

WRF Theological Commission

Statement on Unity & Ecumenism

Introduction

This is now our fourth project as a Theological Commission. We have already presented three documents which have been approved by the General Assembly of the WRF:

The WRF Statement of Faith

The WRF Statement of Reformed Theological Identity

The WRF Statement on Ecclesiology

When we presented our Statement on Ecclesiology to the last WRF General Assembly, we offered a proposal for our next project: ‘As a Theological Commission, we would like to continue our work in this area by exploring further what we have said about the nature of the church and especially its unity. Given the divisions within the Reformed community, not least our denominationalism, we would like to explore the issue of ecumenism. This is a word which produces a negative reaction among many Reformed people but we believe that it can be recovered by developing a solidly biblical and theological ecumenism’. This new project was approved by the General Assembly.

Programme of Work

The following is a brief summary of our work over the past four years.

The Scriptures

Given the vital importance of Scripture in determining what we ought to believe regarding the unity of the church, we spent time considering key texts. Each member of the Theological Commission presented a paper on a passage for discussion and, at most of our meetings, we engaged with relevant Scriptures. These included Matthew 6:5-15; Romans 14-15; 1 Corinthians 1-3; Ephesians 4:1-16; Philippians 2; Philippians 3:15-16; and Revelation 21:1 – 22:5. We also invited an African theologian, Dr Liz Mburu, Professor of New Testament and Greek at the International Leadership University, Africa International University and Pan Africa Christian University in Nairobi, to lead our discussion of John 17 where we find Jesus’ prayer for the unity of the church.

Ecumenical Documents

In order to determine the theological direction of the ecumenical movement we studied a number of important documents. These included:

1. *Koinonia: God's Gift and Calling: The Hiroshima Report of the International Reformed-Anglican Dialogue (IRAD)*, 2020.
2. The World Council of Churches: 'The Church: Towards a Common Vision' (Faith and Order Paper No. 214, 2013).
3. *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church). A Roman Catholic document from Vatican II.
4. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, the Vatican II document on Ecumenism.
5. *In One Body Through the Cross: The Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity and The Ecumenical Future* (2004), containing personal contributions from the authors of the Proposal.

General Issues

As well as these more specific documents, we discussed a paper entitled, 'The Unity of God's people in the Old Testament'. We also had a paper on 'The Ecumenical Quest', being a discussion of unity as an essential element in the creedal definition of the doctrine of the church. In addition, we discussed the question of open or closed communion, clearly a vital subject if ecumenism is to be successful. On that subject, we had two papers before us, one on the early church view of the matter, with a particular focus on Nicaea and one on Calvin's view of the subject. We also had a general debate on 'Barriers to Ecumenism', with each member of the Commission contributing a short paper. During our work, we had several discussions about 'denominations', 'traditions' and 'congregations'. We recognised that the roots of some of our divisions lies in some denominations being sectarian. We agreed that the papers from the recent consultation on denominationalism, sponsored by the WRF USA regional group, can contribute to this debate. Finally, we discussed a fascinating survey undertaken by one of our members on attitudes to ecumenism among his contemporaries.

Conclusions

On the basis of the work described above, we reached the following twenty one conclusions, which we have summarised under a number of headings, indicating their significance:

Biblical and Theological Foundation

1. The breadth and depth of the biblical teaching on the unity of the church was evidenced by the exegetical papers written and discussed by members of the Theological Commission. However, despite being central to Scripture, this teaching on the unity of the church has been neglected by many in the Reformed tradition.
2. In John 17, Jesus prays that the unity of the church would be a reflection of the relationships within the Trinity, thus setting church unity in the context of the doctrine of God. This means that the unity of the church is not a peripheral issue but is at the very core of Christian theology.
3. The unity of God's people is not simply a New Testament teaching but is the focus of the whole Bible given the context and framework of God's covenant with Israel. Given that unity in the NT may in some ways be less visible, we recognise the significance of redemptive historical progress of revelation in the fulfilment of redemption.
4. In our previous report on Ecclesiology, we noted that the church is created by God through the work of the Holy Spirit but is not a continuation of the Incarnation. In other words, it is both a divine and a human institution but is not a 'two nature' institution. One possible discussion might be to relate unity to sanctification, in that both are only partial in this age but will be complete in the age to come.
5. Various theologians and various ecumenical documents (including the WCC document 'Towards a Common Vision') have made important statements about unity being eschatological, with unity only finally achieved in the new creation. While it is true that all of God's purposes will finally be achieved in the eschaton, this must not be used as an excuse to undermine work for unity here and now.
6. Attempts to set 'truth' and 'unity' over against one another, which has often been used to undermine the importance of working for unity, is a fundamental flaw in Reformed engagement with Scripture. How to proclaim truth and pursue unity at the same time is probably the most significant theological challenge of Reformed ecumenism.

Ecumenical Movement and the Reformed Response

7. We must not forget that the ecumenical movement arose out of the World Missionary Conference in 1910 and was a positive attempt to bring Christians together, in obedience to the teaching of Scripture, for the good of the church and in order to advance mission.

8. The ecumenical movement began with a strong emphasis on 'Faith and Order', dealing seriously with the doctrinal and ecclesiological differences between denominations. This, however, has changed over time such that the main emphasis now is on fellowship (*koinonia*) with a tendency to play down doctrinal differences. We believe that this development weakens the search for true unity.
9. Criticisms of the ecumenical movement, some of which are legitimate, have allowed those in the Reformed tradition to adopt a negative attitude to church unity, instead of seeking a legitimate and Reformed ecumenism.
10. In our discussions and especially in the survey undertaken by our colleague Ramesh Chand, it is clear that most Reformed Christians say that they believe in working for the unity of the church, while at the same time believing that it will never happen!

Diagnosing Distinctions and Divisions

11. Paul's concerns about division and disunity, as expressed in 1st Corinthians 1:10-13 should present a real challenge to us because Christ is not divided. Hence when we say, 'I am Baptist' or 'I am Presbyterian' or 'I am Methodist' or 'I am Catholic', are we not guilty of dividing Christ? Some might argue that such divisions are necessary but what about internal divisions even among Reformed Presbyterians: 'I am PCA', 'I am OPC', 'I am EPC', 'I am PCUSA' and so on?
12. At the same time, we must recognize that, while these labels can be signs of division, not all distinctions are divisions.
13. Concerning Roman Catholic teaching on the unity of the church, we noted that there was much with which we could agree but also much that was foreign to a Reformed understanding of the church. Nevertheless, compared to modern liberal and radical views of the church, we saw a real attempt by Catholics to root the nature of the church in Scripture, the Trinity and the teaching of the Fathers. Of course this point must take into account the key themes in RC ecclesiology, so that we understand Roman Catholicism as a coherent entity, before appreciating what we have in common.

Pursuing Unity

14. We have been challenged by the truth that seeking the unity of the church is a mandate and not an option. Christ prayed in John 17 for observable unity.
15. We believe that the creeds provide a basis for unity by stating what is essential. It is also worth making the point that the Reformation Confessions, although historically

written to differentiate the Reformed faith from other expressions of Christianity, are in many ways intended to express unity, not division, not least because they also refer back to the ecumenical creeds.

WRF and Church Unity

16. It is clear to us that barriers to ecumenical endeavour are not always doctrinal and ethical. Barriers can include human pride, the desire for control or power and parochialism.
17. On a practical ecumenical level, we need to identify the limits of co-operation and fellowship, of diversity and unity. What are the boundary markers and where are the 'red lines'? As we move to our next project of encouraging WRF members to participate in ecumenical dialogue, this discussion becomes a priority.
18. We recognise that there are different views as to the overall objective of ecumenism. On the one hand, there are those who see it as working towards full institutional and sacramental communion; whereas, on the other hand, there are those who see it as working towards cooperation in the mission of God.
19. We believe that the Lord's Table should be open to all believers, rather than those who share denominational characteristics.
20. We affirm the importance of dialogue and openness to other views. To quote one of our members: 'The search for unity, must be undertaken, learning from the past and in penitence for wounding the body of Christ, and in obedience to Word of God and in company with the Holy Spirit'. Similarly, in the paper by Dr Liz Mburu on John 17, we explored strategies for promoting unity among different cultural and theological traditions, highlighting the significance of understanding worldviews and fostering genuine love within the Christian community. Our conviction of the catholicity of the church and Bavinck's theme of the full expression of God's purposes in diversity should incline us to this stance.
21. We believe that the WRF can assist the process of embedding ecumenism in the life of the local church.

Recommendations

Given our conclusions, we urge the World Reformed Fellowship to note the following recommendations:

1. Pursue the biblical teaching on the unity of the church and its vital importance for orthodox Reformed theology and the credibility of its witness and outreach.
2. Further explore the obstacles to church unity within the Reformed tradition and ways in which they can be addressed.
3. Continue to expand inclusion of those from the Reformed tradition in the WRF.
4. Encourage member denominations to recognise each other and allow transfer of members and ministers.
5. Engage more fully in the WEA and other wider groups.
6. Seek dialogue with those from other traditions. The WRF is well-placed to engage in such dialogue and it may be simpler and less divisive than member churches themselves developing these dialogues.

Our proposal to the WRF General Assembly is that the Theological Commission be instructed to continue its work on the unity of the church, thus enabling the WRF to carry out these recommendations.

Theological Rationale: The Case for Ecumenism

To justify our recommendations and to help persuade some who remain to be convinced, we present the following argument for Reformed Ecumenism.

In the first section, we outline four key theological and ecclesiological arguments in support of Reformed ecumenism. The second section will examine several classical objections commonly raised against such efforts. Finally, the third section will offer responses to these objections, aiming to demonstrate that faithful ecumenical participation is not only possible but necessary within a Reformed framework.

Four Arguments for Reformed Ecumenism

Four key theological and ecclesiological arguments in support of Reformed ecumenism:

Eschatological Argument

One of the most compelling theological grounds for ecumenical engagement among Reformed churches lies in our eschatological hope, which emphasizes continuity rather than discontinuity between the present creation and the new creation. Louis Berkhof, in his treatment of eschatology, highlights a key distinction between Lutheran and Reformed perspectives on the final state. Reformed theologians characteristically emphasize the renewal and transformation of the present creation rather than envisioning its complete replacement by an entirely new one.¹ This distinction reflects a broader eschatological orientation: Reformed theology is marked by a strong sense of continuity rather than discontinuity.

In the eschaton, all the elect will be perfectly sanctified and made holy. However, this final state is not disconnected from the present; believers are called even now to grow in sanctification and pursue holiness. It would be inconsistent and theologically irresponsible to minimize the importance of sanctification in this life while affirming that believers will one day be perfected.

¹ Cf. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1938), 737.

Furthermore, Reformed eschatology affirms that the elect will consist not only of those within the Reformed tradition but also of members of other traditions who have saving faith in Christ. If, in our eschatological vision, we anticipate a full communion of all the elect from diverse ecclesial backgrounds, then, in keeping with the Reformed emphasis on continuity, we are compelled to pursue visible unity among the churches in the present. Rather than relegating unity to a sudden and unprepared event at the end of time, we should actively strive toward it here and now. Our eschatological hope should serve not as an excuse for passivity but as a mandate for present action toward ecclesial unity.

Christological Argument

A second theological basis for Reformed ecumenism arises from the Christological affirmation of the unity of the body of Christ. While the members of Christ's body are many, Scripture affirms that 'we, who are many, are one body' (1 Cor. 10:17). The persistent divisions within the visible church must be humbly acknowledged as a manifestation of human sinfulness: divisions which stand in tension, if not outright contradiction, to the ontological unity of Christ's body. If we genuinely affirm our belief in the one body of Christ, then we are compelled to pursue visible expressions of that unity through sincere and sustained ecumenical engagement. Such efforts are not optional but necessary for the church to reflect more faithfully the reality of the *una sancta catholica ecclesia*.

Moreover, Paul's declaration in Colossians 3:3 that the life of the believer is 'hidden with Christ in God' deepens our understanding of this unity. This 'hiddenness' implies a spiritual unity that may not be fully visible or institutionally realized at present but which remains a real and enduring participation in the life of Christ. The invisible dimension of the church's unity, grounded in Christ himself, is not a justification for complacency but a theological call to action. As Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 4:18, we are not to fix our eyes on what is seen but on what is unseen. This unseen unity should serve as both a promise and a paradigm: a promise of eschatological fulfillment and a paradigm for present ecclesial striving.

Therefore, rather than retreating into theological abstraction, that is, relying entirely on the idea of invisible unity, or accepting fragmentation as normative, the Reformed tradition, rooted in its Christological commitments, ought to actively pursue unity as both a theological imperative and a witness to the world.

Pneumatological Argument

A third theological basis for Reformed ecumenism is the communion of the saints in the fellowship of the Spirit. Christology emphasises the grounds of our unity and eschatology the promise of realised unity; pneumatology shows that we now experience and grow in unity. This is part of the pervasive pattern in which the Spirit brings to perfection what is intended by the Father and achieved by the Son. Scripture does not describe the gift of the Spirit as granted to individuals who are then, in a second movement, drawn to one another in communion. Rather, the Spirit comes to individuals as he comes to the church, and he comes to the church as he comes to individuals (1 Cor 3:16-17; 12:13). This was demonstrated at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came like a mighty rushing wind filling the whole house and as divided tongues of fire to rest on each believer (Acts 2:1-4). Since the gift of the Spirit is at once individual and corporate, participation in the communion of the saints is a necessary entailment of union with Christ (Eph 2:18-22). That gift of unity is not subsequent to the gift of salvation, it is an aspect of salvation.

This communion cannot remain an abstraction. Berkouwer insists that the body of Christ must live in ‘concrete fellowship’: there can be no theoretical contemplation of an isolated ‘essence’ of the church as a merely ‘mystical’ reality.² The commonplaces of church life in which Christians welcome one another, encourage and admonish, confess the faith, sing, pray, teach, forgive, share gifts, visit, support the poor and suffering, and submit to one another is the community of the saints in and by the Spirit. It is the mode in which the unity created in Christ is realised among us. Nor is this fellowship confined to the local congregation. The unity text of Ephesians 4:4-6 which states ‘There is one body and one Spirit ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all’ may be first addressed to the believers in the city of Ephesus but must also be true for all believers in all places. In the New Testament, fellowship between congregations was expressed in common apostolic oversight (Acts 14:23; 15:22; 2 Cor 11:28; Col 1:24-2:3; 1 Peter 1:1); greetings (Rom 16:5ff; Col 4:15); the exchange of writings (Col 4:16); the exchange of personnel (Col 4:12; Rom 16:1, 3; Acts 18:2); financial support (Rom 15:25ff; 2 Cor 8:19) maintaining the apostolic faith (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor 15:1-2; Gal 1:6-9; Eph 4:3-6; 2 Tim 1:13-14; 2 Tim 2:2; Titus 1:9; 2 John 9; Jude 3) and common practices (1 Cor 4:17; 7:17; 11:16; 13:33,34; 16:1; 2 Thess 3:6). Each of these is a work of the Holy Spirit among the churches.

² Berkouwer, *The Church*, 88.

Participation in the Spirit is progressive. The church is indwelt by the Spirit and exists in the Spirit, and this will and must result in growth, so that in local, global, historical and heavenly dimensions we pray for and expect a growing communion of the saints. This is not always observable: concrete communion in love and faith may seem to diminish rather than progress. That should be a reason neither for presumption nor for pessimism, but an encouragement to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph 4:3).

Our communion in the Spirit includes the church triumphant. In Christ, believers now have access to God in the heavenly temple (Heb. 4:16; 7:19; 10:19–22; 13:10) and worship with those in glory (Heb 12:24). John’s visions in Revelation show twenty-four elders, representative of the people of God, joining with the heavenly host in praise (Rev. 4:4–10).³ Later he sees the 144,000 which is the incalculable multitude in God’s presence, praising him (Rev. 7:9–17 cf 14:3). Beale concludes that this is ‘the entire company of the redeemed’.⁴ Each of these visions show the whole church, triumphant and militant, sharing in heavenly worship. When the church is seen from the heavenly perspective it encompasses all who have faith in Christ and shows us in common worship. As we praise God by the power of the Spirit, we join our voices with the heavenly assembly who are also filled by the Spirit.

Differentiation between essential and non-essential

A fourth foundational argument for Reformed ecumenism is rooted in the critical distinction between the essential and non-essential elements of the Christian faith. The oft-cited maxim, ‘*In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity*’, though originating in the 17th century, remains profoundly relevant for the contemporary church. This principle, historically attributed to Rupertus Meldenius, encapsulates a posture of theological humility and ecclesial maturity that is vital for ecumenical engagement.

Failure to differentiate between what is essential to the Christian faith and what belongs to the realm of theological adiaphora has repeatedly led to unnecessary fragmentation within the one holy catholic Church. When secondary matters are elevated to the level of primary doctrinal importance, the result is not only division but often the erosion of Christian charity. Hostility

³ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 322.

⁴ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 438.

and suspicion replace mutual respect and cooperation, thereby undermining the witness of the Church in the world.

The Reformed tradition, while strongly confessional, has historically affirmed a principled distinction between core doctrines (such as the Trinity, the person and work of Christ, salvation through faith, and the authority of Scripture) and matters on which Christians may legitimately disagree without compromising the integrity of the faith.

If we go back further to the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, arguably the most ecumenical creed, we find that the essentials consist of the doctrine of Trinity and the doctrines of the Person and Work of Christ.

This distinction should encourage greater openness to collaboration and communion with other Christian traditions that affirm the essentials of the gospel, even while differing on secondary theological issues. For example, most churches will accept baptism that has been administered by Trinitarian churches. Furthermore, ecumenical activity should not be limited only to theological dialogue, it can be developed to include shared worship and shared testimony/mission as well.

Therefore, in the spirit of charity and fidelity to the truth, Reformed ecumenism must be grounded in the wise and discerning application of this classical distinction. Such an approach not only honours theological conviction but also nurtures the unity for which Christ himself prayed (cf. John 17:21).

Objections to Reformed Ecumenism

As with any theological proposal, Reformed ecumenism is not without its critics. It is important to acknowledge that some objections arise not from hostility but from genuine concern for the theological integrity and spiritual health of the church. These critiques deserve careful consideration. Among the most frequently raised objections, at least four merit particular attention.

The Risk of Losing Reformed Identity

One of the most prominent concerns centres on the potential erosion of Reformed theological identity. Critics argue that ecumenical engagement, especially when pursued for the sake of

institutional or visible unity, may lead to the dilution or marginalization of the distinct theological convictions that define the Reformed tradition. In striving for agreement across confessional boundaries, there is a real danger that theological distinctives may be softened or altogether sacrificed in favor of generalized expressions of Christian belief.

Ecumenical dialogues might be tempted to prioritize consensus over clarity, resulting in agreements that reflect the lowest common theological denominator. This tendency can create a false sense of unity, one that is achieved not through deep mutual understanding but through the omission of theological depth and particularity. When distinct confessional voices are muted in the name of unity, the church loses the richness of its theological diversity and risks embracing a superficial harmony that fails to honour the full spectrum of Christian thought.

Moreover, there is concern that ecumenical contexts sometimes discourage participants from offering strong, tradition-specific contributions out of fear that such honesty may disrupt the process or delay consensus. As a result, what is often labelled as ‘unity’ may in fact be a compromise that obscures or diminishes the unique contributions of the Reformed theological heritage.

Love without Truth

A second objection to Reformed ecumenism concerns the tendency within some ecumenical circles to promote an abstract or sentimentally vague notion of love that is detached from doctrinal truth. The popular slogan ‘*Doctrine divides, love unites*’, often cited within unsound or overly accommodative ecumenical movements, reflects a false dichotomy that undermines both theological integrity and genuine Christian charity.

Critics rightly argue that true Christian love cannot be properly understood or practiced apart from a robust commitment to truth. The New Testament vision of love is never void of content; it is shaped, informed, and regulated by divine revelation. Indeed, to love rightly is to love in accordance with what God has revealed about himself, the world, and humanity. Doctrinal clarity is not a hindrance to love but its necessary condition. Without truth as its foundation, love becomes little more than emotional sentimentality or mere humanistic tolerance.

Furthermore, there is concern that in such ecumenical contexts, orthodoxy is often downplayed or caricatured as self-righteous rigidity. Theological conviction is treated with suspicion, and the assertion of doctrinal truth is frequently dismissed as a form of self-absolutization or sectarianism. As a result, theological affirmations are increasingly viewed not as universal claims rooted in Scripture and the catholic tradition, but as perspectival opinions, valid only within the boundaries of a particular faith community.

In the face of contemporary scepticism about truth, we affirm with humility and faith that our confidence in the revelation of truth rests not on human capacity alone but on God's gracious initiative in making that truth known. When this posture of humble trust is set aside, the result is often a form of agnosticism that offers little promise for constructive and fruitful ecumenical engagement.

This relativizing of theological truth not only undermines the confessional integrity of the Reformed tradition but also erodes the Church's prophetic witness. A love that is separated from truth, far from fostering unity, ultimately fosters confusion and theological indifference. Authentic ecumenism, then, must resist the temptation to sacrifice doctrinal clarity on the altar of sentimental unity, and instead pursue a communion grounded in both truth and love.

Confessional Commitment vs. Ecumenical Engagement

A third objection concerns the perceived incompatibility between robust confessionalism and ecumenical involvement. From this perspective, ecumenism is often seen as a sign of diluted confessional identity, an endeavour that inevitably requires the softening, compromising, or even abandonment of one's theological commitments in order to achieve broader unity. The fear is that one cannot meaningfully engage in ecumenical dialogue while maintaining fidelity to the distinct doctrines and emphases of a particular confessional tradition.

Those who hold this view argue that to be genuinely confessional is, by definition, to maintain a clear theological boundary that cannot be negotiated in the interest of consensus. Ecumenism, then, appears as a project that prioritizes relational harmony over doctrinal clarity and communal distinctiveness. As a result, one is forced into a binary: either remain confessional and preserve theological integrity, or embrace ecumenism at the cost of weakening one's confessional stance.

This objection highlights the tension many feel between the pursuit of ecclesial unity and the preservation of doctrinal distinctiveness. It raises a serious and necessary question: Can confessional churches engage ecumenically without compromising their theological foundations? While some may answer in the negative, insisting that the two are mutually exclusive, this critique rightly cautions against a form of ecumenism that would render confessional identity negotiable or irrelevant.

The Danger of Cheap Ecumenism

A fourth and pressing objection is the risk of what might be termed *cheap ecumenism*: a superficial unity achieved at the expense of theological seriousness. This concern is especially acute in contexts where one sometimes encounters well-meaning but theologically inadequate slogans such as, ‘*Let us set aside our differences; after all, we are basically the same.*’ While such statements may be intended to foster harmony, they often reflect a troubling tendency to avoid, rather than engage, substantive theological differences.

This form of ecumenism represents a kind of escapism: an unwillingness to acknowledge or wrestle with real doctrinal disagreements that exist among Christian traditions. Instead of encouraging honest dialogue and mutual theological enrichment, cheap ecumenism settles for a veneer of unity that fails to address the deeper divisions within the body of Christ. It promotes consensus without clarity and fellowship without theological depth.

Such an approach is ultimately unfruitful and unsustainable. By masking disagreements rather than addressing them, it deprives the church of the opportunity to grow through rigorous theological exchange. It also fosters a form of unity that is fragile and illusory, because it is not rooted in truth. Far from being a constructive path forward, cheap ecumenism runs the risk of trivializing the very theological convictions that have historically shaped and sustained the life of the church.

Responses to the Objections

In this third and final section, we offer responses to the objections outlined above, recognizing that many of these concerns are legitimate and arise from a sincere commitment to the health and faithfulness of the church. Each objection raises important issues, but none of them, when carefully examined, presents an insurmountable barrier to principled ecumenical engagement.

From A Strong Theological Identity to True Catholicity

Far from threatening theological identity, meaningful ecumenical engagement is most fruitful when it arises from a deep and confident rootedness in one's own confessional tradition. A robust Reformed identity does not preclude dialogue with other Christian traditions; rather, it enables such dialogue to be conducted with clarity, integrity, and mutual respect. In this sense, theological maturity within one's own tradition is not a hindrance to ecumenism; it is a prerequisite for it.

Conversely, the fear of ecumenical engagement may signal an unresolved insecurity or a lack of clarity regarding one's own theological commitments. Those who are firmly grounded in the Reformed tradition should be able to articulate its distinctive contributions to the wider Church while remaining open to learning from others. Ecumenism does not demand the abandonment of particularity, but rather its integration into a broader vision of the *una sancta catholica ecclesia*.

The Reformed tradition, with its historic concern for the unity and purity of the church, is well positioned to contribute meaningfully to ecumenical conversations. It is precisely by maintaining our confessional identity that we can participate in the building up of a more visible and faithful expression of the church's catholicity.

Truth without Love Is Equally Unbiblical

While the concern over a sentimentalized notion of love detached from truth is valid, it is equally important to recognize that truth without love is no less a distortion of the biblical witness. Scripture consistently holds together the inseparability of truth and love. As Jesus declared, 'The truth will set you free' (John 8:32) - a freedom that includes not only liberation from sin and error but also the freedom to love rightly. Reformed orthodoxy that is devoid of charity becomes lifeless, and even harmful; it may defend correct doctrine, yet fail to reflect the heart of the gospel.

Genuine knowledge of the truth should lead to deeper compassion, greater humility, and a stronger desire for fellowship with others who participate in the body of Christ. If doctrinal conviction does not produce love for one's neighbour, fellow Christians from other traditions included, then it is not a full expression of biblical truth. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13 are

a stark reminder that even the highest theological insight, if not accompanied by love, is ultimately empty.

Ecumenical engagement, therefore, should not be viewed as a betrayal of truth, but as an act of Christian love grounded in truth. Love does not erase doctrinal difference, but it enables us to approach difference with humility and openness rather than hostility or suspicion. In this light, ecumenism becomes not a compromise, but a faithful outworking of the gospel, seeking unity in truth and charity.

Avoiding an Unnecessary Polarization

The perceived opposition between confessionalism and ecumenism often stems from a false dichotomy that need not exist. It is entirely possible, and indeed theologically desirable, for Christians to be both confessional and ecumenical. The strength of one's confessional identity need not preclude openness to dialogue; rather, it can serve as the very foundation from which meaningful engagement with other traditions takes place.

Being confessional means being rooted in a coherent theological framework shaped by Scripture and tradition. Such rootedness does not demand isolation, nor should it foster sectarianism. On the contrary, it enables one to engage ecumenically from a place of theological maturity, offering distinct insights while remaining receptive to the wisdom and experiences of other Christian communities. Confessional fidelity, far from being a barrier, can become a bridge to mutual understanding when approached with humility and charity.

Likewise, to be ecumenical does not require a theological *tabula rasa*. Ecumenical engagement does not mean suspending one's doctrinal convictions in favour of a vague religious consensus. On the contrary, it demands theological clarity, discernment, and a willingness to listen and speak truthfully across confessional boundaries. An ecumenism without confessional depth risks superficiality; a confessionalism without ecumenical openness risks narrow-mindedness.

The challenge, then, is not to choose between confessionalism and ecumenism, but to hold both together in creative and faithful tension, recognizing that our unity in Christ is deepened, not diminished, when pursued through honest and respectful theological conversation.

Toward Fruitful Ecumenism

In response to the concern over “cheap ecumenism”, that is, a superficial unity achieved by ignoring real theological differences, it must be emphasized that authentic ecumenical engagement is not about erasing diversity but about cultivating serious, respectful, and theologically substantive conversation. Fruitful ecumenism does not demand total agreement on all doctrinal matters; rather, it seeks to foster mutual understanding and shared witness while maintaining fidelity to the essential truths of the Christian faith.

Theological disagreement, when approached in a spirit of humility and love, can become a source of growth rather than division. Engaging with differing perspectives challenges us to refine and even deepen our own theological convictions, to distinguish clearly between essential and non-essential doctrines, and to appreciate the richness of Christian tradition. Such engagement requires not only theological maturity but also the courage to name disagreements without resorting to caricature or hostility.

The goal of ecumenism, then, is not uniformity but unity: a unity that reflects the mind and love of Christ. As Paul exhorts the Church in Philippians 2:2 and 2:5, we are called to ‘be of the same mind, having the same love,’ and to cultivate the mind of Christ among us. This does not necessitate consensus on every theological point, but rather a shared disposition of humility, charity, and a common commitment to the gospel.

Far from being cheap, such ecumenism is costly: it demands patience, honesty, and deep theological work. But it is also deeply rewarding, as it witnesses to the reconciling power of the gospel and the unity for which Christ himself prayed.

Conclusion: Reformed Ecumenism as a Theological Imperative

The case for Reformed ecumenism rests on a robust theological foundation rooted in eschatological hope, Christological unity, the principled distinction between essentials and non-essentials, and a commitment to truth expressed in love. Far from being a betrayal of the Reformed tradition, ecumenical engagement can be understood as a faithful outworking of its deepest convictions, particularly its commitment to the unity, catholicity, and sanctification of the church.

At the same time, the legitimate concerns raised by critics, regarding the potential loss of confessional identity, the dangers of truthless love, the tension between confessionalism and

ecumenism, and the temptation toward superficial unity, must be taken seriously. However, as the refutations demonstrate, these concerns need not lead to a rejection of ecumenism altogether. Rather, they call for a more thoughtful, theologically grounded, and spiritually mature form of ecumenical engagement.

Reformed ecumenism, when pursued with both conviction and humility, offers a vision of the church that is neither sectarian nor vague. It is marked by a deep rootedness in one's own theological tradition and an openness to the broader body of Christ. It does not demand uniformity, but seeks unity in truth and love. It does not compromise essentials, but calls for liberty in non-essentials and charity in all things.

In a fractured and often polarized ecclesial landscape, Reformed ecumenism stands as a hopeful and faithful witness: one that honours the integrity of the Reformed tradition while striving toward the visible unity of the Church for which Christ prayed. It is not an optional or peripheral concern, but a theological imperative that flows from our identity in Christ and our eschatological *telos* as one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. It is an invitation to glorify the triune God.