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Bible Study

Bishop Dr. Dr. h.c. Wolfgang Huber

President of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany

I

A few weeks ago I received a letter (see attachment) with an impressive recollection from the year 1939. The person writing the letter recalled the German-speaking Protestant congregation in Cambridge in the 1930s. He wrote: "The congregation was mainly composed of people who for reasons of politics or race had had to leave Germany. They were holding their services in the Round Church in the city centre at the invitation of the Church of England. In the year 1939 arrangements had been made as usual for a united ecumenical service. Shortly afterwards, Germany invaded Poland and England declared war against us. Our pastor phoned his English friend and colleague to say that because of these terrible events the arrangements for the united service should be cancelled. The reply was, 'Yes, it is indeed terrible, but, surely there can be no better reason for us to pray together.' So, shortly after the beginning of hostilities between England and Germany, the two congregations of the warring nations prayed together."

Similarly, in the course of the history of the Conference of European Churches, there have been hostility, violent conflict and war between European neighbours. The time when CEC came into being fifty years ago was a time marked by heightened confrontation between East and West. The cold war was an occasion when CEC prayed across frontiers. Since then a central concern has been the determination to maintain links and dialogue between the churches across frontiers and to encourage reconciliation. The situation of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants has led CEC to defend their rights, to encourage the churches to defend human rights and to coordinate joint aid. Theological dialogue and exchange between different traditions have been further important tasks. There have been many other issues that have taken us across frontiers to share together in prayer and to provide aid.

Today CEC has reached a point at which it must find new opportunities to which to devote its energies. Amid the multiplicity of issues and activities it must again find the central ecumenical idea for Europe and set out in common ecumenical action. In a Europe that is seeking its way ahead, we desire to give a common witness to God's mercy and peace. That is our ecumenical task. And its basis is the core of the Gospel. In our ecumenical endeavours it



is our desire to demonstrate that this is what we concentrate on. That is what we concentrate on, but our horizons are wide – that, as I see it, is the great task confronting this Assembly.

As it does this, the Assembly needs to be aware that it has this dual role. The reconciled diversity of the Christian churches of Europe can be a significant example for the task confronting European society as a whole: that is, to shape our diversity on the foundation of common values and beliefs. At the same time, however, CEC also has the task to speak with the united voice of the churches to the situation in Europe. Today we need to make it clear that the contribution of the Christian faith to European society is indispensable. To maintain diversity and to speak with a united voice – that is the dual task facing CEC today with particular urgency.

At the beginning of the Second World War, as described in the letter I quoted from, the people of England in that Europe going up in flames threatening to destroy their fellowship in the faith, concentrated on the core of their faith so that Christians could stand by one another. Following their example, I should like this morning to reflect with you on the basis of our ecumenical fellowship. Only with that as our starting point will we be able to tackle the tasks before us. For that, I turn now to a passage in the New Testament that is for me a magna charta for all our ecumenical work.

II

In Ephesians chapter 4, verses 3-6 we read:

Making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.
There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. (NRSV)

According to many biblical scholars, the person addressing us in this passage is someone who feels committed to speak with the authority of the apostle Paul. As Paul's successor, aware that he thinks like Paul, he addresses the congregation in Ephesus. He has the same approach as Paul, addresses his congregation, and reminds them of the message of the great apostle to the gentiles. He belongs to the next generation, and with his own perspective he develops the apostle Paul's message further and makes it contemporary.

A basic theme of his letter is the united nature of the Christian community. He speaks of the unity of those who confess Christ, quite apart from whether they were previously reckoned to be Jews or gentiles. At the centre of the letter there is a matter that had already troubled Paul and which, one generation later, was still a pressing and explosive issue.

It is a clearly structured letter and it falls into two parts. In the first part, and particularly in chapter 2, the author describes the unity of the congregation, living under the same new roof of their faith in Christ as promise and message of salvation. The core sentence is the message for gentiles in Ephesians 2: 19: "You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow-citizens



with God's people and members of God's household." From the standpoint of those who were committed to the old covenant and had long belonged to God's chosen people, he opens the door in the name of God and declares that Christians from among the gentiles are no longer simply guests. Instead, he unreservedly declares that they are full members of God's people and that salvation is theirs.

That was because Christ had broken down the wall that had separated the two groups from one another. The categories of 'uncircumcised' and 'circumcised' counted no longer. Christ had brought reconciliation and peace between people who had confronted one another so irreconcilably. And it would be to scorn Christ, if they were to think again in terms of dividing walls.

This magnificent passage is unhesitating, does not weigh up the difficulties that could ensue, and is not afraid that the house might prove too small. There is enough room in God's house. The great invitation in Ephesians is to everyone to be members of the household.

Together with the Sermon on the Mount this passage has to the present day been an inspiration for the peace witness of the Christian churches. I myself remember exactly when this powerful inspiration from the letter to the Ephesians first came home to me. It was at that time when Europe was divided not only by frontiers but also by barbed wire, with the Berlin wall as its most massive section. That was the background to the German Protestant Kirchentag in Hanover in 1967 with the theme "Christ is our peace". The great philosopher, Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker told us that peace is the body of truth and truth is the soul of peace. The core of that insight was that, because of the division of the continent of Europe, we must hold on to the fact that we belong together. We hardly dared then to hope that the division of our continent could be ended in our lifetime. But that is exactly what happened a bit more than twenty years later – exactly twenty years ago this year. Christ is our peace. With deep gratitude and emotion we can confess: Yes, the iron curtain was torn down, the wall demolished, the division of our continent ended. Together we can declare our faith and carry out our task of reconciliation and testify to the peace of Christ that is given to us.

With chapter 4, to which we turn this morning, there begins the moral, exhortatory section of the letter. So that the project of the peace of Christ has a future, so that the work of salvation does not come to nothing because of the sloth of those who are called to reconcile, there follows from this chapter onwards encouragement and indications as to how this work can succeed. This section is full of the author's passionate commendation of fellowship and openness to one another.

The apostle addresses the Christians in Ephesus as people who have a calling. You are called, you are called to go out. You are not like people who sit at home, content with themselves, gazing at the floor, and only accepting as valid what has always been familiar and what they have been taught. You are called and chosen. This calling is described in a quite distinctive way. Unity in the Spirit is to be maintained by the bond of peace. What is being described is not a unity achieved by compulsion, but through mutual care. A way of belonging together is presented to us that grows out of diversity and embraces the whole of life. Our letter uses the



word "peace" to describe it, peace that includes the whole fullness of life, life as it is meant to be, for which the Old Testament uses the word "shalom".

This fullness is expressed in the letter in an unforgettable threefold way: one body, one Spirit, one hope. In that threefold way it indicates the distinctive features of any Christian community. As a congregation, you are one body. One Spirit shapes you. And you have one hope.

By means of this threefold description, the author makes a link with the image, already used by Paul, of the congregation as the body of Christ. It was a familiar image. You thought of the foot, which, because it had nothing in common with the hand, considered that it did not belong to it; or of the ear, that spontaneously compared itself with the eye, and had doubts whether it then had anything in common with it (1 Cor. 12: 15-16). This familiar pictorial language is here highly intensified: one body, one Spirit, one hope. Immediately hearers and readers would get the point: it is that the Christian community and its visible form in the world belong inseparably to one another, that God's Spirit creates fellowship between Christians in the midst of their everyday problems, and that they have the high calling to hope. The certainty that they formed one body, the confidence that they were guided by God's Spirit, and the shared hope that sees beyond the here and now – those are the characteristic features of every Christian church.

Confident certainty, confident trust and confident hope are there expressed. Even more important is the question: on what are they based? That question is given an answer that is also threefold: one Lord, one faith, one baptism. The first threefold formulation of body, Spirit and hope was an answer to the question 'Who are we?' Now the second threefold formulation provides an answer to the question 'Where do we come from?'

At the very beginning there is the basic confession of the early Christians: 'Jesus Christ is Lord' (Phil. 2: 11; 1 Cor. 12: 3; Rom. 10: 9). You can see here an allusion to some arguments, even in the earliest Christian community, over who was their chief, for example, Apollos, Cephas or Paul (1 Cor. 1: 12). 'How can that be? Is Christ divided?' Paul had already pointedly asked the Corinthians. The letter to the Ephesians repeats it in the same sense. One Lord. It is your calling to confess that. The one Lord cannot be divided. Faith in him holds them together and does not divide them.

The idea of the one faith also inseparably belongs here. Whenever the New Testament speaks of faith, it is not only an inner state of mind, nor one possible opinion among others. Faith means trust, becoming involved there where the power of God's goodness is at work. becoming receptive to the salvation that encounters us in Jesus Christ. 'One faith' does not mean a common creed or doctrinal tradition. Rather, it describes a way of living and a relationship to reality as a whole that is shaped by salvation in Christ.

Belonging to those who confess Christ as Lord and live in the realm of the power of God's goodness finds its expression in baptism. Hence the third element: one baptism. Baptism is the ecumenical sacrament par excellence. Nowadays we are increasingly aware of that. In our



churches in Germany there is a movement under way to make us more aware of this ecumenical nature of baptism. I see in that one of the most promising ecumenical developments. In Germany in 2007 we expressed this in the form of an ecumenical agreement on the mutual recognition of baptism. In this important ecumenical document we have made direct reference to this passage in Ephesians 4. It is also highly probable that the wording used here in Ephesians has its origin in a baptismal liturgy of the early church. If so, that would be an even more definite indication of the ecumenical significance of baptism.

Just as baptism marks the initiation of our Christian life, just as faith is the foundation for living out our Christian life, just as our one Lord certainly leads us, so it is also with our ecumenical fellowship. It is not ours to do what we like with. It is not ours to shape according to our liking. It is not a matter of a decision that we can comply with or ignore. It is also not a matter of a goal that we can strive towards with greater, or lesser, enthusiasm. The belonging of Christians to one another and of the church is rather something that is given to us with that very foundation of our faith: one Lord, one faith, one baptism.

It is not we who bring ecumenism into being: it is a gift. And the question addressed to us is, rather, whether we rise to this previously given gift, or whether we fall short of it. We are challenged as to whether we give expression to this basis in the organisation of our church fellowship, whether we let ourselves be guided in a recognizable way by the one Spirit of God, whether we in our day are witnesses to the one hope. The one Lord also urges us to be one body. The one faith commits us to be guided by the one Spirit. The one baptism makes us witnesses to the one hope.

What we have here is a short hymn, but, although short, it is a sublime hymn to unity, quite comparable to the sublime hymn to love in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. This sublime hymn to unity flows into praise of the one God and Father. The fellowship of the church, in its witness, its service and its hope, has as its foundation its confession of Christ, its common faith and its one baptism. It is this fellowship that is the basis of our praise of the one God, who is over all, and through all, and in all.

With this praise of God the Letter to the Ephesians places our Christian life in the widest setting conceivable. It portrays an ecumenism of praise and thanksgiving to God. It does not begin with what is required of us ecumenically. Rather, it reminds us of what is entrusted to us ecumenically. It says first of all what we **are** ecumenically before it demands what we should **become** ecumenically. We here encounter in a magnificent and impressive way an ecumenism in the indicative tense. By recalling what is entrusted to us in common, it makes clear our calling to be the body of Christ together.

The choice of this image reminds us that belonging to one another ecumenically does not imply uniformity. Ephesians does not link unity to any uniform structure of relationships of ministry or structure, nor to any universal uniformity of the liturgy. Its ecumenical litmus test is whether different people are being guided by the same Spirit and are testifying to the same hope. And the sure foundation for that is that they are bound together by the same baptism, hold to the same faith and confess the one Lord, the crucified and risen Christ.



III

Although, on first hearing this short passage, we might think that so much emphasis is being placed on unity that there is no room for diversity, on closer inspection we can see that that is not the case. The sevenfold unity statement in Ephesians describes rather a dynamic unity in which diversity definitely has its place. What we have here is not an ecumenism imposed from above, in which a conclusion is drawn from the unity of God that the church should be uniform. What we have here is an ecumenism from below that makes room for diversity, but, as it does so, has confidence in the strength of its unity. On the basis of thankfulness for the given unity of our confession of Christ, we seek ways to bring diverse gifts together into common witness to this unity.

That is a dynamic understanding of unity, and we have also seen its political equivalent in the recent history of Europe. Twenty years after the peaceful changes in Europe, we can thankfully say that a unity in diversity has been given us for which we had long hardly dared to hope. To shape it is the great political task ahead of us in Europe. As churches we wish to make our contribution to it.

The ecumenical community which we wish to shape is not a rigid template but a vital process. It is a road, along which we shall come again and again to significant junctions and dividing of the ways, where we shall need to decide what direction we should take. As I see it, we stand today at such a junction.

Many European churches in these years are engaged in discovering anew their place in society. In face of the radical social changes through which we have passed and which is by no means at an end, they are discovering their role anew and are attempting to find an appropriate form for their witness. In the Evangelical Church in Germany we are taking our direction for this from a policy document of 2006 entitled "Kirche der Freiheit" (Church of Freedom). It is our aim to feed the Reformation heritage into the common witness of the churches. We wish to emphasize the particular insight of faith entrusted to us so that it can reach out to those who have become unfamiliar with the confession of one Lord, one faith, one baptism. We are trying to link the missionary task before us in today's Europe with our ecumenical obligation, in which we are involved as churches with one another.

Today we have to find a fresh balance between the common message entrusted to us and the many possibilities of expressing it in the life of our churches. That task is not always greeted with enthusiasm. Many have settled down into their particular niche, consider their own room possibly as the real world, and thus have lost sight of the whole house. They change Christian faith into a particular lifestyle that can be cultivated and preserved only in a small circle of the likeminded. In their self-contained world they are at the same time disappointed that only a few are hearing their message. And they then ask whether Christian belief has any relevance for developments in European society. However, as Christians, it is our conviction that our understanding of humankind as made in the image of God, our confidence in the



power of forgiveness and reconciliation, and our hope for a life of justice and of peace can be a powerful force for the future of Europe. To that end, we need to combine in a fresh way the diversity of our traditions and the common elements of our faith.

Out of this combination of diversity and what we have in common, a fresh ecumenical vision for Europe can emerge. Our response in our diversity to the unity that is given us can become the leitmotif of the ecumenical movement in Europe. Diversity and unity, breadth and concentration can thus be combined anew. The breadth of issues and networks must not be lost, when we reflect on our common witness. Our different traditions must not lose their distinctive hues, when we together make visible the one foundation on which we stand: one Lord, one faith, one baptism.

The unity of the church does not need to be reinvented. It is the foundation on which we stand. This change of perspective is the decisive step for the new direction necessary for the ecumenical movement today. It will help us to see that our diversity is not a threat to our unity but an expression of it.

Ecumenical cooperation presupposes above all that we constantly return to the common sources of our faith. For it is out of them that our faith constantly gains fresh strength to renew our common witness.

Ecumenical cooperation is further demonstrated in the way in which ecumenical partners are bound to one another in their mutual respect for their respective ecclesiologies. Just as ecumenical cooperation rests on participants being faithful to their own church, so it also rests on their having this mutual respect.

Finally, ecumenical cooperation is expressed in the way in which common tasks are also undertaken together. Our ecumenical fellowship must be maintained in our response to the great crises and challenges of our time. The irresponsible actions that have led to the present economic crisis, the danger of disastrous climate change still hanging over us, and the continuing unrest in many parts of the world – all these are challenging us to engage in common witness.

Yet, in all this, our ecumenical cooperation rests on our joy in this precious treasure of the Church of Jesus Christ, which is a sacred trust to us all. Our rejoicing in this precious shared treasure is the theme of the sublime hymn of unity that can guide us in all our endeavours. It is a joy in which we all can share:

One body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.



Anlage:

Sehr geehrter Herr Bischof Huber! Gestern hatte ich kurz Gelegenheit, mit Ihnen im Anschluss an die Veranstaltung in Altenberg ein paar Worte zu wechseln. Zunächst meinen herzlichen Glückwunsch zu dieser im besten Sinne erbaulichen Veranstaltung und Ihrer Moderation. Es ist immer erfrischend, wenn Persönlichkeiten so unterschiedlichen Charakters, wie Ihre Gäste, trotz recht komplett anderer Lebensläufe und Ansichten so respektvoll miteinander umgehen können. Ähnliches habe ich in Neuhardenberg bei Veranstaltungen des Veters meiner Frau, Bernd Kauffmann, erlebt.

Ich hatte Ihnen kurz gesagt, dass ich Ihren Vorgänger, Herrn Kock, aus seiner Zeit als Stadtsuperintendent in Köln kenne, als ich mal Vorsitzender des Finanzausschusses des Stadtkirchenverbandes war. Aus meiner Zeit in Cambridge, U.K. ist vielleicht für Sie eine Geschichte von Interesse, die ich als Schatzmeister der "German Speaking Lutheran Church of the United Kingdom" erfuhr. (Nicht, dass ich mich als Ingenieur und Kaufmann in solche Aufgaben gedrängt hatte, aber ich kann schlecht NEIN sagen, wenn ich um Hilfe gebeten werde)

Die Deutsche Gemeinde in Cambridge bestand ab 1933 im Wesentlichen aus Menschen, die aus politischen oder rassischen Gründen Deutschland verlassen mussten, bekanntestes Mitglied war Lise Meitner. Man hielt Gottesdienst in der Round Church im Stadtzentrum als Gast bei der Church of England. Die beiden Pfarrer waren herzlich befreundet und öfter wurde ein gemeinsamer Gottesdienst gefeiert. So hatte man auch wieder einen Service verabredet. Kurz darauf hat Deutschland dann Polen überfallen und England erklärte uns den Krieg. Unser Pfarrer rief seinen Englischen Freund und Kollegen an und sagte, dass wohl wegen dieses entsetzlichen Geschehens aus der gemeinsamen Veranstaltung nichts werden könne. Die Antwort war: Es ist zwar furchtbar, aber gibt es einen besseren Grund für gemeinsame Gebete? So haben bald nach Kriegsbeginn England - Deutschland die beiden Gemeinden der verfeindeten Nationen zusammen gebetet. Die Deutschen galten - unabhängig von den Gründen, weshalb sie Ihr Land verlassen mussten - als Feinde und wurden auch bald interniert (wenn auch, wie mir gute Bekannte berichteten, in sehr zivilisierter Form). Können Sie sich ein anderes Land vorstellen, in dem so etwas möglich gewesen wäre? Vielleicht noch in Skandinavien, bestimmt nicht in einem romanischen Land Europas.

Es gäbe noch viel über meine Zeit in England zu berichten, aber ich will Ihre Zeit nicht über Gebühr strapazieren. Ihnen persönlich und für Ihre Arbeit darf ich Glück und Segen wünschen und bin mit herzlichen Grüßen, Ihr Peter Starke