

## Revisiting the Bases of Our Ecumenical Vision

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Text: Ephesians 4:1-6

*I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. (NRSV)*

When thinking of a biblical reflection on “Revisiting the Bases of Our Ecumenical Vision”, many passages came to my mind, such as, 1 Cor 12, Jn 17, Acts 15, Rom 12, Phil 2, Eph 4, etc. But I decided to focus my reflection on Ephesians 4:1-6 (especially verses 4-6). Because of its majestic and exalted content, the letter to the Ephesians has been hailed as “The Queen of the Epistles.” Ephesians 4 speaks about the fundamental nature and purpose of the church, and its relationships to the world in which it must live.<sup>2</sup> The author believes that a firm theological foundation leads to spiritual stability, so that God’s people must no longer be children “tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine” (Eph 4:12). The Christians are already “in Christ” but they are called to become what they truly already are. The Christians who are already in Christ must grow to maturity, to true identity, to “the full stature of Christ... no longer be children.” The author’s perspective is ecumenical, not merely congregational (“church” appears nine times in Ephesians, always of the universal church, never of the local congregation). Thus the instruction is not only about how church members should get along with each other in the local congregation, but how Christians of different groups relate to each other in the one church of God.

Like Colossians (and also 2 Thessalonians), the letter to the Ephesians is one of disputed letters of Paul or one of the “Deutero-Pauline letters”. It probably was not written by Paul but by a student or one of his associates, someone close to the Pauline tradition, “to reinterpret the Pauline gospel in a new situation.” The author is unknown. Whether the letter was indeed addressed to the Ephesians, we are not sure, but we will call it the letter to the Ephesians (in some key ancient manuscripts the words “in Ephesians” (Greek: *en epheso*) in Eph 1:1 are missing, suggesting that the letter might have been a general letter not to a concrete Christian community, but it is such a “general treatise or meditation” or a letter for circulation). The vocabulary is quite different from some other letters of Paul and different

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<sup>2</sup> Markus Barth, “Ephesians”, in *The Anchor Bible*, vol. 34A (New York: Double Day, 1974), 496. Barth writes: “Indeed Ephesians says more about the church than do large parts of other NT writings, and the first half of Eph 4 is more directly devoted to a description of the church’s existence and order than any other section of Ephesians. Nevertheless Paul is far from suggesting a self contained and boisterous church or doctrine of the Church.”

theological expressions are used. The letter does not reflect a specific local situation or color or problem and therefore the concrete occasion for writing the letter is not clear. The writer, in fact, admits that he does not know the readers personally (1:15; 3:2). Unlike Paul the Christian communities were not so enthusiastic anymore for the imminent return of Christ (Greek: *parousia*) and they began to organize themselves and arrange their lives in the world and at the same time “accommodating to their environment” (see the Household Code in Eph 5:22-6:9; cf. Col 3:18-4:1). The letter depends heavily on Colossians (around one-third of Colossians is found in Ephesians). This means the author of Ephesians knew and used the letter to the Colossians and extended it.<sup>3</sup> The entire emphasis of the letter is on the church and the most important in the ecclesiological teaching is the unity of the church.<sup>4</sup>

In Eph 2 the author deals with the pain and strife that result from the many divisions in the human family, with the animosity between Jews and Gentiles. The contention is that in Christ God has broken down that particular dividing wall of hostility and brought unity (between Jewish-Christians and gentile-Christians), since Christ is our peace in the household of God. “The Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (3:6). In the church all are included and embraced. In Eph 3, then, we see that it is our calling “to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities” (3:9-10). The chapter ends with a soaring and poetic prayer of praise to God and intercession for the Ephesians that they may “know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (3:19). They need that depth of spiritual strength and wisdom to enable them in the fulfilling of their calling.

In chapter 4(-6) the author now deals with the painful reality. The Ephesian Christians, like so many other Christian churches then and now, do not always reflect the mutual love and the witness to unity that is central to their life and faith. Far from it. The author therefore begs them to “lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (4:1) and describes the personal and inter-personal qualities which are necessary to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (4:3). The writer exhorts the Christians to live in unity in response to God’s plan and God’s gift of unity. “After Paul’s imprisonment and death the unity of the Christian communities, of the church, was endangered. Therefore, the concept of ‘church’ transcending the local churches became important. The church, meaning all local churches together, is the body of Christ.”<sup>5</sup>

The writer of Ephesians begins his exhortation in 4:1 with a big “Therefore” (Greek: *oun*) to link with what precedes (see also Rom 12:1), indicating that “Christian conduct follows from Christian doctrines.”<sup>6</sup> Scholars observe that in Paul’s letters, he often first stresses the

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<sup>3</sup> Britta Mohring, “Introduction to the New Testament” (unpublished).

<sup>4</sup> Markus Barth, 451. Barth writes: “Though the word ‘church’ is not used in Eph 4:1-16, this whole passage deals with its life, order, and purpose. In the form of imperatives and polemical statements, the constitution of the church is described under diverse aspects.”

<sup>5</sup> Britta Mohring, “Introduction...”

<sup>6</sup> Francis Foulkes, *Ephesians, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprinted 1988), 108.

doctrinal, and then proceeds to the practical and ethical. Arthur G. Patzia explains the relationship between chapters 1-3 and chapters 4-6: “If chapters 1-3 provide the *theological basis* for Christian unity, then chapters 4-6 contain the *practical instruction* for its maintenance.”<sup>7</sup> Following Pauline style the author of Ephesians here turns from the “grand theological vision of the nature of the church to the nature of Christian life – sometimes expressed as from indicative to imperative, from theology to ethics, from theory to practice.”<sup>8</sup> However, as Markus Barth states, the content of Eph 1-3 is doxological rather than dogmatic. “The direct connection of the ethical chapters 4-6 with the praise of God rather than with a doctrine of God is a specific feature of Ephesians.”<sup>9</sup> Before God demands anything of a person God gives grace and salvation. The author of Ephesians specifically admonishes the believers to “make every effort” to maintain unity and peace among them. There would be no need for that exhortation if no differences existed, if there were no pressures to break up, if there were no forces at work to divide the Christian body. “Christians are called to maintain and exhibit the unity given by God, not to create it... The author does not view his particular group as ‘the’ one church, but urges his readers to see themselves as already belonging to the one body of Christ composed of various groups.”<sup>10</sup> This demands that they exercise humility, gentleness, patience, and love toward one another.

In Eph 4:4-6 the writer gives the objective ground in reality for the subjective experience of unity that we are to pursue. The unity of the Spirit that we should be so diligent for is based on a given, objective unity outside ourselves that we have nothing to do with creating or defining. It is there and we are to humbly recognize it and submit to it and rejoice in it and live it out.<sup>11</sup> The fundamental unity is not a human achievement, but given through one Spirit, one Lord, one faith. The writer of Ephesians (4:4-6) uses the word ‘one’ seven different times: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. These seven things frame the doctrine that defines the Christian church, the body of Christ. In verses 4-6 we have Christian creedal elements<sup>12</sup> which speak of “oneness which exerts a unifying force beyond the community of the saints. The ‘calling’ is still going out. The ‘one body’ is still growing. The ‘one baptism’ is still a declaration – a confession of that sin which plagues the church and her members together with all non-believers. The Father’s government ‘over all’ and ‘through all,’ cannot possibly be restricted to those believing in him at the present time.”<sup>13</sup>

The UCCP (United Church of Christ in the Philippines) Constitution and By-Laws approved by the UCCP General Assembly 1998 in Manila, Article 11, Section 3, declares:

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<sup>7</sup> Arthur G. Patzia, *New International Biblical Commentary: Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon*, Vol. 10 (Hendrickson Publishers, 1990), 228.

<sup>8</sup> Eugene Boring and Fred B. Craddock, *The People’s New Testament Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 605.

<sup>9</sup> Markus Barth, 426.

<sup>10</sup> Eugene Boring and Fred B. Craddock, 606.

<sup>11</sup> John Piper, “One Spirit, One Body for All Time and All Peoples (Ephesians 4:1-6).”

<sup>12</sup> Here in Ephesians 4:4-6, the sequence of the confessional elements collected in the apostolic, Nicene, and later Christian creeds is anticipated in reverse order: first the Spirit is praised, then Christ, then the Father. For more details see Markus Barth, 463.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 496.

“The United Church of Christ in the Philippines is a *united and uniting Church* (italics mine), in response to the prayer of Jesus Christ ‘that they may all be one... that the world may believe that thou has sent me’ (John 17:21 RSV).” In Section 1 it says, “The United Church of Christ in the Philippines is an integral part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Jesus Christ.”

The writer of Ephesians does not say “eager to produce the unity of the Spirit” but “making every effort to maintain the unity.” We are never told to produce unity in the church. There is a unity that is already there by virtue of the very existence of a church. There is no need to create it. In fact we are unable to create unity. At this point the author of Ephesians “is interested not in the fabrication or existence of an invisible unity but in the factual manifestation and enjoyment of oneness.”<sup>14</sup>

Christian unity does not mean uniformity. The members of the church have received different gifts “just as the Spirit chooses” (see also 1 Cor 12:8-11); Rom 12:4-8). If Paul’s emphasis was on the diversity in a local congregation for it to function as a living body, in Ephesians the emphasis is on the one body of “the universal Church.” They have all been given to you by God so that together you can fulfill all the roles necessary “for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (4:12b-13). So the church must preserve and celebrate the differences among its members as part of the richness of its inheritance. Markus Barth states clearly, “No one among the saints can say He [she] is not equipped or has nothing to contribute, for everyone is given a gift and an appointment.”<sup>15</sup> Further he writes, “The church cannot be one except when it attests to its God-given oneness by proving unity in diversity, and when it ventures to respect diversity in unity. Uniformity would be the alternative – a form of death which is recommended neither by 1 Cor 12, nor by Eph 4, nor by any other of the ecclesiastic passages of the NT.”<sup>16</sup>

In Indonesia we have our official national slogan or motto, “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika” which is from old Javanese language and is often loosely translated as ‘Unity in Diversity’ but it literally means “(although) in pieces, yet one”. This motto is stated in the national symbol, *Garuda Pancasila* (as written on the scroll gripped by the Garuda’s leg), and in the principal national constitution of Indonesia, *Undang-Undang Dasar Negara Republik Indonesia Tahun 1945*.<sup>17</sup> Indonesia consists of thousands of islands, hundreds of ethnic groups, many local languages, and several religions. But we are united to become one Indonesian country (*Negara Indonesia*). We have one national language (*Bahasa Indonesia*), and one nation that is *Bangsa Indonesia*. We are one in our diversity or plurality. Unity in diversity and diversity in unity. In the church of Christ the rich and poor alike are to gather on the same basis, without distinction and certainly without favor – slaves and free, Jews and Gentiles, men and women, black, red, white, or yellow (Gal 3:28; Col 3:11; cf. 1 Cor 12:13). This is not the way the church has always been, but this is the way the church ought to be. The church crosses all natural distinctions and all boundaries that men and women erect and gathers all kinds of people, without exception, into one body. There is no other grouping in the world that attempts to

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 463.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 452.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 466.

<sup>17</sup> “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika,” [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhinneka\\_Tunggal\\_Ika](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhinneka_Tunggal_Ika)

unite people from such widely variant origins and sources. But we do not ignore these boundaries easily. Friction often arises because of them. It was there in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, as you can see in several places in the Scriptures. In the letter to the Philippians two ladies who could not get along with each other are named, Euodia and Syntyche, who had trouble working together (Phil 4:2). The church is not a conglomeration of individuals who happen to agree upon certain things. It is bound together as an organism in a bodily unity. It cannot therefore derive power from the association of individuals in a society. The church is intended to be an instrument of life. There were distinctions of personality then, and they still exist here in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The strength of the church never comes from its numbers. It is the Spirit that is the true power of the church, and there is only one Spirit. The Spirit is the same everywhere no matter where the church exists – in every place and in every age. No one is excluded. That is why truth remains unchangeable; the passing of time does not change it. It is impossible to make any meaningful or significant union apart from this unity which is only produced by the Spirit. R. Alan Culpepper clearly states, “God’s grace is never subject to the limitations and boundaries of any nation, church, group, or race. Those who would exclude others thereby exclude themselves. Human beings may be instruments of God’s grace for others, but we are never free to set limits on who may receive that grace. Throughout history, the gospel has always been more radically inclusive than any group, denomination, or church, so we continually struggle for a breadth of love and acceptance that more nearly approximates the breadth of God’s love. The paradox of the gospel, therefore, is that the unlimited grace that it offers so scandalizes us that we are unable to receive it.”<sup>18</sup>

I am afraid that a real threat to our genuine unity is that in a new form or style we add or create a new wall of partition or separation above the dividing wall that Christ has already destroyed or abolished. Wong Wai Ching expresses her concern in her brief experience with the ecumenical movement. She writes:

I found the experience of division to be at the very heart of our ecumenical fellowship. Many of our excellent statements and declarations are therefore a sarcastic witness to our failure to work with differences at home... We need to cultivate a spiritual depth that can stand the pain of division while continuously nurturing new strengths to build unity. Most of all, we need to nurture a spirituality that would allow us to venture outside of our comfortable, stable and fixed territories and to meet the others in their own ‘homes’.<sup>19</sup>

Hope S. Antone expresses similar feeling when she writes, “I always find it very unfortunate that being evangelical and being ecumenical are seen to be in conflict with each other. I strongly believe that being ecumenical and being evangelical need not be opposed to each

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<sup>18</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, “Luke” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 108.

<sup>19</sup> Wong Wai Ching Angela, “Negotiating Christian Unity in a Pluralistic World,” in *Living in Oikoumene*, edited by Hope S. Antone (Hong Kong: CCA, 2003), 75-76.

<sup>20</sup> Hope S. Antone, “Mission and Evangelism with an Ecumenical Vision”, in *Windows into Ecumenism: Essays in Honour of Ahn Jae Woong* (Hong Kong: Christian Conference of Asia, 2005), 133.

other, in fact they need to go together. If we revisit our history, that is how it actually started."<sup>20</sup> Further she writes, "Our ecumenical commitment is that we can meaningfully and effectively participate together if, while being rooted in our own faith communities, we are open to learning, working and living with other faiths and groups."<sup>21</sup> Sam Kobia, writes, "The spirit is at work in the different ecclesiastical realities and that we should therefore listen to one another."<sup>22</sup>

The churches in Asia today are called and challenged to make the Gospel, the Good News relevant for the people in every context and situation. We live in a changing world but the Word is always the same. CCA has celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2007. There is need to rethink or revisit the biblical bases of Our Ecumenical Vision toward a "New Ecumenism" in order to further explicate the issue of unity and diversity in Asia or in order to make "the dream of belonging together still valid for us today" and the churches in Asia are truly Asian. As Wong Wai Ching asks, "What kind of vision can we project as we move into the future?"<sup>23</sup> Ahn Jae Woong also asks, "As Asian Christians, what can we offer to the rest of Asia and the world in terms of important religious values for living in today's world?"<sup>24</sup> But Sam Kobia convincingly affirms that "Life-centered vision will inevitably be a key component of ecumenism in the twenty-first century."<sup>25</sup> He refers to Konrad Raiser who had already anticipated it, "It has become ever clearer that the perspective of 'the whole inhabited earth', based on a traditional human-centered view of the world and of history, is still too limited. One major challenge facing the ecumenical movement is thus the need to develop a life-centered understanding of the *oikoumene* which embraces all of God's creation."<sup>26</sup>

The Biblical warrant for mission is no longer the so-called Great Commission (Mt 28:18-20). The church is called to be co-worker with God in the *missio Dei*, proclaiming and living out God's love (Lk 4:16-21; cf., Mt 25: 31-46). The Vatican Council documents and more recent statements like *Evangelii Nuntiandi* express the concept of evangelization in broader terms: "Christians should work to bring about a change in personal and collective consciences of people, their activities and ways of life, and the milieux in which they live."<sup>27</sup>

"We need to develop new ways of speaking about mission that name and reject the wrongs of the past, embrace what is good, and respond in new ways to the challenges facing the Asian churches and the modern world... Any understanding or definition of mission that

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>22</sup> Sam Kobia, "New Vision and Challenges to Ecumenism in the Twenty-first Century," in *Windows into Ecumenism, Essays in Honour of Ahn Jae Woong* (Hong Kong: Christian Conference of Asia, 2005), 24.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>24</sup> Ahn Jae Woong, "The God who Matters," in *Living in Oikoumene*, edited by Hope S. Antone (Hongkong: CCA, 2003), 10.

<sup>25</sup> Sam Kobia, "New Vision and Challenges to Ecumenism in the Twenty-first Century", 28.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Tom Michel, "The Challenge on Interfaith Dialogue," paper presented at the Second Congress of Asian Theologians (Bangalore, India, 8-15 August 1999; unpublished).

divides the community into saved/unsaved, reached/unreached and seeks to convert people into a particular understanding of the Christian faith or separate Christian and non-Christian into disparate human communities is inconsistent with the gospel message," says Monica J. Melanchthon.<sup>28</sup>

Bishop Erme R Camba convincingly states: "It is about time for us to understand that mission is not ours. For the church actually does not have it[s] own mission apart from the mission of God. Mission, rightly understood, is *missio Dei*, the mission of God."<sup>29</sup> Further he adds, I am bringing up the idea of *missio Dei*, to put us in wider perspective of our mission as a church. For the *missio Dei* is larger than the Church. God's mission embraces both the Church and the world and in which the Church is privileged to participate."<sup>30</sup>

The churches in Asia are challenged to develop new goals and see new visions of opportunities through the ecumenical movement (e.g. the CCA) and should (1) initiate ways of entering into intra-faith and inter-faith dialogues within the region,<sup>31</sup> (2) initiate cultural renewal that provides the space, opportunity, and respect for the entry of women into increasingly significant roles in the life of the church and God's mission, and (3) initiate a study on the impact of modern technology and the problems of poverty and aging and their impact on mission and evangelism. It is the urgent need for and responsibility of Christians to make their response to the Gospel or the Word of God as concrete and lively as possible. Our context influences our understanding of God and the expression of our faith. We can only speak about a theology that makes sense at a certain place and in a certain time. Therefore, the churches in Asia need to undertake serious analysis of their own contexts, practices, and theologies. The churches in Asia are called to stand with the victims of injustice and violence and thus expose and denounce evil powers and situations that distort and disrupt creation and dehumanize life in society.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Monica J. Melanchthon, "Mission in the Asian Context in the Third Millenium: Issues, Questions and Needs," unpublished paper presented at the Seminar on Mission, October 25-30, 2000 in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. Malaysia, 2.

<sup>29</sup> Erme R. Camba, unpublished paper presented at the Athens 2005 Mission Conference: Mission as Healing and Reconciliation, 3.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*; see also David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 10.

<sup>31</sup> John Hick, "Whatever Path Men Choose Is Mine," in *Christianity and Other Religions*, eds. John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 188. Hick argues that different religions are "equals, though they each may have different emphases." Christianity, he says, is not superior, but one partner in the quest for salvation. We are not to seek one world religion but rather we look to the day when "the ecumenical spirit which has so largely transformed Christianity will increasingly affect relations between the world faiths."

<sup>32</sup> See also Robinson Radjagukguk, "Biblico-Theological Foundations of Mission through Asian Eyes," in *CTC Bulletin*, Vol. XXIV, Nos. 1-2 (April-August 2008), 16-26.