



**Mennonite  
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**Congreso  
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**Conférence  
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## Gathered into One

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### **Part II “Unity of the Spirit – the creation of body and temple”**

In the first presentation, we focused on the emphasis Ephesians places on unity for our understanding of God’s purposes, of Christ’s mission, and of the church as his body, the “new human.” We spoke of God the Father gathering “all things” in and through the Son, Jesus Christ, as in Ephesians 1:10.

It is often noticed that Ephesians 2:11-22, the great peace text we looked at most closely, is itself very Trinitarian. Listen to verse 18: “for through *him* [Christ] both [Jews and Gentiles] have access in one *Spirit* to the *Father*.” Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The “one” Spirit takes all those whom the Son has brought together by breaking down walls and giving his life – strangers and enemies, Jews and Gentiles, insiders and outsiders, family and strangers, friends and enemies, near and far – into the presence of their Father, the Creator who is “father of every family in heaven and earth” (3:14). Every imaginable dimension of God is engaged in this great peace work of reconciliation and new creation.

We were reminded in Kisumu a few days ago of “the Holy Spirit transforming us,” the MWC *Renewal 2027* theme for 2018. I wish now to continue that theme by making the Spirit the focal point of our discussion of unity and diversity, again drawing on Ephesians 2:11-22, and in a more limited way on 4:3.

## ***Spirit (ruach/pneuma) – energy, breath, wind***

“Spirit” is one of our slipperiest words. It turns out that there may be a good reason for this. The Hebrew word for Spirit is “*ruach*”; the Greek is “*pneuma*.” I’ll use the Hebrew and Greek terms for reasons that will become quite obvious.

In some cases, *ruach/pneuma* is best understood as invisible, powerful energy – the energy at work in creation. Think of Genesis 1:2, where the *ruach* of God hovers over the as-yet-unformed creation. Or we might think of it more generally as God’s energy making things happen. We remember Jesus’ “sermon” in the synagogue of Nazareth in Luke 4, where he takes the words of Isaiah 61 and applies them to himself:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.” (18-19)

Today we might think of *ruach/pneuma* as electricity: you can’t see it, but as power or energy, it makes things happen. Article 5 of *Shared Convictions* speaks thus of “the Spirit of Jesus empowers us.” The *Shared Convictions* concludes with “We seek to walk in his name by the power of the Holy Spirit.” So, *ruach/pneuma* is power, energy.

At other times *ruach/pneuma* is related to authority. We speak, for example, of “inspired” or “in-spirited” Scriptures. We know well 2 Timothy 3:16: “All scripture is inspired by God, [literally God-spirited], and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” It is because we believe the Spirit of God has given life and authority to the words of the Bible that we listen for God’s voice addressing us in the Bible. And, as Article 4 of *Shared Convictions* reminds us, the Spirit is present in the community that reads the Bible together.

But sometimes *ruach/pneuma* refers to “breath.” Those of us who went to Obwolo Mennonite church on Sunday recall Bishop Maurice preaching on Ezekiel 37. In that great passage, the prophet is taken “by the Spirit [*ruach*] of the Lord” to the valley of dry bones, which represent the shattered hopes and dreams of the people in exile, in dispersion. Let me read some excerpts from that dramatic event in which God and the prophet Ezekiel have an encounter, in which God addresses the prophet (37:4–14).

“Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. I will cause *breath* [*ruach*] to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put *breath* [*ruach*] in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD.” [...] “Prophecy to the *breath* [*ruach*], prophecy, mortal, and say to the *breath* [*ruach*], Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four *winds* [*ruach*], O *breath* [*ruach*], and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” [...] Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. [...] I will put my *spirit* [*ruach*] within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act,” says the LORD.

I want you to notice that in this great resurrection and homecoming text the very same word, *ruach* in Hebrew and *pneuma* in the ancient Jewish Greek translation, is translated in English with three words: “breath,” “wind,” and “spirit.”

It will be important to remember that *ruach/pneuma* can also mean “wind.” In his night-time conversation with Nicodemus in John 3, Jesus makes this well-known statement:

“The wind [*pneuma*] blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit [*pneuma*].”

The English translators render the very same word – *pneuma* – as both “wind” and “spirit.” We don’t see the wind, but we can see what it does. It’s noisy, it shakes things up, it blows things around. We are familiar with the language of being born again or from above, which comes from this very same conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. But can you imagine yourself being born of the wind? Have you ever imagined the church that way?

## The unity of the Spirit

Let’s bring all this together in relation to how it sheds light on our topic of unity and diversity.

### 1. Spirit as *energy* or *power*

First, the energy that fuels the sun, that gives life to every bit of creation, is the energy at work in salvation, in God’s peacemaking, God’s creation of the new human. The creator of the universe is the *re-creator* of “all things” in Christ. Remember 2:18: We *together*, Jews and Gentiles, old-time family members and strangers, near and far, are brought into the presence of our common Father *both* “in and through *one* Spirit.” The Spirit is the wind energy powering this amazing act of new creation, in which the dry bones of those dead in their trespasses, suspicions and hostilities are raised *together* with Christ, as 2:4 puts it, saved by grace *together* (vs 5, 8), created *together* for good works by the artist of new creation (2:10). In the One who is our Peace, all things come alive, and are being reconciled with each other and their creator, *together* transformed into the new human. “Spirit” is the life-force, the energy of creation giving life to the church, indeed, to “all things” gathered up in Christ. It is the energy that raised Christ, and raises us with him (1:19, 20).

Let me read Paul’s words in Romans 8:11 and 14, highlighting this aspect of *pneuma*:

If the energy [*pneuma*] of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his creating power [*pneuma*] that dwells in you.

For all who are led by the energy [*pneuma*] of God are children of God.

The community of former strangers and enemies is, like Ezekiel’s vision of dry bones, the new human being brought together into one body by the Creator. With Easter still very much in our memory, it is important to recognize that the church is first and foremost resurrection, new creation, new human – the Creator’s energy at work. Christ’s death, Christ’s making peace between strangers and between them all and God is the Creator not giving up on creation, but loving it into newness, as John 3:17 reminds us.

### 2. Spirit as *breath*

The body of Christ breathes as one. This a powerful and dynamic image of unity. “There is one body and one *pneuma*, one breath” (Ephesians 4:4). In an echo of Ezekiel 37, as those who were once dead (Ephesians 2:1), we now, in Christ, breathe the *one* breath of life, *together* with those we once knew only as strangers and enemies, with whom we are *together* becoming the new human, *together* with those who make life hard for us in the womb of new creation. Ephesians 4:3 calls exactly this the “unity of the Spirit.” We can call it the unity of those who breathe as one.

### 3. Spirit as *wind*

Spirit means “wind” – the wind of God. We’re clearly not in control of this wind. As in Jesus’ image in John 3, the wind blows where it wills, and those born of the wind blow where they will. We should therefore expect the “unity of the Spirit” to be turbulent, upsetting of old arrangements, with walls of division crashing down, old certainties giving way before this storm of grace, all of it to sweep clean a space for “the far” in the presence of God. What we call the Spirit is the wildness of God creating anew – a hurricane of grace, a tempest of love.

Perhaps most unsettling is that those who are estranged and hostile to each other are being swept together by this wind. Old-time Jewish believers are being asked to receive and accept the formerly godless Gentiles as family members, as brothers and sisters, still very much in the process of re-creation. Gentiles are having to receive and accept suspicious Jewish older brothers and sisters. But, this text reminds us, this conflict-laden unity is the work of the Spirit; it is creation, not destruction, as much as it must have felt that way. This is the nature of the unity of the Spirit, a wind that continues to blow open the windows and the doors so as to blow in the all the broken pieces of humanity, indeed creation. That is what peace looks like in the present. This is what emerging life looks like. The new human wants to be born, to breathe, but it is a new human created out of “all things,” including those who don’t get along, who don’t agree, whose habits of living are sinful and alienating. And it’s only going to get more challenging the harder this wind blows, the more that is gathered! God’s grace will make sure of that!

#### **The body of Christ, the womb in which the new human is being formed**

Two images in our text capture what the Spirit is creating. The one is the body. You will still have in mind the photo of the great tapestry of Christ from the Coventry Cathedral I showed you in the last presentation. We are very familiar with this image. In both Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, Paul uses the image of the body to help us deal with the diversity of gifts the Spirit gives to the body. We are taught to value the differences the way we are grateful that our bodies have a variety of members and organs.

But here in Ephesians 2:16, “body” is an image of the turbulent peace that brings “both” strangers and enemies, and all that made them that, into the same space in which God is creating the new human. It is a body that is – by God’s design! – constantly tested and tried by new members being gathered to it. They do not yet know how to walk, or how to walk together. The body is tested in this instance not by the beautiful diversity Paul speaks of in 1 Corinthians 12, but by the troubled diversity of deeply rooted habits and taboos that make shared life sometimes enormously difficult.

It is not the case that we understand, let alone like each other the moment God’s grace has found us and brought us into the body. That which estranges persons and groups from each other and from God does not disappear instantly. The process of new creation is long. We will speak more of this in the next presentation, but here I just want to remind us that what makes up the body of Christ is broken and sick humanity “saved by grace,” in the process of being remade, reborn into the new human. God creates the “new human” out of the sick and broken “old human.” That is what “saved by grace” means. As Paul says in Romans 5:6, 8, and 10: “While we were still weak, sinners, and enemies” God made peace with us through Christ dying for us.

So the image of the body of Christ is at heart an image of peace, and an image of mission. The church is most “at peace” – the peace that is the reconciling and re-creating Christ – when it is most involved in the turbulent and unsettling act of new creation, in which enemies and strangers are being reconciled with each other and with God. That is the work of the Spirit.

The church is *most* the body of the Messiah, God's agent of new creation, when it is itself radically engaged in the gathering up of *all* things – *all* people.

## The temple of God – a home from recycled material

If the one image in this text pointing to what the Spirit is up to is that of the *body*, the other image is the *temple*. Paul often loves to mix his images, in this case the organic image of a body together with the architectural image of construction. In Ephesians 4:16, for example, Christ is the head:

from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in *building itself* up in love.

"Building up" is a construction image. In Ephesians 2:20-22 Paul mixes the same two metaphors. The body becomes a house, a temple, the home of God:

built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the corner [or head]stone. In him the whole structure is joined together and *grows* into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are *built* together *in spirit* into a dwelling place for God."

Here is the point most relevant for us: if you or I were to build a temple, a home for God, we would choose large, beautiful, perfect stones; stones that fit together, that have a smooth dazzling appearance, without a chip or a crack, "without spot or wrinkle." Stones that don't fit, we reject and throw on the rubbish heap. After all, this is *God's* home, and it needs to be a temple fit for the Creator of the universe.

But that is exactly what we do *not* find here in Ephesians. This temple is being built "in Spirit" (2:22), which we can translate as "through the Spirit," "with the Spirit," or "in the Spirit." This is the same Spirit that gives breath to the body it is assembling out of strangers and enemies. The same wind that blows down walls is here the energy that powers the construction of the temple, the mortar that holds it together. Because if you are going to build a temple with broken stones, rotten wood, discarded and rejected materials, you need the power of the Spirit to hold it all together.



*Cano's Jesus castle (photo by jimsawthat flickr.com. Used with permission.)*

This is exactly the kind of house in which God feels most at home. Because it is the house of peace, the home built with salvaged pieces, saved by grace. This is the temple of salvation, built with stones that have been rejected, stones which God, out of his great love (2:4) gathers from the rubbish heap. Please note! This is exactly what makes it *perfect*.

Many of us have seen beautiful churches and temples. But years ago, I and my family were driving through the tiny town of Antonito, Colorado, in the United States, and we came upon a very surprising building. Dominic Cano Espinoza

built his “Jesus castle” in gratitude to God for saving his life when he was a soldier in Vietnam. Under constant construction for over 30 years, it is made up of 100,000 pieces of what others throw away – beer cans, hubcaps, screen doors, wooden windows, bicycle reflectors, and more. It reminds me of 1 Corinthians 1:26–28:

Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are.

Would you and I choose such strange building materials for constructing a home? God does.

## Unity and diversity

Both the images of body and temple are used to illustrate the “gathering of all things” that lies at the heart of God’s designs for creation (Ephesians 1:10). Just so the “unity of the Spirit” contains an endless diversity.

One dimension of this diversity is one in which the Creator takes great delight: diversity of race, culture, language, personality – all the kinds of diversity that mark human life at its best. Even then, however, as positive as such diversity is, it can be a big challenge to experience unity. But it is the diversity the Creator has put into the cosmos, and we should cherish it as a gift. MWC gives us a taste of that wonderful divine creativity.

But the diversity that marks the body of the new human, or the home of God, is also caused by sin, both individual and corporate, both personal and systemic. We think here of ways in which our individual lives can be deformed by sin and brokenness. But our corporate lives too are often formed by racism, xenophobia, colonialism, material callousness. Such diversity is more dangerous, often because we live it without seeing or understanding it. We bring it with us from the valley of dead bones. We see the world and each other through the lenses given to us there. When God gathers us in, God also gathers in our brokenness and alienation, and that diversity constantly threatens the healing of the body, the construction of the temple.



*Miriam Neufeld with permission*

But remember, this is *Christ’s* body! And he came for those who need a doctor, who need healing, as he reminds those suspicious of his reaching out to the “tax collectors and sinners” (Mark 2:17). Just as a hospital is for sick people, sick people who bring their injuries and diseases with them, so the body of Christ is for the healing of the nations, we might say. Those are the ones Jesus made a special effort to gather to himself. As long as “all things” have not yet been reconciled and transformed, the “*perfect* body of Christ” is like a perfect hospital: full of broken and sick people, but who are there for healing and restoration. In such an enterprise you cannot stay without spot or wrinkle, as this photo of my daughter Miriam, a surgeon in Boston, illustrates. Too often we remove ourselves from the dirt and grime of broken humanity so as to keep the temple clean. We think we are keeping unity. Such a unity leaves Jesus the doctor alone with sinners and tax collectors.

So also with a temple of God built with salvaged materials from the refuse pile, where all the discarded pieces are to be found. But that is precisely its perfection, its beauty. It is by design a permanent building site; it is “under construction.”

My cousin, Harold Neufeld of Winnipeg, Canada, reminds me of God. He loves using discarded pieces and making them into sometimes rather humorous but always beautiful art. Just one example: a beautiful clock out of scraps of wood.



*Harold Neufeld with permission*

God the architect must have a peculiar sense of beauty, humour and fathomless love to fashion a home for himself out of us! Ephesians 2:10 speaks of us who are saved by grace as God's *poiema*, "work of art." God the creator of the new human must possess endless patience to keep working at this strangely wonderful work of art we call the church, given that there are always new pieces to add, and old pieces that break, or members that refuse to cling to each other. This is a body that is constantly in a state of disruption precisely because of the success of grace. This body spends most of its time in rehabilitation; this temple is permanently under construction. The Spirit of God powers it; the wind of God moves it, pulling and pushing, sometimes throwing it off balance, sometimes knocking down what is too weak to stand, only to raise it up again when all hope seems lost. What strange living art work the church is! That – all of it! – is the living "unity of the Spirit."

## **Anabaptists and Spirit**

What affirmations and challenges does this understanding of the Spirit have for us Anabaptists? Most especially on how we deal with unity and diversity?

First, Anabaptists are committed to peace. We might argue over what peace means practically, but peace is foundational for our tradition. It is a central component of our *Shared Convictions* (Article 5). As is the Spirit (*Shared Convictions*, Articles 3 and 5).<sup>1</sup> We have much work to do, however, in connecting *peace* with *spirit*, most especially the kind of deep and comprehensive peace spoken of in Ephesians. Article 5 does speak of the "Spirit of Jesus" empowering us for peacemaking and sharing of goods. But, there are still questions we must as Anabaptists ask ourselves:

- Is our understanding of peace and peacemaking thoroughly informed by the work of the Spirit in unifying strangers and enemies with each other, and most importantly, with God, as we see in 2:18?
- Do we see the church, in both identity and mission, as the epicentre of God's peacemaking?
- Do peacemakers and peacebuilders among us see themselves as charismatics, gifted and empowered by the Spirit? After all, Galatians 5:22 lists peace as one of the fruits of the Spirit.
- Do we see that the peace Christ embodies is the peace that brings strangers and enemies together into one body, building blocks of one temple, the Creator's own home?
- Do our evangelists see themselves as proclaimers of peace, and thus as peacemakers in the pattern of Jesus (2:17)?

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<sup>1</sup> See also the exploration by the Mennonite missionary, professor, and writer, John (Juan) Driver, *Life Together in the Spirit: A Radical Spirituality for the Twenty-First Century* (Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism, Goshen College, 2011).

If the one Spirit can hold together strangers and enemies in one body, in one temple, might that Spirit hold together peacemakers and evangelists among us? We are not yet speaking of peace as found in Christ unless the diversity between peacemakers and evangelists, peace activists and church planters, is gathered into the unity of the Spirit and transformed into wholeness.

Second, do we have an ecclesiology, a conception of church, that is faithful to such a unity? As I said yesterday, from the beginning Anabaptists have been uneasy about diversity. We know that our commitment to following Jesus will make us different. We prize nonconformity. But we tend to want to be different in the same way. Our commitment to faithfulness sometimes makes it difficult to be as enthusiastically hospitable as is God to the diversity of still broken and diseased humanity.

We also are uneasy, thirdly, about the Spirit. More recently, the global growth of Pentecostalism has brought renewed nervousness in some parts of the Anabaptist family. We often view it as too individualistic, favouring personal experience over following Jesus, personal wellbeing over discipleship and peace, to name only a few points of uneasiness. These are all real problems we should wrestle with. But we should never ignore Paul's warning: "Do not quench the Spirit!" (1 Thessalonians 5:19).

To connect all this with our topic today, we should see unity – a unity of radical hospitality and transformation of diverse individuals, groups, peoples – as a manifestation of the Spirit as dramatic and miraculous as tongues and healing. Without the Spirit there is no "new human:" there is no *breath* in the body; there is no missional *energy*; no *wind* to unsettle us and create space for the birth of the new human. There is no peace.

The workshop of new creation which we call the church is a noisy, dusty, argument-filled space – *not* because of human failure, but because of God's success! God wants us in there, all of us, estranged and hostile as we still often are toward each other and toward God. That is the perfect unity of the Spirit.



*Lisa Packull created this banner to inspire the interpreters at the MWC Assembly in Zimbabwe in 2003. It now hangs in First Mennonite Church, Kitchener, Ontario, Canada, Lisa's home congregation.*

To look at unity in this way means that we see all the misunderstandings between Jesus and his most intimate circle of followers, all the troubles in Corinth and Galatia, all the tensions between Paul, Peter, and James, etc., as signs not only of human frailty and failure, but also of the Spirit at work. So also today. We would like to make unity cleaner, more orderly, more harmonious. But that would no longer be the unity of the wind of God. Many of the troubles we have in our churches are the Spirit's fault! They are there because of whom the Spirit brings into the presence of the Father (Ephesians 2:18). God has gathered us up, together with our cultural habits, our fears and suspicions, our convictions and passions, together with those we don't like or understand, precisely to re-create us and give birth to us together as the new human. That is grace that saves!



Pentecost is coming soon, on May 20. In many of our churches, we celebrate Pentecost as the birthday of the church, and often also as a celebration of mission, of reaching out. That is a marvelous festival. Ephesians 2 tells us that church and peace are inseparable, fuelled by the wind energy of God who gathers all things, so that he might have a home with us. Perhaps we can more consciously devote Pentecost to that miracle, even if the unity of the Spirit demands every bit of faith, trust, energy and resilience we have.

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