Christ's love move the churches to reconciliation and unity given all these new and old divisive issues?

Especially Protestant churches and theologians are promoting the method of a "reconciled diversity" as the ideal way to unity, claiming that already in Galatians 2,1-10 this was the way the apostles chose and pointing to The Concord of Leuenberg as a good recent example. Roman Catholic and Orthodox theologians are skeptical towards these propositions. Is "reconciled diversity" not only an oxymoron, a wooden iron? Do we not need visible unity? Is the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe an attractive example for the unity we seek? On the other hand, we could ask whether to a certain extent the unity of the Roman Catholic Church represents not also a kind of reconciled diversity held together by the loyalty to the pope as the head of the Church and a common system of episcopal leadership.

That is the reason why many theologians speak about the necessity of a "*reconciliation of ministries*". In the so called Nairobi Report of the dialogue between the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the World Methodist Council *Towards a statement on the Church* (1986) the Roman Catholic side insists that "*reconciliation with the see of Rome is a necessary step towards the restoration of Christian unity*" (57) and their partners indicate, that under certain circumstances Methodists may acknowledge that a "universal primacy might well serve as a focus of and ministry for the unity of the whole Church." (58).

But this was not taken up again in the dialogue and I must confess that I do not really understand what *reconciliation* in this context means. Is it more than a euphemism for the necessity to accept the primacy of the bishop of Rome and to submit oneself to his authority? Therefore, the question remains: is this really the only way to make unity visible and reconciliation real? Can we not find other expressions of our communion in our sharing in the presence of Christ and his love and in a common message and ministry? Is “visible” or “organic” unity only achievable by an organizational union? And given the experience we have in the Protestant family with Church unions the question arises: why are United Churches often less “attractive” than those who cultivate their uniqueness? Are they not clear enough with their message? Can “reconciliation” mean the smoothing down of the profile of the different expressions of our faith? How can we avoid such unwelcome “side effects”?

3.3 Reconciliation for the world

Having spoken about the need of our personal reconciliation with God and of a reconciliation within and between churches we did not forget that the real focus of the theme of the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Karlsruhe is the reconciliation of the world: *Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity*. And given the present situation in the world this is a very bold and audacious statement. The apparent failure of so many efforts of peacemaking, not only in the actual conflict in Ukraine, gives moreover the impression that Christ's love is as powerless as ever.

Sometimes it seems to me that we are in a similar situation as after the outbreak of World War I. Many had thought that with the spread of Christianity and European civilization the Kingdom of God would come step by step. But then the civilized Christian nations waged a brutal war against one another invoking God and his support exclusively for their own cause. At the beginning of the 21st century not many would have openly spoken about an earthly manifestation of the kingdom of God. But there was a widespread feeling that in the age of global economy and mutual dependence on a functioning world trade there is no other option than universal peace. The terrorist attack on the Towers of the World Trade Center in New York on 9/11/2001 was a first blow to this optimistic world view. The invasion of the Russian Federation of the Ukraine on 2/24/2022, after many attempts to solve the conflict on the level of diplomacy has changed the hope of many that peace without weapons is possible.

For us as Christian people this is especially sad and disheartening for a double reason: it turned out again that a large and honorable member church of the World Council of Churches took sides for the aggressor and proclaimed a holy war against the enemies although they belong to its own Church family. Not only Christ's command to love one's enemy is violated but also the love of brothers and sisters of the own Church. But even more frustrating and disturbing is the fact that the hope which was nourished by some successful efforts to create

peace and reconciliation by ways which were inspired by the love of Christ seems to be confounded and debunked.

There were signs which justified such hopes. Although the work of *The South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission* which was established 1996, after the end of apartheid, may not be assessed by all as fully successful it was nevertheless a very important tool for a peaceful transition into a democratic system in the country. And this enterprise was surely inspired by a Christian understanding of forgiveness and reconciliation which does not gloss over the evil that happened but instead finds ways to name guilt and to overcome it.

The disappointment affects especially the churches in Germany and their policy of reconciliation. The so called *Ost Denkschrift* (Statement on the Eastern Territories) of the Evangelical Church in Germany from 1965 with the title *The plight of refugees and the relationship of the German people to their Eastern neighbors* was first seen as breach of a taboo in German post-war politics. One of its basic and indisputable principles was not to disclaim the right to exist as country within the boundaries prior to World War II. But the Church suggested from a Christian base to seek real reconciliation with old enemies, even by renunciation of revisionist claims of historical German territories in the East. And after some time of heated discussion this turned out to become the initiation of a breakthrough for a new politic of reconciliation with our neighbors in the East.

To create peace without (or at least with as little as possible) weapons was an important principle of German politics, very much influenced by the work of Christian peace activists and the voice of the churches. That it is now widely accused of complicity with the Russian aggression is a deep disappointment for many upright and dedicated champions of reconciliation and peace.

But amid our disappointment and our sorrows we are told by the theme of the assembly: *Christ's love moves the world to reconciliation and unity*. After all we have said it should be clear that this statement does not mean (and surely was not meant to mean) that *our* ministry of reconciliation is not necessary because Christ in his love is doing the job.

CONCLUSION

The world, and the Church and every human being is still in need of the message of reconciliation entreating people to accept God's extended hand of peace and to trust in the *yes* he speaks to us through Jesus Christ.

Christ's love will continue to motivate and enable us to love one another and not to cease with our efforts to reconcile and bring together churches in their common mission to witness to this love and to share it with as many people as possible.

And this gives us the motivation and the ability not to get tired in our labor of reconciling and peace making among people and nations but also with the whole creation, despite of all our shortcomings and frustrations.

The ministry of reconciliation

I can't help quoting in this context the famous saying attributed to Teresa of Avila: "Christ has no hands but our hands to do His work today; He has no feet but our feet to lead men in the way of peace and freedom". Christ's love moves and works through those in whose hearts this love was poured out and became the center and motor of their lives (Rom 5,5).

But having said this I pause and ask myself whether this is the whole truth. The exact wording of the theme of the assembly that it is *Christ's love* which *moves the world* may well remind us: we are not alone with our efforts, and our ability and power are not the only factor for the success of our struggle for reconciliation and unity. All our troubles are grounded in what God has done and is doing in Jesus Christ. This is a reality in the world beyond all our efforts and accomplishments. Against all odds and contrary to all appearances the love of Christ works in this world even through people we wouldn't have thought of and in situations we wouldn't expect it. There will always be signs, howsoever small or weak, that love is stronger than hatred, peace is better than war, and the desire for freedom and unity will last longer as the power of oppression and discrimination. Christ's love which is marked by the experience of crucifixion and resurrection, of defeat and victory, appears in different manifestations! Although it is not easy to bank on this message in these days it may help us not to give up hope but to trust that God still is at work through Christ's love. ✨

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