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## Gathered into One

Thomas R Yoder Neufeld

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### **Part III     “Maintaining the Unity of the Spirit – when walking together is hard”**

Ephesians opens the second half of the letter in 4:1 with the exhortation to “walk in a way that is worthy of our high calling.” To “walk” is the favorite way the Bible has to speak of the way people live or behave. Anabaptists speak of discipleship as “following Jesus,” as “walking after Jesus.” We might say, learning from Jesus how to walk. Of course, we did not invent that. Early followers of Jesus liked to call their movement “the Way” (Acts 9:2, 19:23, 22:14, 22). We walk together as one body of Christ.

Given what we have learned about the body of Christ and its astonishing and challenging diversity, nothing about such a walk is simple. We are, after all, to walk as *one* body. How is that even possible!?

There is, as I have said previously, the diversity of creation which the Creator called “good.” We are privileged in MWC to have a taste of this. And yet, even this divinely created diversity makes walking together a challenge, doesn’t it?

We experience, secondly, the diversity that sin creates and brings into the community of followers of Jesus. We walk together as both injured and injurers, both abused and abusers, both oppressed and oppressors – in *one* body! I read the Africa volume in the MWC history in

preparation for our gathering here in Limuru, and I have seen again and again how the legacy of colonialism has left its mark on the body of Christ. I am aware of the ugly history of colonialism, racism and violence in my own country of Canada in relation to indigenous peoples, a history and legacy we are only beginning to respond to as a church. We are becoming more and more aware, secondly, of the abuse of power and sex, also in the church. Our response to it is often painfully diverse. Or think of the diversity (or should we say “disparity”?) of status and wealth that grows ever larger, also in the church.

We might call all this the diversity of brokenness, alienation and sin. It is a reality in the church because we bring it with us when we enter the body of Christ. It is also present because we too often fail to address these and many other faces of destructive diversity. It is also a reality – and this is important – because *God* gathers us in with all of that, not to welcome it, but to welcome us in order to re-create us together into the new human in Christ.

There is also, lastly, what may be the most difficult kind of diversity. It is the often deeply conflictual diversity that grows not out of sin, but out of our passionate commitment to holiness, to faithfulness, to discipleship, to being God’s people. We sometimes disagree fundamentally on what to believe and confess rightly, or how to act justly and peacefully. And such disagreements make walking together in the unity of the Spirit exceedingly difficult, because on such matters we are not very flexible. You don’t easily compromise on what you believe to be the clear teaching of Scripture or the clear will of God. Nor should you! As a result, we are often in fierce and destructive struggle with each other *within* the body of Christ.

Anabaptists know this story well. From the very beginning of the movement, our passion for faithfulness, for nonconformity, for being the true bride of Christ “without spot or wrinkle” (Ephesians 5:27), has made us vulnerable to the virus of the *Täuferkrankheit*, the “Anabaptist disease” – schism, division, distancing ourselves from each other. We have come to see separation too often as a sign not of failure to walk in the unity of the Spirit but as evidence of faithfulness, most especially when we are the ones separating or keeping our distance. We genuinely thought we were protecting the gospel and the faithfulness of the church when we separated ourselves from those who did not share our understanding of faithful belief and discipleship.

Such tensions were there in Jesus’ day too, as he struggled with his fellow Jews over what holiness and purity looks like. Don’t be so sure you would have followed Jesus to Levi’s home to eat with tax collectors and sinners (Mark 2:13-17). Such tensions were there in the days of Peter, Paul and James, as they struggled with each other over what to do with Gentiles open to the gospel (Galatians 1, 2). The challenging and conflictual diversity brought about by the desire to be faithful can be found all over the New Testament.

Let’s be clear. This diversity is found *within* the unity of the Spirit. This *is* what the unity of the Spirit will look like for as long as “all things” have not yet been fully gathered up in Christ. This *is* the peace of Christ through whom God is gathering also us whose passion for faithfulness makes us strangers and enemies of each other within the body of Christ. As I have said in the past days: exactly therein lies the beauty of the church, its perfection.

You can name the kinds of diversity in your settings that make walking together intensely difficult. But walk we must if we wish to follow a Jesus who walks in search of the sick and the lost, the hostile and alienated, in order to gather them in. But how do we walk together within the kind of unity that is at its very core hospitable to those who make walking in unity so difficult? How do we walk as *one* body of a Christ who keeps seeking both near and far, even giving his life for strangers and enemies? How do we “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,” as Ephesians 4:3 has it? That is the question I wish to address in this last presentation.

## **We do not walk alone**

The first thing we must acknowledge is that we do not walk alone. *God walks with us.* Jesus is with us on the road. You may recall that our sister Rebecca Osiro, Vice President of MWC, spoke at the MWC Assembly in Harrisburg in 2015 about the tradition of the *jakol khudo*, the thorn remover.<sup>1</sup> The Spirit who brings us into the Father's presence (Ephesians 2:18), the Spirit who holds us together in the walls of God's home (2:22), is with us on the walk, giving us energy, breath, and wind in our back. Jesus, the pioneer of our faith (Hebrews 2:10; 12:2), tested in every way as we are, walks with us, ahead, beside and behind us as the thorn remover.

We do not follow Jesus by ourselves. We do not walk alone as individuals. We do not practice discipleship by ourselves. *We walk with each other.* We have each other for support, encouragement and correction. We carry each other's burdens when they become too much for us to carry on our own (Galatians 6:2).

But we also have each other to irritate us as we walk together, to make us mad. So walking together will sometimes tempt us to want to kick others out of the circle, or to want to remove ourselves from the community of walkers. The bond of peace Ephesians 4:3 speaks of is there precisely to help us walk with those we don't want to walk with. In Ephesians 4:1, Paul refers to himself as a prisoner of or for Christ, literally "*chained*" in Christ. In verse 3, we are urged to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in/with the *co-chain* of peace," to translate literally. You need chains for what does not easily hold together. We are prisoners of Peace!

Needless to say, such a unity of the Spirit is intensely challenging. That will be the nature of this unity as long as there are still broken and alienated persons and groups the Spirit wishes to bring together into the presence of the Father (Ephesians 2:18). Importantly, this unity is the essential *basis*, the *premise* for our walking together. We walk together *because* of the unity of the Spirit. It is not the *result* of our having succeeded at walking together harmoniously, in full agreement. We are not asked to create this unity, but to *maintain* it.

## **How do we walk together?**

How then do we walk together with so much diversity? How does the body of Christ walk in chains of peace? How do we walk not only with those we love to walk with, arm-in-arm, but also with those the Spirit chains us to, those who trip us and make us stumble, or whom we have to help or even carry? How do we walk together when the road becomes hard, difficult, even dangerous, and when we face choices to make in which direction to go?

I cannot do better in answering these questions than to listen again to the opening words of the exhortation in Ephesians 4. I think it is of great importance that these are the first instructions given for walking together as the body of Christ:

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to walk in a way that is worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, suffering one another in love, sparing no every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the chain of peace. (Ephesians 4:1-3)

Let me add a few other familiar Scripture passages that speak similarly about humility, patience and mutual suffering. We hear much the same in Colossians 3:12-15:

Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.  
Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive

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<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Osiro & Tom Yoder Neufeld (Faith and Life Commission), "Walking in Doubt and Conviction/Caminemos con dudas y convicciones/En march eave des doutes et des convictions," *Proceedings/Memorias/Actes*, Mennonite World Conference Assembly 16, 2015, *Walking with God/caminemos con Dios/en marche avec Dieu*, 47-61.

each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony (literally translated: “which is the perfect co-chain”). And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body.

### *Philippians 2*

Or listen to Philippians 2. Paul knows that the “*koinōnia* of the Spirit” (2:1; “fellowship,” “partnership,” or “communion,” which sounds a lot like “unity of the Spirit”<sup>2</sup>) requires the following:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. (Philippians 2:3-4)

Paul knows that the best model for such humility is none other than Jesus Christ himself. He draws on one of the wonderful hymns celebrating Jesus as Lord and Messiah. Only now the focus of the hymn is not on Christ as “our Peace”, as it is in the hymn in Ephesians 2, but on Christ humbling himself to the point of slavery and death, and then being exalted, given the Name above every name. Relevant to us here is that Paul takes this great hymn to Christ in order to provide a basis for how we are to relate to each other in the body of Christ, how we are to walk together.

Let the same mind (or thinking) be in you that was in Christ Jesus,  
who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited [or grasped],  
but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.  
And being found in human form,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death –  
even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:6-8)

To have “the same mind” as Christ, to think like Christ, to have the same perspective, is to give your very life for those who are with you in the body of Christ, most especially those who require every ounce of humility and patience and respect you are able to exercise. How hard it must have been then for Jews and Gentiles to sing this challenging song together. It still is, if we pay attention to what it demands of us!

### *1 Corinthians 13*

Perhaps most familiar to many of us is 1 Corinthians 13, the famous “love chapter.” In many of our churches it is typically a wedding text. It is indeed fitting for such an occasion. But it is actually one of the most radically church-oriented texts. It directly addresses how we are to walk together as the body of Christ. The Corinthians were torn by spiritual competition, moral chaos and factionalism. But Paul did not give up on them, or consider his efforts a failure. On the contrary, he reminds them in chapter 12 that they are, even in their present state of conflict, nothing less than the body of Christ. And then, to complete his response to their struggles at unity, Paul appeals to love:

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, *Koinōnia — The Gift We Hold Together* (Faith and Life Commission, General Council, 2012). A shortened version at MWC website under Faith and Life Commission, Resources. For full version see Mennonite Quarterly Review, July 2012, also available online at [www.goshen.edu/mqr](http://www.goshen.edu/mqr).

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. (1 Corinthians 13:4-8)

### *Matthew 18*

Paul learned well from Jesus. Matthew 18, Jesus' "sermon to the church," starts with the disciples asking Jesus who is greatest in the Kingdom. Jesus responds by placing before them a child, literally, a little slave boy, someone at the absolute bottom of the social pyramid, and says:

"Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me." (Matthew 18:4-5)

Jesus incarnates himself in the most vulnerable and powerless in our community of walkers, those most inexperienced, frail and easily misled. It is from there he leads us in our walk. He walks with us both as Lord and Saviour, as *jakol khudo*, but also as the littlest, weakest member of the body.

Perhaps we are beginning to understand why there is this constant stress on humility, patience, mutual suffering and forgiveness. Let's look at these more closely.

### **Humility, patience, suffering each other**

Humility, patience, bearing with each other, suffering each other – that is how the new human, the still-forming body of Christ, walks. Only so! In Jesus and Paul's day, humility was closely linked with humiliation. Humility was seen as the stumbling walk or "shuffle" of slaves, not of persons of high calling, let alone as the "sons of God," as Caesar liked to be venerated. But the New Testament is of one mind: humility is absolutely essential if we are to follow Christ, to walk as he walked as one body. As those who have been saved by grace, raised and seated with Christ in the heavenly places (2:5, 6), we walk together like slaves in chains. That is what it means to walk in a way that is "worthy of our calling" (4:1).

What a combination! Worthiness and humility. Surprisingly, Paul calls this freedom! As sons and daughters of God, we *choose* such mutual slavery; we *choose* such humility. As Paul says in Galatians 5:13:

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters! Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love become slaves to one another.

I will confess that I wrestled with this imagery. I know that to speak of slavery in a land and on a continent that was devastated and humiliated by slavery is very troubling. And to do so as one who is part of a culture that benefitted from that brutality makes it all the more difficult for me. But if we find the imagery repugnant, so did Paul and his readers. Keep in mind, they knew slavery well. Many in the congregations were slaves. I believe Paul deliberately picks a deeply repugnant image to show that if we want to walk together in the body of the "new human," in the "unity of the Spirit," we have no better example than the one who is our Lord, our boss, who nevertheless emptied himself, and took on the form of a slave (Philippians 2:6-11), who washed the feet of his students (John 13:1-17), who gave his life on the cross for not only his friends, but his enemies (Romans 5). There is no other way to cope with the diversity the Spirit invites and the unity the Spirit creates. There is no other way to walk together as the body of Christ.

Perhaps we can find another image than slavery and chains that would better express this radical emptying of ourselves for the sake of the sister and brother, for the sake of the body of Christ. If so, I would welcome it. Even if we could find such an image, it would likely be equally offensive and shocking, precisely because it goes against so much of our natural impulses, our “flesh,” to use Paul’s language. Walking together in the unity of the Spirit will always push us to the limit. Unity is hard!

*Patience* appears alongside humility in all of the texts we read. Our recently departed brother, Alan Kreider, cherished by many of us gathered here, has highlighted how patience characterized the witness of the church in the early centuries.<sup>3</sup> He calls it the *habitus*, the habitual way of walking, we might say, a defining aspect of the church’s culture integral to its life and witness. Like humility, patience is absolutely important for walking together in the unity of the Spirit.

Patience is a virtue, sure. But that’s too abstract. It is the ultimate in practicality for walking together as a body. When we are so different in health, wealth, maturity, culture, ethics and theology, we cannot walk together without patience. We might think of it as a link in the chain of peace. Perhaps “chain” is not adequate. As useful as it is to shock us into awareness of how the Spirit ties us to each other, it is too static an image by itself to capture the flexibility of patience. When my mother turned 80 years old, I told her that what I appreciated so much about her was that the rope that kept her and me connected through my growing-up years was not so tight that I could not learn to walk, to make mistakes, to try new things, to become an adult. But always, always I knew that she never let go of the other end of the rope, holding me in her prayers, in her patient love for a son whose decisions she no doubt often did not understand.

Perhaps that captures what patience means also in the body of Christ. We are connected to each other by the Spirit, but we need sometimes to give each other the space to mature, even to make mistakes, and at the same time to remain connected so we can help each other grow, to mature, close enough to correct and to receive correction, in other words, to participate with each other in the birth of the new human.

Such patience we learn from a God who in Christ does not give up on us. Think of it: We come to God day after day, week after week, asking forgiveness, asking help, knowing that we can count on the unshakable patient bond we have to our divine parent.

The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. (2 Peter 3:9)

Those words from 2 Peter remind us that patience is an exercise in *hope*. Patience is not letting go, not disengaging, even if patience might sometimes look just like that. It is an intense longing for any sign of change, of turning, of new ways of thinking – to translate “repentance” more appropriately. Humility requires that I know that my brother and sister, those I walk with, are exercising the same patience toward me, hoping for signs of transformation in my life.

Ephesians 4:2 speaks of “bearing with one another in love;” 1 Corinthians 13:7 speaks of love “bearing all things, believing all things, hoping all things, enduring all things.” We might say, “suffering all things.” Anabaptists have known much of suffering over the centuries. The Deacons’ Commission places it at the core of its concerns. It has been a major theme in our theology. But usually it was the suffering experienced at the hands of our opponents that tested our faith. Let me suggest that *within* the body of Christ, *within* the unity of the Spirit, it will often be our sisters and brothers, or whole groups of sisters and brothers, who will give us occasion

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<sup>3</sup> Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016)

to carry the cross, to love the enemy, to suffer each other as Christ also suffers us – day in and day out.

Recently the term “*forbearance*” has become an important way in North American contexts to deal with the conflict we have over sexual ethics. Some have seen this as a version of tolerance. But “tolerance” as we use that term today is often based on the rights of individuals. It sometimes means leaving each other alone. The “bearing” or “suffering each other” Paul speaks of is something very different. It is quite literally another way to speak of patience, suffering and enduring each other. Such suffering patience very deliberately does *not* leave the other alone. This is not a matter of putting up with each other. It is, rather, hopeful, patient engagement with each other even when it hurts badly. This is the love that “endures all things,” as 1 Corinthians 13 puts it, even when our patience is stretched to the limit, and when our patience does not seem to produce the fruit of repentance. We “suffer” our sisters or brothers who go astray; we grieve like parents grieve when their child goes astray, like a shepherd who goes after that one lost sheep (Matthew 18:12-14). We suffer each other because we love each other with the love the Spirit who unites us pours into our hearts (Romans 5:3-5). That is how we can walk together in this challenging unity of the Spirit.

## **Forgiveness**

As Colossians 3 makes clear, all this is intimately connected to forgiveness. There is no unity of the Spirit without forgiveness. We come into the body, every one of us, with injuries that make us defensive, suspicious or arrogant and controlling. Without forgiveness walking in the unity of the spirit is impossible.

Forgiveness has come under considerable suspicion, also in Anabaptist circles, among those who are concerned that the church has too often demanded forgiveness as a way to silence victims of sexual abuse in order to protect abusers for the sake of the church’s reputation. I think this is a very serious concern. We should not forget that Jesus’ sharpest demands for forgiveness in Matthew 18 are preceded by words of warning every bit as sharp to those who abuse and exploit the vulnerable, the “little ones” (18:6-10). It is *from within* radical solidarity with the most vulnerable that Jesus demands forgiveness, going so far as incarnating himself in the most vulnerable (18:5). We know Matthew 25 well. To paraphrase: “When I was naked, in prison, and hungry, where were you?” Today we might add: “When I was a victim of sexual abuse, where were you?”

We cannot get around the reality that forgiveness is always taking on oneself the injury or the loss that has been inflicted. The point of forgiveness is not, however, to let the one doing the harm get away with it. Forgiveness is not cutting ties, letting go. It is a radically powerful act of solidarity *with* the one sinning against us, keeping the door open to repentance and transformation. It is the patient practice of faith, hope and love toward the one or those inflicting harm. Forgiveness is thus an exercise of power for the sake of the other, just as God exercises it toward us.

Of course, forgiveness is vulnerable to being betrayed by refusal to change, by refusal to reconcile. But is not God’s forgiveness of us betrayed by us again and again too? Of course, patience will run thin, and we will be tempted to ask with Peter: “Is forgiving seven times enough?” Jesus’ response? “Seventy times seven!” In other words, the bond of peace stretches as far as love and hope allow. That is what it means to “have the mind of Christ” (Philippians 2:5). We will only walk together as the body of Christ in the transforming unity of the Spirit if forgiveness is an essential trait of our walking culture.

Ephesians 4:32 is typically translated as, “Forgive each other as God in Christ has forgiven you.” The Greek is more literally translated as, “Grace each other, as God in Christ has graced you.”

God has saved us by grace (Ephesians 2:5,8), creating us anew in the gracious body of Christ, the transforming unity of new creation. For us to imitate God (Ephesians 5:1) is to participate in exactly that saving grace toward each other. That is what Paul means in Romans 14 and 15, when he asks us to “welcome each other as Christ has welcomed us.” We are, in short, to practice radical hospitality toward each other with enormous persistence and patience just as Christ does. The word Paul uses for “hospitality” in Romans 12:13 is literally translated “love of strangers.” Can our sisters and brothers, who might often feel like strangers to us, count on such gracious love from us?

Such grace is costly. To welcome each other is to take up the cross in relation to each other, for each other. Do we have the courage to walk together if that is what it means? Do we dare *not* to walk with each other in this grace that cost Christ his life (Ephesians 5:2)?

### **Speaking truth WITH the neighbour<sup>4</sup>**

Recall the phrase in 1 Corinthians 13:6: “[Love] does not rejoice in wrong-doing or injustice, but rejoices in the truth.” This reminds me of 3 John 4: “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in truth.”

Which truth are Paul and John referring to? In my experience, truth can make walking in the unity of the Spirit difficult. How so? We care about the truth, as we should. We want to be confident that our most basic faith convictions are true, whether theological or ethical. But, as we know well, strength of conviction can easily become a kind of rigidity and closedness that makes “walking together in truth,” as 1 John has it, very challenging. That is what has happened to us in the Anabaptist community again and again. The insistence on truth has at times been one source of our divisions.

It turns out that we need not fear the truth, nor the insistence on it, if we want unity. The opposite is in fact the case. Ephesians can again help us see that. For one, it reminds us that truth is not an abstraction. God has given us the “word of truth,” the “*logos* of truth”, which is the good news of our liberation, of our salvation (Ephesians 1:13). But this truth is not *about* Jesus so much as it is *Jesus himself*. That true Word came to us in the flesh, as John 1:14 reminds us. “I am the way, *the truth*, and the life,” Jesus pronounces in John 14:6. Yes, the truth *about* Jesus matters absolutely: who he is as the Christ, as the Word not only with God, but truly God. The truth that Jesus taught matters absolutely. The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 is the best-known example among us. But most importantly, the truth is “*in* Jesus” (Ephesians 4:21) who is “our Peace” (2:14-16). He is the truth in whom we are joined in the unity of the Spirit – the truth that welcomes outsiders, sinners, strangers and enemies into the transforming and re-creating womb of Christ.

I believe that it is urgent *for the sake of the unity of the Spirit* that we strengthen our hold on that foundational truth, lest we be blown about not by the wind or Spirit of God but by every whim and wind of teaching threatening to tear the body of Christ apart, as Ephesians 4:14 warns us. Could it be that one such ill wind is that *my* understanding of truth is more important than *my unity with you* in the body of Christ?

As we know from experience, the search for and insistence on truth can become contentious and divisive in the church. We should not avoid such a search or such a commitment because it that. It sometimes takes not only thick skin but strong guts to walk together with other truth-seekers. Interestingly the term “compassion” we saw in Philippians 2:1 is literally “guts”. Maybe we can read it as having the guts to remain in the *koinonia* of the Spirit when the search for truth

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<sup>4</sup> I did not have time for more than a very few comments on this in the Limuru presentation. Here is what I would have liked to have had time for.

becomes a fight. Remember, the truth that is “in Jesus” has us think like him, to have his mind, to participate in his suffering patience, his persistent efforts at correction and renewal. That is what it means to “learn Christ,” as Ephesians 4:20 has it.

Ephesians calls that “truthing” (4:15). We don’t, of course have such a word in English. I don’t know about your mother tongue. Many English translations thus have “speak truth in love.” But “to truth” means more than speaking. It means being in the truth, living it, being authentic, but especially being in Christ, being in the truth that is in Jesus, being in the one who is our Peace. “Truthing” is loving as Jesus loved. “Truthing” means bringing all the transforming grace and patience to bear on our sisters and brothers in the midst of conflict and disagreement that God brings to bear on near and far, on strangers and enemies (2:11-22). It means being humble enough to acknowledge that we don’t know it all, that we look through a mirror into a puzzle, as 1 Corinthians 13:12 reminds us. We together with strangers and enemies within the body of Christ walk in the truth that together with them we are being born again as the “new human.” As verse 15 goes on to say, that is how we grow into Christ (4:15).

Each of us very much needs to hear words of encouragement and affirmation. They “build us up.” They are an expression of “truthing in love.” But sometimes “truthing” means speaking truth that is hard to hear, hard to receive and hard to speak. It might be taken as judgment or criticism. So, “to truth in love” means being willing to say and do what love demands. Every parent knows this. Every spouse, friend, teacher knows this. Such “truthing” will always be the exercise of solidarity with others in the body of Christ, always with the intention of building each other up until we together arrive at the fullness of Christ (4:13). That requires too that we are open to hearing the words of the sister and brother, the congregation, the conference, as the exercise of love, even when communication is uncomfortable, feels harsh, even condemning. We need both guts and compassion to have open minds, tender hearts and thick skin for walking together in truth, in the unity of the Spirit.

Ephesians 4:25 has the phrase “speak truth each with his neighbour.” Most English translations have “speak truth *to* the neighbor,” as is indeed the case in Zechariah 8:16 which Ephesians is quoting here: “Speak truth *to* one another; render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace.” In Ephesians, however, there is a slight but important alteration: “Speak truth each *with* the one near you, for we are members of one another.”

*Speaking the truth* is therefore also more than simply telling the truth. It means “truthing” *together with* other members of the body of Christ. It means speaking truth not *to* the neighbour but *for* the neighbour, *in solidarity with* members of the one body, always with hope for change and new creation. In the body of Christ, in the unity of the Spirit, “telling it like it is” is always to speak with hope the truth that is in Jesus. The only truth worth speaking within the body of Christ is truth that emerges out of love, regardless how hard, sharp and unwelcome to the hearer that truth might be. It is spoken courageously, but always humbly, patiently and especially, lovingly.

## **Seeing the face of God in each other**

I wish to draw your attention to one last point. As Ephesians speaks of it, the creation of the New Human is another way of speaking about God recreating us in God’s image (2:10; 4:24). Can you and I see in those “others,” those “strangers” or even “enemies” *within* the body of Christ, those who make walking together so difficult, the face of God?

When Jacob and Esau, those twins who already fought in Rebecca’s womb, met after years of bitter alienation, midst guilt, fear and anger, they embraced and kissed, and Jacob was able to say to the brother he had so terribly wronged and who had sworn to kill him: “in your face I see the face of God” (Genesis 33:10).

Or think of the origin of the image of the “body of Christ.” It emerges from a terribly difficult time in Paul’s relationship with his beloved Corinthians. They accused him of being a weak speaker, perhaps not even a real apostle, maybe even an embezzler of money. They did not like that he gave them unwelcome correction. How did Paul respond? “You are the body of Christ! You are Christ to me, I am Christ to you!” (to sum up 1 Corinthians 12). At another point, right in the middle of a terrible argument in which Paul’s legitimacy as an apostle was being questioned, Paul refers to the Corinthians as a letter of Christ, the New Testament in the making (2 Corinthians 3). Or, as much as the Jerusalem “pillars” like Peter, James and John questioned Paul’s mission, he responded by organizing the first Mennonite Central Committee, collecting funds among the Gentile believers to send to Jewish believers in Judea who were suffering famine.

We will “maintain the unity of the Spirit” (Ephesians 4:3) when we can see the “face of God” in the sisters and brothers we have the greatest trouble with.

### **Does the bond ever tear? Does the chain break?**

Does the chain of unity ever break? Do the bonds of peace tear? Tragically, the chain of peace does break. Ego, power, control, clashing of vision, arguments about direction, contentious issues of faith and behaviour – they can seem to make walking together impossible. Perhaps there are times when breaks appear unavoidable, when our patience with each other runs out. Even then I keep hearing Jesus’ “70 times 7.”

I am convinced, even in such times, that we need a deep understanding of the dynamic unity of the Spirit. God wishes to gather up *all things* in Christ, including our breaks and tears, our rifts and schisms. In Christ, God brings them into the transforming and re-creating embrace of transforming grace. If we can rediscover ourselves in the body of the One who is “our peace” – and “*their* peace” too (!), and if we can place that understanding of deep unity at the centre of our discipleship, of our commitment to peace, of our understanding of church, then we will see much less of the *Täuferkrankheit*, that Anabaptist disease of separation-as-solution.

We’ve seen instances where God can use even rifts and schisms to serve his saving purposes. The historians among us can tell us how our schisms have sometimes been a kind of wake-up call that has led to renewal and greater faithfulness. They have sharpened our awareness of what we needed to correct, what we needed to be open to, how and where we needed to change. And then sometimes it has taken a break to bring about the surprise of grace, when estranged members of the body of Christ find a way of confessing and reconciling. God does not let up; grace is very persistent.

That is in essence the miracle of the MWC. Many of our member churches emerged from such breaks. But here we are, walking together, rejoicing in the diversity, even when its roots lie in a painful past. In 2010, we experienced how God brought us together with our Lutheran sisters and brothers after 500 years of estrangement. In reconciling with each other, we recognized that even our estrangement was taking place *within* the body of Christ. This conviction has accompanied us in our conversations with Catholics, Lutherans and Seventh Day Adventists.

The unity of the Spirit is broader and deeper than any of our organizational structures, whether congregations, conferences or denominations. True, those structures and organizations are the place and time where we are most tested in our commitment to unity, where we work most intensely at our ability to walk together, where we seek the unity of the faith and the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:13). But the unity of the Spirit is not the same thing as this or that structure, conference or church. It is much wider and deeper and much more radical. We know that in the business world bigger is not always better, that competition is a very good thing, unleashing

creativity and innovation. Might this be true of the “economy of grace” (Ephesians 3:2), for the unity of the Spirit?

As I said in my first address, Anabaptists are a bit nervous about unity. We’re worried that the Anabaptist emphases on discipleship and nonconformity are downplayed if the focus becomes unity. I hope it has become clear that to maintain the unity of the Spirit is nothing less than the imitation of God, walking like the Christ who gave his life (Ephesians 5:1) so we might live. Walking together, maintaining such spirited unity, is the most radical act of discipleship and peacemaking there is. As Paul insists in his “Sermon on the Mount” in Romans 12, we will indeed be radical in our nonconformity, transformed in mind, one body (12:4), when we practice hilarious (literally) mercy (12:8), chasing after strangers with love (12:13), blessing those who chase after us (12:14). Unity is the hardest work any of us will ever do. The more faithful we are, the harder it will be. We need to make it core to our understanding of discipleship. Our becoming new together in Christ demands it. Only so will we participate in the wild and generous ingathering of God.

So let us cherish and maintain this unity, knowing that the one who has begun this work will complete it, no matter how many days, years, or millennia it might take. God is patient and God is persistent in equal measure.

Thanks be to God.

*At time of writing, Thomas R Yoder Neufeld is chair of the Faith and Life Commission. He is retired as professor of religious studies (New Testament) and peace and conflict studies at Conrad Grebel University College in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada.*