

**Church unity and justice in the *Gereformeerde Kerke*
in South Africa:
perspectives from the Soutpansberg Synod
between 2003 and 2008**

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Abstract

The quest for unity and justice in the church has become a central debate among the Reformed churches in South Africa (SA). It is clear that the church is divided into two racially divided synods, namely Potchefstroom and Soutpansberg. It is also widely believed that Reformed churches have no reason to be divided, unless it is because of differences based on confessions. Theological debates, ethnicity and language issues that were orchestrated through the abuse of church order (church constitution) occupy a central position, while the Calvinistic teaching on unity is undermined. These divisions from synod to classis level are making the biblical message of unity a fast-growing issue which will be difficult to overcome. While one division internalised church disunity and injustice silently, the other division claims that anyone who differs from them is vindictive towards Calvinism. The theoretical question is: If the division is not based on confessions, are their reasons valid to divide the church? This article seeks to unveil and evaluate whether the perspectives of the Soutpansberg Synod on unity and justice can be used as good reasons for division of the church. The study will be confined to the events and records between 2003 and 2008.

Introduction

The current state of affairs in the Reformed Churches of South Africa (GKSA) is unthinkable because although John Calvin, the founder of the Calvinist tradition, showed strong commitment to church unity, the churches remain divided. I want to begin this part of the discussion by quoting the agenda of the Particular Synod Bosveld (GKSA member), which says:

Classis Limpopo requests the National Synod Potchefstroom to take a clear decision on the relationship between GKSA (Synod Potchefstroom) and Synod Soutpansberg. Synod Potchefstroom (2006) decided to carry on with the unification process with the different Synods (Potchefstroom, Middellande, Soutpansberg, etc.) in the GKSA. Synod Soutpansberg decided not to take part in the process of unification. Since then no synod has taken a decision on the relationship between GKSA (Potchefstroom) and Synod Soutpansberg (*Aanvullende Agenda* 2008:3).

The above quotation serves to confirm that the Reformed Churches of South Africa (GKSA) are currently divided, and that the two synods mentioned in the above quotation are operating in parallel. After apartheid was abolished in 1994 when the first democratic elections took place in South Africa, the white, and dominant, church from Potchefstroom initiated a unification process that was intended to unite the three former synods into one. This resulted in the phasing out of the former theological schools that had upheld the apartheid regime (Hammanskraal as the theological school for Middellande Synod and Heidelberg as the theological school for Synod Soutpansberg) and the introduction of one theological school at Potchefstroom University. The report says:

The churches decided to merge their seminary with those of the Potchefstroom Synod but had to be forced to re-establish their institution when it had become clear by 2001 that those of Potchefstroom will not allow them a meaningful participation in the training of

future ministers of the Gospel through Potchefstroom Theological Seminary (Maambiwa 2005:14).

Although the detailed reasons were not mentioned in the minutes, the issue was that the Venda-dominated synod withdrew its school and re-started it under the University of Pretoria.

Another report says:

Rev. Royall reported that the GKSA delegates have clarified that the Soutpansberg Synod is formally one with them, in that no formal act of separation ever took place, but de facto they are a separate body. The government and discipline is separate. They wish it were not the case but they agree that they should be treated as a separate body. It reflects the history in South Africa (http://.icronline.com/past_conferences-2005.html).

This report was given at the international conference of the Reformed churches to confirm that the Synod Soutpansberg had indeed excluded itself from the GKSA family.

It is widely known and believed that it is possible to be a committed Christian without being a Calvinist, but pretending that things are going well is counterproductive to the responsibility that God bestowed on us as members of the body of Christ. The existence of different synods and different theological training schools in the Reformed Churches of South Africa (GKSA), for instance, adds credence to the argument in this article. According to Nyomi (2010:394), Calvin believed in unity to the extent that he viewed the frequent celebration of the Eucharist as fostering unity.

Aim of the study

This article aims to research the way unity and justice are intertwined in playing a significant role in the well-being of the church, especially in view of Calvin's theology on unity and justice. Some of the leading causes of the divisions in GKSA from the perspective of the Synod Soutpansberg of the *Gereformeerde Kerke* (Reformed Churches) in SA will be unveiled, studied and evaluated in the light of Calvin's theology. It is also the aim of this study to formulate some suggestions on how the current divisions can be solved for the sake of unity in these churches.

Methodology

The methodology that will be used for this article will be a review of the books and church literature relevant to the problem. The minutes and agendas of the relevant synods involved in this issue will be studied and used to formulate the possible causes of the division.

A study of Calvin's view on unity and justice will also be made from primary sources. The reason for this is to see how he, as the founding member of the Reformed tradition, would deal with issues of unity and justice. Insights from other sister Reformed churches like DRC and URCSA that also had difficulties in uniting their churches are also consulted to assist in formulating some suggestions. My intention in studying unity and justice together is that the two work together for the well-being of the church.

Short history of unity and justice in the Gereformeerde Kerke in South Africa

The concept "church" in the GKSA context

A short description of the concept "church" is necessary to begin with. The reason for this is that some of the divisions and injustices occurring in the church are as a result of not knowing, or ignorance of, the meaning of the church and its intentions in the world. It should be noted that the author regards unity and justice (in the context of the church) as two faces of the same coin. If the two are separated, the complexion of the true meaning and intention changes as well.

Various words have been used to refer to the "church", for instance *ecclesia*, *qahal*, *kuriake*. Although all these concepts refer to the church, and I will at times refer to them as the discussion continues, for the purpose of this study I will mainly reflect on *kuriake*. The term *kuriake* comes from a Greek word referring to the church. Despite many different terms used to refer to the church, the word "church", according to Longman (2001:226), is a building where Christians go to worship, or the institution of the Christian religion. Du Plooy (2003:2) defines a church as "that which belongs to the Lord". The term *kuriake* is derived from the Greek *kurios*, which means "Lord".

The second question to ask is: Who rules the church? Calvin advocated that the Word and Spirit should rule both the visible and the invisible church. For Calvin, the authority of the Word is the only authority in the church. God Himself decides what is right through His Word and Spirit, and people are called (offices) to proclaim it (Du Plooy 2003:9). The discussions, decisions and personal opinions should be evaluated against the scriptures as a measuring standard. A lack of understanding of the unique identity of the church has led many people to make mistakes. That is why I strongly feel Burger (2010:316) is right in saying: "They did not realise that the church is not ours to command, but that the church is a creation of God, belongs to its Lord Jesus Christ and that He and He alone has the final word in the church."

On the concept of the unity of the church

The truth is that God as the creator of the church expects the church to be a place where people from different cultures and traditions will enjoy the unity and justice brought about by the death on the Cross of Jesus Christ. Du Plooy (2003:5) explains:

The church is a unity in diversity, and diversity amid unity. Unity essentially concerns unity in faith, an invisible unity, yet unity must be visibly manifested in one fellowship of churches across national and linguistic boundaries. This unity must be experienced within one fellowship, those who are as one in doctrine, office and discipline must experience unity, not only in major assemblies, but also among individuals regarding equipment, love, assistance and so forth.

This explanation makes unity one of the important characteristics of the church. One of the challenges that the church faces is to strive for unity, the unity that cannot be hindered even by language or nationality. The fact that the Reformed Churches of South Africa have been wrestling for unity for so many years is indefensible, and there is still no sign that this has been achieved. One of the services most affected by the lack of unity is missionary work. That is why, according to the report of deputies of missionary work: "[T]he second issue that contributed to our delay was that in our churches there were so many problems of divisions and our capacity was affected, our focus were no longer on the mission of Mozambique, as we were focusing on rebuilding our churches and strengthening our capacity" (Maambiwa 2005:24).

The unity of the church was undoubtedly one of the central motifs of Calvin's theology and pastoral life. Accordingly, Burger (2010:313) states that Karl Holl, the Lutheran theologian, generously admits that, of all the Reformers, Calvin had by far the strongest commitment to the unity of the church. Calvin said: "For the sake of the Gospel, unity is not a luxury but an act of obedience towards God" (www.reformedreflections.ca/faith_and_life/calvin-on-church-unity.html). The underlying concept of *communion*, which Calvin used earlier to replace *congregation*, played a very important role in his theology (Birmele 2009:2). For Calvin, it is our communion with Christ which is the ultimate foundation for the unity of the church, because when we come to faith we are united with Christ and become part of His body. A deeper understanding of Calvin's unity could have helped the Reformed Churches in their quest for unity. Brinkman (2010:309) emphasises Calvin's point by saying: "The celebration of the Lord's Supper shows how fragile the unity with Christ, the *unio cum Christo*, and

therefore also church unity is. Church unity is the work of Jesus Christ himself who invites us to His Table in order to be reconciled with God and to each other.”

Calvin’s view on unity is that the church is strictly one, hence his use of the “mother” metaphor to emphasise the unity of the church. If the church as a whole is understood to be a mother, then any idea of a particular denominational church being a mother is deconstructed by implication. For more than a century in South Africa, the Dutch Reformed Church and some of the other Reformed Churches were spoken of as the “mother church”. This is an issue of both self-identification and internalised paternalism on the part of black reformed churches. Calvin knew full well that the invisible and the visible churches are not two, but one (Kuiper 2009:14). In April 1552 Calvin wrote a letter to Archbishop Cranmer on unity saying: “Amongst the greatest evils of our century must be counted the fact that the churches are so divided one from another that there is scarcely even a human relationship between us ... I shall not be afraid to cross ten seas for the purpose of unity if that should be necessary (www.reformedreflections.ca/faith-and-life/calvin-on-church-unity.html).

Before we search for possible causes of divisions among the Reformed Churches of South Africa, it is important to mention that signs of disunity are already clear. When reading the following statement from the Agenda of Classis Limpopo of the Reformed Churches (GKSA), we find a clear indication that the divisions of this church are becoming emotional: “The lack of clarity on the relationship causes severe tension between congregations of the different synods. This tension has already led to attempts to resolve disputes in worldly courts” (Aanvullende Agenda 2008:AA34). The bitterness that has become part of the problem has forced parties to sidestep the church order that forbids Calvinists to rush their problems to civil courts. There is evidence of some differences being reported to local chiefs by pastors of this church, which is very contrary to the church order which indicates that church matters should be solved by church assemblies instead of civil courts. The author’s understanding is that the divisions affected the relationship of some individuals on a personal level.

There is a confirmation of disunity from Soutpansberg Synod:

If working towards reconciliation was part of the decision, the Potch deputies will inform the Part Synod that there is urgency in the matter, since the whole situation is viewed as a stumbling block by Synod Soutpansberg in the negotiations for a new system of major assemblies. Our position on this issue must be clear: our last synod dealt with De Hoop and it was clear that some of the people who went to the Classis Capricorn were under church discipline. The question is: How can we be one with those people? (My own translation of Maambiwa 2005:11).

The unwillingness of the Soutpansberg Synod to unite with the other synods is based on the other synods’ acceptance of certain members who, according to them, were under church discipline. It is irrelevant to detail the reasons for probing discipline or to question whether or not the discipline was conducted according to the procedures. One of the churches that decided to terminate their membership of the Soutpansberg Synod (the Malamulele Reformed Church in this case) because of its rejection of unity states:

We decided to terminate our membership from your synod due to several reasons, including the fact that the synod decided to withdraw its membership from the new proposed demarcations for one national synod in our country without consulting us. We believe in unity and not division (Maambiwa 2006:6).

Unjust practices as part of the problem in the synod

Besides the fact that the concept of justice (alongside righteousness) occurs frequently in the Old and New Testaments, Du Plooy (2003:11) emphasises that the most profound source of justice is God.

As the largest family of churches linked with Calvin’s legacy, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) has a long history of covenanting for justice – justice for the marginalised in any community: racial justice, gender justice, economic justice, environmental justice and so on (Nyomi 2010:1). On 20 December 1555, Calvin preached a sermon (on Deuteronomy 20:16–20) on environmental justice, which became one of the signs of his concern about any form of injustice, along with other sermons. From this perspective, Max Weber and other scholars were very wrong when they saw Calvin as the father of capitalism because Calvin’s readings demonstrate how he pitied and reacted to those who were poor, marginalised and displaced (Nyomi 2010:391).

According to Du Plooy (2003:6) the congregation over which God reigns through His Word and Spirit is the sphere or community where God’s justice and righteousness apply, and must apply. The

very brief examination of the above views indicates clearly that the forerunner of the Reformed Churches (including the ones in the GKSA) not only preached justice, but also expected justice to be implemented practically in those churches. Nyomi (2010:392) says that it is a shame that, 500 years after John Calvin's death, his message of justice has not been fully integrated with what the church engages in to help in challenging unjust structures.

The abuse of church order (which was supposed to be a helping document to foster unity and justice) has lately been observed in some of Reformed congregations. For instance, church order article 44 states: "The Classis shall authorise two of the oldest, most experienced and competent ministers to conduct regular visitations at all the churches in the classis." The practical application of this article indicates that ministers of local congregations, the church council and the entire church should be notified in good time about the visitation of the two elderly ministers mentioned above, and the minister of the local congregation must preside at the meeting.

Now, on the contrary, the minutes indicate that a visitation was planned and performed, without even informing the local minister, on 28 March 2004. The report says: *Vhadinda vho wana hu si na Mudzulatshidulo wa khoro ya kereke*, meaning "The visitation delegates find that there was no chairperson of the church council ...". This is evidence that the visitation was conducted (without the chairperson of the local congregation) and the report was later accepted by the synod (Maambiwa 2004:59). A church council meeting without the local chairperson is deemed unconstitutional, but the synod accepted the report of such a meeting and used that report as a basis for their decision which states *Mufunzi Muimeli a shume mishumo yothe ine mufunzi a tea u i shuma kha itshi tshivhidzo*, meaning "The *consulent* or relieving pastor should take over all the responsibilities of the local minister in this congregation". This means that the synod decided to relieve the local minister of his ministerial duties (in his absence) even before they heard what had prevented him from coming to the meeting. An analysis of the recommendations from the visiting delegation makes it clear that deposing this minister was planned beforehand: *U sedza khonadzeo dza u vhea mufunzi kha u vhidzwa nga zwin 'we zwivhidzo u ri zwivhidzo izwi zwi fhatee. U sedza khonadzeo dza u vhea zwivhidzo zwothe fhasi ha vhulisa ha dzin 'we khoro u swika zwi tshi vhuelela kha tshiimo tshavhudi* (Maambiwa 2004:58). The translation of the recommendations which was later accepted by the synod is: "To look for a possibility of placing a minister in a situation of being called by other churches (beroepbaarstel) so that these churches can grow. To look at a possibility of placing these two congregations under the leadership of other churches until things becomes normal again" (Maambiwa 2003:58). This was placing the cart before the horse because the synod decided to remove a minister even before they had looked at the allegations. For instance, one of the churches under discussion is doing far better than many churches in Venda after refusing the deposition of its minister and leaving the synod. Such practices are very common in the synod and are orchestrated by half truths and lies that certain influential ministers use to further their personal ambitions and settle scores. On the other hand, the same synod decided to install a new minister without informing the first one. Even the civil courts do not judge a person without listening to his side of the story. So if such injustices continue in the church, the result will be divisions that Calvin would have hated to see. The injustices that emanated from the abuse and misuse of church order were also observed by Burger (2010:317) in the Dutch Reformed churches:

Although we profess to be Reformed in our ecclesiology we tend to be very legalistic. We rely much on the literal interpretation of the church order without adequate reference to theology, the Bible and creativity of the Spirit. The problem is that the church order often acquires a life of its own and is then used as a rule book of what can and cannot be done.

Historical causes for the divisions and injustice according to Synod Soutpansberg

The role of political history in conjunction with missionary work

It is undeniable that South Africa is one of the countries that has had a bad record as far as racism is concerned. Among many other things, the inequalities that were orchestrated by racism affected the church considerably. Racism was also defended and applied theologically within the church, especially some of the mainline churches like the Reformed Church. Missionary activities of those times helped not only to establish the church amongst the indigenous people, but also to subject them. It was because of apartheid that the three synods were divided right from the beginning until efforts for unity were made in 1995 through the merging of the three theological schools as indicated below (Maambiwa 2004:14).

The other important point is that the white churches which were involved in doing missionary work for the *Gereformeerde Kerke* in SA were already divided churches and played a pivotal role in orchestrating these divisions. More than half of the churches in Soutpansberg Synod were established as a result of the missionary activities of the Christian Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, while a smaller number of churches were a result of missionary work by some of South African white churches. The majority of the churches in Midlands Synod were born out of the missionary work by South African white churches, which were doing this mission as members of Potchefstroom Synod. For us to understand the present divisions, it is important to consider this background information.

In some instances, the synod used suspicions to strengthen their argument to separate the church, saying: *Hezwi siya zwi tshi isa kha muhumbulo wa uri kereke dza vhathu vatswu dzi nga joina dza vhatshena. Hezwi ndi zwithu zwine zwa nga ita uri kereke dzashu dzi di ise livhidani* (Maambiwa, 2003:67). The meaning is: "These things bring us to think that black churches will join white churches. That also may probably mean that our churches might be going to the grave." This argument arose because it was suspected that the demarcations of the new national synod would have three classes, namely black classis, white classis and one multiethnic classis (see Maambiwa 2003:67, point 2). Although this suspicion strengthened the arguments of the synod for withdrawal from unity, the present classes were in fact demarcated geographically regardless of race, ethnic grouping or language. Then wrong decisions were based on wrong suspicions.

According to Lekalakala, the expressions *ons kerke vir hulle* (meaning "our churches for them") and *die jong kerke* (meaning "the young churches") (Lekalakala 2002:14), which are still heard in some instances, clearly point to racial statements which easily divided the church, especially by those who could not succumb to being called small churches for reasons of financial support. In this way apartheid thinking had a role in the missionary thinking of the church which also gave birth to divisions. Calvin's view that the local church should be autonomous was good (Burger 2010:319), but he should have also acknowledged that such a view can only be applied when the local church is self-supporting.

Theological training

According to the minutes the final frustration which caused the Soutpansberg Synod to exclude itself from the proposed unity was the issue of theological training. To begin with, this quotation from the Synod is an eye opener:

The churches decided to merge their seminary with those of the Potchefstroom synod but had to be forced to re-establish their institution when it had become clear by 2001 that those of Potchefstroom will not allow them meaningful participation in the training of the future ministers of the Gospel through the Potchefstroom theological seminary (Maambiwa 2005:14).

Even if other arguments can be used to strengthen Soutpansberg Synod's reasons for withdrawal, the statement above informs the reader that things changed when they realised that they could not teach in the theological school. They thought that they should own the capacity-building posts made available by the University, although they did not have people who academically qualified to take those positions at that point. That is why after their favoured candidates failed the interviews (one from the camp of non-favourites passed), their frustrations came to a head. This led them to withdraw their theological training from the then Potchefstroom University.

The fact that theological training was the only direct link in the unification process at that stage meant that withdrawal from the theological training automatically amounted to withdrawal of the synod from the process of unity.

Lekalakala (2002:14) is right in saying:

Students who study together begin to network from the school and it becomes simple to put things into practice. Different theological training schools can be a good source of division; it is just like having GKSA with its three synods. Already many students feel inferior about their qualifications.

It is true that theological training as such is doing more harm than good to the Reformed churches. The fact that some theological students are being trained at Potchefstroom while others are trained at the newly founded theological seminary at the University of Pretoria means students are on unequal footing and divisions originate from different qualifications. The black churches are already divided

among themselves because some receive their ministers from Potchefstroom, while others receive theirs from the University of Pretoria. Among the group who see the issue of theological training as a hindrance to unity, there are some who have their own scores to settle and hide their own agendas behind the whole issue.

As regards the issue of the capacity-building posts, according to my observation as the secretary of deputies of theology for Soutpansberg Synod, the issue was not a theological dispute as many were informed, but rather one of ideological differences and the ambitions of certain members of the synod. It should be mentioned that if we speak about theological dispute someone should be held responsible for heresy, false teaching or doctrinal differences. In this case, there was no one among those selected to take capacity-building posts who transgressed any Reformed principle from church order and Bible. The issue arose because the synod had its own people, regardless of educational qualifications and abilities.

Language barrier

There is no doubt that Synod Soutpansberg promotes one language above the other(s). This has developed into a language barrier, since non-Tshivenda speakers do not contribute their thinking in the whole discussion. It is another source of division. The author ministers to a predominately Xitsonga-speaking church and has been a member of Synod Soutpansberg from 1989 when his church (Reformed Church Malamulele) was instituted. For the Synod Soutpansberg, Tshivenda is not only the official language, but the only one in which all major decisions are made. The delegation from the above-mentioned local church attended all meetings of major assemblies with only Tshivenda being used, without translation, until they decided to terminate their membership of the synod in 2006. The archives of the synod until 2008 are only recorded and available in Tshivenda, although Xitsonga-speaking people were included in decisions that were taken without their participation due to language constraints. The same Xitsonga-speaking church asked the synod in 2002 to look at the language issue, or else use another language that would include all the groups, but their request fell on deaf ears. Xitsonga-speaking people remained members of that synod. The frustrations of one Xitsonga-speaking church are summed up in their letter terminating their membership, which says:

We decided to terminate our membership from your synod due to several reasons, including: The fact that one language continues to dominate the synod to an extent that we do not participate equally in the synod (Maambiwa 2006:6).

To indicate that this concern was valid, we can turn to the minutes; the synod did not deny it, but they instead said: *Arali zwo itea uri fhando sinodoni ri dzhiele fhasi lun'we luambo ro vha ro khakha*. Literally this means: "If it happened that we undermined another language in this synod then we were wrong" (Maambiwa 2006:67). If this is a confession, it should have been directed to those who were offended by the language issue. The author's interpretation of this statement is that it is an acknowledgement that the use of one language in the synod has happened, and thus it was their own wrongdoing. It is unthinkable that just two years later the same synod decided to contradict itself by saying: *Na hone a si luambo lwa Tshivenda fhedzi lune lwa shumisiwa tshinodoni hu a shumisiwa-vho na English* (Maambiwa 2008:33). This means "It is not Tshivenda alone that is used in the synod meetings, but English is also used." Firstly, this argument confirms the synod's inconsistency in its own decisions. Secondly, the argument was not about English, but about Xitsonga; it is disturbing that the response is in defence of English, which is also untrue because, even up to 2009, there are no minutes or discussion of that synod which were recorded in English. Thirdly, another contradiction arises from their statement, which says: *Ri songo tangedza u dibvisa ha Malamulele ro lavhelesa zwiitisi 1,2,3 nga u ri zwo fhatiwa nthu ha zwi si zwone*, meaning: "Let us not accept Malamulele's (Reformed church's) withdrawal (from this synod) on the basis of their reasons from 1, 2 and 3 issues mentioned because their reasons are based on untrue things (Maambiwa 2006:67). They initially accepted that guilt, but they now argue that it was a lie. These inconsistent arguments prove that the synod is trying to justify their unjust practices by making statements which pretend to make other people liars, while they remain the only people telling the truth. One student is mentioned in point 5.1.4 of their minutes as if he had left the school without reason: *Mutshudeni uyu o sokou litsha u bvela phanda na u guda zwi kwamaho vhufunzi*, meaning: "This student just left the theological training." (Maambiwa 2006:64). Some of the Xitsonga-speaking church members suspect that he left the school after realising that the Tshivenda and Xitsonga-speaking students were not treated the same.

Cicero said that *the authority of those who teach is often an obstacle to those who want to learn*. After one of the Xitsonga-speaking students gave his sermon for the synodical examination, there was

a remark: *Ho tutuwedzwa uri vhafunzi vha gude dzin'we nyambo*, meaning “It was encouraged that ministers should learn other languages as well” (Maambiwa 2008:93).

Perhaps this was good advice, but it is a sensitive issue that the advice came only after the preaching was delivered in Tsonga, while it was not a concern with the other preacher who delivered his in Tshivenda. The meaning of the statement is unclear, but from the context the author interprets it to mean that it refers to the Xitsonga-speaking preacher and that he was being advised to learn Tshivenda so that he could also preach in Tshivenda for them to hear. In this light, the Soutpansberg Synod undermined the other language, Xitsonga in particular, in favour of Tshivenda.

Critical evaluation and the way forward

Having subscribed to the school of thought that advocates that *it is not the load that breaks you down, it is the way you carry it*, the author came to believe that it is not Calvinism that make people so conservative, but the way they apply it in their own churches and lives. It is difficult to understand that the Soutpansberg Synod which withdrew from unity locally, seeks unity with other Reformed churches from abroad. One of the ministers of this synod stated in one of his sermons when given a chance to preach in America: “The final goal of Our Lord is to have one big Christian community. That means we have to look beyond our local church” (www.pvb.thunder-bay.on.ca/NetSermons/Ephesians%203201-13%20World). Unless the sermon was trying to work on the consciousness of the audience for some other reason, loyal members of the Soutpansberg Synod would not pretend to preach unity which they dislike.

The misuse and abuse of the church order to assert the authority of certain individuals within the church has become evident. This has occurred because in many cases people rely heavily on the literal interpretation of the church order without adequate reference to theology, the Bible and the creativity of the Spirit. It has in some cases become a legal document aimed at punishing suspected guilt. One wrong usage of the church order is when it is used as a rule book of what can be done and what cannot be done (Burger 2010:317). It is not the synod which decides the installation and the dismissal of a local minister, but it is for the local church council which pays him to decide. No elder, minister or deacon should be deposed without firstly listening to his story. Unjust practices, like the deposition of a minister without properly following the church order (as indicated earlier), are a demonstration of a lack of both church administration and Christian love that needs to be discouraged and stopped for the sake of the unity of the church. The creativity of the Holy Spirit (accompanied by Christian brotherly love) should be considered when such sensitive matters are dealt with. Even the application of the church order should be done with love and truth. The synod should only help with advice to the churches when needed; it should not dictate. This also undermines Calvin's thinking that the local congregations should be autonomous and free to develop their own standards, church order and liturgy (Burger 2010:319).

The Calvinistic distinction between the visible and invisible church is poorly understood and often misused, and this has resulted in divisions and injustice (Burger 2010:317). It is unthinkable that all these things are taking place in the church, where there should be peace, justice, unity and harmony. If the meaning of the concept “church” were understood, people would start realising that the church as the property of God does not deserve what people are doing to or in it. The dwelling place of God should be a peaceful place and no one should use it to settle personal scores.

Although it is not the purpose of the study to indicate that even the disciplining mentioned was not done properly, the argument that suggests it is a stumbling block for unity does not hold water (Maambiwa 2005:11). Since it was not all members of the congregation who were claimed to be under discipline, it becomes illogical to deny the rest of the church unity because of a few individuals. Such a teaching is also foreign to the Reformed teaching. In other words, the decision of the synod to be out of unity on this basis is contradictory to both the Bible and the church order they claim to apply.

The discussion about language is long overdue because even John Calvin himself did not see it as a challenge to his ministry. The churches in South Africa (GKSA) should start emulating the way Calvin embraced people from different races and language backgrounds in the Geneva church. Although Geneva was a haven for refugees, from France and other European countries, John Calvin never doubted for a moment that foreigners were part of the congregation of Geneva. Not even language issues, ethnic or tribal reasons could stop the unity of the church. It is the duty of the synods under discussion to start taking unity as a priority seriously. Perhaps it was for the same reason that Calvin allowed local congregations the freedom to develop their own standards such as church order and liturgy. The congregation led by Calvin was made up of foreigners (Burger 2010:318). Local congregations which are part of Synod Soutpansberg and which hold second services under the same roof simultaneously with the other Reformed church of the same faith to preserve the Tshivenda

language (like the Reformed Church Sunnyside in Pretoria and others) need to study the multi-ethnic church of John Calvin in Geneva in order to transform for the sake of unity.

According to the synod the students who finished their studies at university should become students for a second time under the experienced ministers before they become full ministers. The minutes state: *Matshudeni vha fanela u funzwa nga ha u talutshedza Bivhili zwavhudi na u fhata dzipfunzo dzavho*, meaning “Students must be taught to explain the Bible clearly, and also to build their sermons” (Maambiwa 2008:94). This indicates that the sermons of theological students who had finished their studies did not meet the standard required by the synod, particularly in preaching. This is one of the areas in which the difference between Potchefstroom Theological School and Heidelberg Theological School becomes evident. It is the divisions of synods which gave birth to the ministers who know and those who do not know – the experienced and less experienced. This means that there will be ministers whose role is to follow while the others are leading the church. My articulation is that the setting up of a new theological school caused the decline in preaching. The theological training needs to be one if the church is hoping for unity and the other factors regarding staff training should be discussed without undermining the capability and educational qualifications of those who should teach in the school. If there is to be meaningful participation in theological training, one should not undermine these two things.

There is also a constant need to keep church leaders, particularly the ministers, pastors and theologians, mindful that it is the church of God that we are theologising and taking decisions about, not our church. The meaning of the Greek *Kuriake*, “that which belongs to the Lord”, should always remind us to think about the will of God for His church before we decide on how it should be run. That is why Brinkman (2010:310) says:

Only when we are fully aware of the fact that the church is not in the first place the product of our hands, but that the church is Christ's, we shall be able to overcome the Protestant prosperity, and to underestimate the visibility of the church. It is very true that many Reformed Christians tend to think that the church has emerged from their own response to God's word and they forget that the church already existed long before they came to believe in Christ, the church was created by God from generation to generation.

These sentiments are also shared by Burger (2010:315) when he says: “The Gospel did not start with us! We are not the first Christians and hopefully not the last.” It is bad for us to direct and misdirect the church as if we are the last Christians to live in it. We need to keep thinking about those who will come after us. This information can work in our consciousness to keep us remembering that whatever we decide for the church, we are going to be accountable before its Lord and Owner.

The Gereformeerde Church in SA appears to exist only on South African soil because, although this country has experienced a long history of racial and ethnic divisions and injustice which have now been abolished, the legacies of the past continue within the church (Nyomi 2010:393). In order to continue the legacy of Calvin we need to commit ourselves to Christian unity and reconciliation, which could be an effective means of overcoming the pains and injustices of the past. For the church to be healthy, it is not good to suspect each other. But it is good that people face each other to speak frankly and openly about their suspicions and differences, for the sake of the unity of the church. As long as we continue harbouring ambitions of being divided we are not demonstrating true Calvinism, or indeed the true Christian unity that we are called to typify.

Conclusion

There is a need to seek ways for Spirit-directed unity and justice in the *Gereformeerde Kerke* in South Africa, particularly Synod Soutpansberg. It is very clear that the present divisions in these churches are orchestrated by differences of opinions between leaders of the various denominations on certain aspects, but not from confessions as laid down in Calvin's thoughts. It is both the duty and the challenge of these churches to search for a spiritually guided justice and unity. The Reformed Churches cannot afford to remain purely reformed if they abandon the quest for unity and justice. Not even language or political history should stop the church from striving for unity. According to Calvin, who had a united church in Geneva, nothing (if not confessional disputes) should be a reason for church division. Calvin united his Church from different language groups, Synod Soutpansberg should do likewise. Calvin would rebuke those who have no interest in unity, who are stubborn enough not to yield an inch on secondary matters (www.reformdreflections.ca/faith-and-life/calvin-on-church-unity.html). In conclusion, the author agrees with Mahatma Gandhi saying that *no culture can live, if it attempts to be exclusive*.

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