

# THE RELEVANCE OF EPHESIANS 4:3 TO THE UNIFICATION OF THE REC AND WARC

Dr Arnau van Wyngaard<sup>1</sup>

*Two men meet each other for the first time. After some time, the one man asks the other: "What did you do before you got married?" To which the second man replies: "Whatever I wanted to!"*

## Introduction:

"Unification" is a term that often arouses mixed feelings amongst Christians. On the one hand most Christians agree in principle that there should be unity within and amongst churches, but on the other hand, when it comes to the practical implementation of the unification process, many Christians refuse to be part of this. The main reason could probably be attributed to fear of the unknown. In the process of unification, something will have to be sacrificed by all parties involved. No longer will they be able to do whatever they want to do.

When I was asked to write about my impressions of the *Reformed Ecumenical Council* (REC) meeting held in Indonesia in 2000, where the *Swaziland Reformed Church* had at that time been approved as the latest (and smallest) member of the council, I expressed my feelings in the words taught to us by our geography teacher in primary school: *Giant Italy kicks little Sicily into the sea* (Van Wyngaard 2000:25). At that time I felt that this sentence expressed the fear that I had had before the meeting that we, as the smallest member church of the REC, would eventually just disappear amongst the larger churches. I'm glad to say that the love and concern shown by the larger member churches since that assembly, has taken my fear away.

The process taking place at present whereby the REC and the *World Alliance of Reformed Churches* (WARC) intend to form a new organisation, the *World Communion of Reformed Churches*, may evoke the same type of emotions, especially from members churches of the smaller REC, and probably with good reason. According to WARC's website, it has 214 member churches from 107 countries, representing more than 75 million Christians. Compared to this, the REC has only 39 member churches in 25 countries, representing approximately 12 million Christians. It is therefore not unrealistic to believe that many of the member churches belonging to the REC may feel threatened by the planned unification of the two organisations. History has taught us, through cases such as the eventual integration in 1961 of the *International Missionary Council* (IMC) and the *World Council of Churches* (WCC) that mere conviction about the theological basis of unification is seldom enough to eliminate all fear of going through with the process (World Council of Churches, [s.a.]; Saayman, W A 1984:17).

## Ephesians 4:1-3:

I am of the opinion that Ephesians 4:1-3 can do much to create a climate in which these two organisations can unite, without fear that the process will take place at the cost of either one of the former independent organisations.

There seems to be consensus that Ephesians 4:1 introduces a second major part in the letter to the Ephesians. The first three chapters consist mainly of praise to God for including the heathens in His plan of salvation, while the last three chapters are more exhortative in nature to encourage the readers to live according to their Christian faith (Roberts 1984:140; Hendriksen 1976:63). However, the second part of the letter does not stand on its own. 4:1 starts with the words: "I urge you, therefore..." (Greek: *parakalo ōun*) which indicates that the following verses are to be read as the logical consequence of the good news

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<sup>1</sup> Arnau van Wyngaard is the Secretary of the *Swaziland Reformed Church* and has been a missionary in Swaziland since 1985. He is also the project manager for *Shiselweni Reformed Church Home-Based Care*, a faith-based organization focussing on helping people living with HIV and AIDS in the southern region of Swaziland.

which is given to us in the first three chapters of the epistle (Louw 1996:162). This may not seem to be important, but this one word, “therefore”, makes the difference between a moralistic command to be humble and a loving call, taking into account all that God had done for us, to live humbly.

To “live a life worthy of the calling you have received” (Ephesians 4:1) is a direct result of having heard “the gospel of your salvation” (1:13) and personally experiencing God’s “mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms” (1:19-20). The fact that there had been a break between the old life, set on “gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts” (2:3) and the new life “created in Christ Jesus to do good works” (2:10), can have no other logical result than to live according to God’s will (Louw 1996:162).

This “life worthy of the calling you have received” is then further explained in 4:2: “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.”

“Humility” (Greek: *tapeinofrosune*), according to Louw & Nida (1988:748) means to be “without arrogance”. Louw (1996:165) further explains the meaning of “humility” by looking at its opposite, found in Romans 12:16: “Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.” Pride, conceit and arrogance describe an attitude whereby people are so totally focussed on those things which will be to their own benefit, that it becomes virtually impossible for them to focus on the needs of others.

“Gentleness” (Greek: *prautes*) is described by Louw & Nida (749) as “gentleness of attitude and behavior, in contrast with harshness in one’s dealings with others.” As with the previous word, Louw (1996:165) once again explains the word by referring to its opposite, “strife”, as found in James 3:13-14: “Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility (Greek: *prautes* - AvW) that comes from wisdom. But if you harbour bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth.” Gentleness, thus, stands in total contrast to bitter envy, selfish ambition and strife.

“Patience” or “longsuffering” as the *Authorised Version* translates the Greek *makrothumia*, is defined by Louw & Nida (307) as “a state of emotional calm in the face of provocation or misfortune and without complaint or irritation”. This is a word which is often used in the Bible to describe one of the characteristics of God, as in 2 Peter 3:9: “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient (*makrothumei*) with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” Furthermore, this is also one of the words used by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:4 to describe the essence of love.

Hendriksen (1976:184) explains this as “true and tender affection toward the brother, the neighbor, and even the enemy, the noble endeavor to benefit him and never to harm him in any way.” Wessels (1990:71) quotes M Barth who considered these virtues “peculiarly un-Greek”. Both humility and gentleness had a fairly negative meaning in pre-Christian and later Greek documents, referring to a lack of self-respect. According to Barth the background of Paul’s exhortation in verse should rather be found in the Hebrew word, *anah* which have meanings such as “to humble oneself” or “to be afflicted by God or another human being”. The attitude of such a person is clearly illustrated in Zechariah 10:2: “... they were troubled, because there was no shepherd” (Koehler & Baumgartner 1958:718). “In the Bible a gentle or meek person has no one else to turn to except God or a faithful king” (Wessels 1990:71).

After having urged his readers to be humble, gentle and patient, Paul then continues with Ephesians 4:3: “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”

The Greek word, *henótes*, used only in Ephesians 4:3 and 4:13, has the meaning of “a state of oneness” (Louw & Nida 1988:748) and they suggest that 4:13, which reads in the NIV: “...until we all reach unity

in the faith” should be translated with the words: “...we believe just as though we were all one person”, in other words, being in total harmony with each other.

This unity is a gift from the Holy Spirit and is not something that people can create (Naudé 1997:169-170; Wessels 1990:71). The task of the Christians is merely to *maintain* this unity which was created by the Spirit.

In the first three chapters of the epistle to the Ephesians, Paul had made a strong point that those who had been far away (the heathens) and those who had been close (the Jews) were united with each other through the blood of Christ. By destroying the dividing wall of hostility, God had reconciled these former enemies, thus making the two groups one and enabling those who had been heathens to become heirs of Jesus Christ together with the Jews (2:11-18; 3:6). Thus the body of Christ consisted of Christians from a heathen background, as well as Christians from a Jewish background. But in Christ they were united and they had become one. And it is this unity which the believers are called to maintain as they learn to accept each other through a humble, gentle and patient attitude.

### **Applying Ephesians 4:3 to the unification process:**

The question remains how this passage can help ease the unification process between Christian groups, be it different churches or, as in this case, the REC and WARC. In the Greek, Ephesians 4:1-3 is one sentence. The readers are urged to live a life worthy of their calling, by living with humility, gentleness and patience, doing their best to maintain the unity created by the Spirit. Or put in another way, the virtues necessary in order to maintain the unity effectively are those found in verse 2: humility, gentleness and patience (Wessels 1990:71).

On 26 May 2006, Nico Smith published a letter in *Die Kerkbode*, official newspaper of the *Dutch Reformed Church* in South Africa. The topic under discussion was the lack of enthusiasm amongst churches within the family of Dutch Reformed Churches to unite. He writes (my translation - AvW):

Taking everything into account, I have no other option than to believe that the family of Dutch Reformed Churches is not serious about uniting. This, as far as I am concerned, is true for all four of these churches. There are too many certainties, with the result that there is too much arrogance present in all of these churches. I am still of the opinion that certainties are the biggest enemy of humanity. It has been the certainties of peoples and nations and their leaders which drove them to war. And it's the certainties and consequential arrogance of world religions which are ravaging the world with acts of terrorism.

Arrogance, as we have seen, is in total contrast to an attitude of humility. And as Nico Smith argues, this attitude is probably the number one reason why unification within the family of Dutch Reformed Churches cannot be accomplished. Arrogance may well be the main reason why many other attempts of churches or church organisations to unite, have failed in the past.

### **Conclusion:**

Unification calls for a special attitude if it is to be successful. The unification of the REC and WARC has already been approved and will be accomplished once the formalities have been taken care of in 2010. But that does not necessarily mean that all member churches belonging to these organisations will have a feeling of “oneness” with each other. This can only happen if a new (S)pirit is revealed in all those who are part of the World Communion of Reformed Churches - a spirit of humility, gentleness and patience. No longer will the REC or WARC be able to do whatever they want to do. With humility, gentleness and patience they will need to bear with each other in love.

It is only when we truly live according to the virtues in Ephesians 4:2, that we are able to unite without fear, knowing that each will be focussing, not on their own needs and preferences, but on each other's needs. And this unification may then well be experienced as a marriage made in heaven.

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