CHRISTIAN IDENTITY AND CHURCH UNITY

CALLIE COETZEE

INTRODUCTION

It is significant that, after centuries of Christianity, as well as considerable research and discussion on the issue of Christian identity, the final word has not been spoken? Naudé makes the statement that it seems an almost typical Reformed feature to constantly ask ‘identity questions.’ Is this because Christianity experiences an identity crisis? Almost twenty years ago it was stated that “Christians are uncertain about their identity.” Duquoc continues: “This is not an easy problem. Should one opt for perfect integration in a group with structure, ideology and dynamics which decide what one is; or should one opt for self-definition, only to risk uncertainty about what enables one to say one is a Christian anyway?”

The theme of Christian identity cannot only be discussed from many angles, but it also has many facets. It is the aim of this article to look at the theme from a Reformed perspective and, furthermore, to focus on a specific ecclesiological facet; namely, that of church unity.

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4 Cf. the article of J.H. van Wyk, “Christelijke identiteit: Augustinus oor geloof, hoop en liefde,” In die Skriflig 38(4) Des. 2004; R.W. Holder, Calvin’s heritage, in D.K. McKim, ed. The Cambridge companion to John Calvin (Cambridge: University Press, 2004), 265 mentions the fact that within Calvinism, transported to America through the Puritans, there are found generosity, liberality, morality, and a basic humility that was reflected in the doctrine of total depravity. He continues to refer to another aspect of “Calvinian legacy,” “… that pursuit of the godly commonwealth encompassing every dimension of a community’s life that in Calvin’s mind gave the highest dignity to the vocation of counselors …” Here we have a specific identity that reflects in the community, the state, etc.
5 If Christian identity is understood as the Calvinistic-Reformed tradition as it
Defining Christian Identity

As Reformed churches we confess that we are called Christians because we are members of Christ by faith. Thus we partake of His anointing with the Holy Spirit because we may confess His Name, because we may present ourselves as living sacrifices of thankfulness to Him, because we may fight against sin and the devil in this life with a free and good conscience, and because hereafter we shall reign with Him eternally over all creatures. But in spite of this clear definition, many people who call themselves Christians do not live according to this confession. The name ‘Christian’ today has many meanings and is broadly defined.

The same is true for the ecclesiological definition of Christianity. Christianity has many faces. From an ecclesiastical point of view, there is the identity of the mainline churches, the charismatic movement, Roman Catholicism, as well as new identities being formed, such as the new church formation in the Netherlands called the Protestantse Kerk Nederland, to name just a few. Some people would say that diversity, pluriformity, and dissension are essential parts of Christianity. Berkouwer focuses on the unity and division of the church in the same chapter. I shall return to this issue later in this article. On the one hand, we can therefore agree with Blei that we should not try to identify a special Protestant or even Reformed identity: Not Reformed identity but ‘Christian identity’ should be our main concern. On the other hand, it is necessary to qualify the term.

From a biblical point of view the identity of a Christian cannot be separated from his/her faith in Christ. “Christian identity is the adventure of a meeting with Jesus Christ, of a life shared with Him on the...