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Brexit in a fractured Europe

A relational vision and strategy for reconciliation

By Paul Mills and Michael Schluter

Summary

The outcome of the UK's referendum on EU membership has highlighted deep divisions within the populace, including among Christians, and increased the likelihood of further ruptures between the UK and EU27 as well as within and between the EU27 countries themselves. This paper first sets out the mandate for Christians to prioritise time and resources for peace-building within and between nations. It then presents an alternative 'relational' framework for peace-building within the UK and between the UK and the EU27. A Confederal model is then outlined as the basis for a new shared vision for reform within the EU. Within God's Providence, we can pray that the Brexit vote will be seen in hindsight as a trigger for relationally-positive transformation, not just in Britain but across the Continent.

Introduction

Following the referendum of 23 June 2016, the UK government is set to take the unprecedented¹ step of invoking Article 50 of the European Treaty to leave the European Union (EU) within two years. The referendum revealed a closely divided electorate (52 per cent : 48 per cent) on a relatively high turnout (72 per cent). Parliament had set neither a margin nor turnout threshold for a 'Leave' vote to meet and so the narrow majority was sufficient to give a democratic mandate for leaving the EU.

The referendum and subsequent process of leaving the EU threatens to rupture three constellations of relationships: those between UK 'Leavers' and 'Remainers', between the UK and the other 27 members of the EU (EU27), and between

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(and within) the EU27 members over the future direction of EU reforms. Increasingly deep divisions between EU integrationists and critics are fuelling political uncertainty in many of the larger EU countries, threatening the Continent's social order and impairing its international influence.

This paper first sets out the mandate and principles for relational peace-building and then applies them in the context of these three spheres of the UK exit debate. There is an urgent need for Christians to seek the peace and prosperity of the whole continent of Europe at an uncertain time in its history. This paper is intended to equip Christians for this task of subsuming self-interest whatever their views on European integration.

Why does peace-building across Europe need to be a high priority for Christians?

Christianity is a relational religion. We learn from the nature of the Trinity that relationship is the essence of reality and the primary category to describe the way God sees the universe. Righteousness, sin, and covenant are all relational terms. The purpose of the Incarnation was for God to relate directly with us, so Jesus was given the name Emmanuel ('God with us'). Jesus' life was that of a perfect relational person; the purpose of the cross was forgiveness and reconciliation. The two greatest commands, to love God and to love neighbour, lie at the very heart of the Christian faith.²

God's concern is for right relationships (demonstrating righteousness and

1 While Norway was due to join the then European Economic Community in 1972, a contrary referendum result blocked official entry. Greenland voted to leave the EU in 1985 but was not a full member and remains subject to EU law.

2 Matt. 22:34–40; Isa. 1:12–17; Amos 5:21–24; Mic. 6:6–8.

justice) not just between individuals but between nations;³ the latter must today include issues surrounding EU institutions and the euro. Resentment and hostility resulting from the euro, between Germany and Greece for example, are the antithesis of love. Jesus warns that 'every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand.'⁴ The consequences of such antagonisms are likely to include emotional, financial and physical hardship, and ultimately violence. However, when peacemakers sow seeds of peace, they harvest justice.⁵

Jesus calls peacemakers 'blessed'.⁶ Reconciliation between nations, ethnic groups and individuals is rooted in Christ's work on the cross.⁷ More generally, Christians are called to seek and pray for the harmony (*shalom*) of wider society⁸ and do good to all.⁹ So what initiatives might Christians take to restore trust between integrationists and separatists, not just in the UK but across the EU? Surely this must be a central goal of the Christian agenda given that relationships are so important in God's eyes.

Preconditions for rebuilding relationships of trust¹⁰

To analyse distrust, or trust, in the context of public life requires fresh categories and language. Relationships are, like clouds, hard to define and measure. Biblical language speaks much about relational distance,¹¹ the converse of which is relational proximity. What can Christians propose to their political leaders to reduce relational distance between those holding opposite viewpoints?

Three main components of trust are mutual understanding, perceived fairness and the sharing of goals and values:

- **Mutual understanding** can be developed best through face-to-face dialogue; communication is far richer when the parties are in the same room. Trust also requires sustained contact with those who hold the opposite point of view and understanding the rationale of the other side's position. Trust is strengthened by not assuming the worst of the other's intentions.¹²
- **Mutual respect** requires recognition that all are made in the image of God,¹³ a commitment to fairness in the distribution of risk and reward, and fairness in the process of discussion or negotiation.
- **Shared goals and values** involve a joint commitment to mutually beneficial outcomes. They are often a key factor in the search for peace and can require leaders to agree both the underlying principles at stake and how these impact on their constituencies. In the Brexit context, both parties need to take account of the impact of their decisions on third parties, including nations outside the EU.

Rebuilding trust across Europe: the challenge

It is not possible for all those on opposing sides of the EU

debate across the Continent to meet face-to-face. However, key influencers of the attitudes of the majority are political leaders and the media. How can these parties be encouraged to portray the issues in a balanced way? For Christians, the starting point is to persuade leaders of local congregations and their denominations that healing relationships within the Church across Europe is a priority in God's eyes. They can then seek sustained dialogue not only among their members representing these different Christian constituencies, but also between protagonists on both sides of the debate in wider society.

Relational peace-building: Leave and Remain in the UK

As already noted, the referendum outcome in the UK was relatively narrow with significant majorities against leaving the EU in some regions (especially London and Scotland) and demographic groups (notably those under 30 years of age). The initial reaction following the largely unexpected result was, unsurprisingly, elation on the part of some and despondency from others. More surprising was the depth of emotion continuing to be expressed weeks after the result and the denigration of the motives of the opposing side. The mood gave a small, if highly partial, taste of the societal rupture experienced during a civil war. It perhaps reflected two factors. First, the growing 'tribalism' of higher income societies as citizens increasingly self-select those to whom they relate and whose opinions they listen to, rather than associating with a wider variety of compatriots in extended family, community or church. Second, while the question of EU membership crosses traditional party political divides, it acts as a touchstone of whether someone is an idealist or a realist about political structures, and whether or not they see the nation-state as the best place to locate ultimate governing authority. Given these deep divisions, what will rebuilding trust between the opposing sides entail?

First, both sides need to accept the referendum result as the expression of the majority in a fair voting process. Parliament's 'sovereignty' derives from the electorate, ultimately rooted in all citizens being made equally in the image of God. Parliament passed the EU Referendum Act in 2015 by an overwhelming majority (544-53 votes) at second reading. No 'leave' threshold was specified other than a majority. While referenda are constitutionally advisory to, rather than binding on, the UK Parliament, failure to enact this decision would produce a far greater crisis than the one opponents of EU exit are seeking to avert.

Second, both sides should acknowledge that there was a principled case on the other side, rather than ascribing base motives to all their opponents.¹⁴ The Leave side needs to accept that there are many uncertainties and likely costs entailed in invoking Article 50, that negotiations will be complex and tortuous, and that a significant number of UK and EU27 citizens are likely to lose employment, at least in the

3 For example, see Amos chs 1-2.

4 Matt. 12:25.

5 Jas. 3:18.

6 Matt. 5:9.

7 2 Cor. 5:21; Eph. 2:14f.

8 Jer. 29:7.

9 Gal. 6:10.

10 An earlier Cambridge Paper (J. Ive, 'Peacebuilding and the ending of apartheid', July 2014) described how the process of relational peacebuilding yielded fruit

in smoothing the path to a largely peaceful transfer of power in South Africa in 1994. For a theory of relationships for the understanding and building of trust, see J. Ashcroft, et al., 2016, *The Relational Lens: understanding, measuring and managing stakeholder relationships*, Cambridge University Press.

11 For example, Jas. 4:8; Isa. 59:1-2; Hos. 5:6.

12 1 Cor. 13:7.

13 Gen. 1:27.

14 See page 3 for a summary of the primary Christian arguments deployed on both sides of the debate.

The Christian cases for leaving, and remaining in, the European Union

The Christian debate during the referendum campaign was polarised in a way that mirrored the wider discussion. The following summarises the strongest contentions from both sides which displayed a distinctively Christian emphasis.

Leave¹

- The tendency towards the abuse of power resulting from human sinfulness means that it is safer to disperse rather than concentrate power, both within and between nations. The practical interpretation of the commitment to 'ever closer union' within the EU Treaty has been in the contrary direction.
- The creation of nations and languages (Genesis 10:1–11:9) displays God's common grace in enforcing the dispersal of power and limits on humanity's ability to commit evil. They are to be present in eternity (e.g. Revelation 7:9; 21:24, 26) and are not a temporary brake to be overcome.
- The limitations of human knowledge and wisdom mean it is humbler and wiser to preserve a degree of flexibility over rules, customs and laws. In this regard, the catastrophe of the euro (the EU's most ambitious and prestigious project) in reducing Greece to a multi-generational debtors' prison exemplifies the hubris of the European construct and argues for its complete moral repudiation.
- Trade between nations can be both beneficial and exploitative.² Maximisation of trade *per se* should not be an overarching policy priority and societies should ensure a roughly equitable sharing of its gains. The longer-term potential benefits from exit would likely be felt disproportionately by those on lower incomes (e.g. cheaper food and energy; more controls on unskilled migration).
- The EU urgently needs institutional reform to permit greater flexibility (e.g. a mechanism to leave the euro) and move to a more Confederal structure of nation states. It is more likely that the EU would be encouraged down this path by the UK's exit than its continued half-hearted membership.
- Brexit offers greater policy freedom in areas of concern to some Christians. For instance, banking regulation would not be bound by some of the common EU rules.

Remain

- In a historically nationalistic and volatile continent, the EU furthers the goal of peacemaking and peace-building. Through its institutions and encouragement of trade, the EU makes armed aggression between traditionally antagonistic member nations virtually inconceivable and some countries (e.g. the Baltic states) see membership as significantly reducing the likelihood of external aggression.
- In this regard, free movement of capital, labour, goods and services should act to improve interactions and relationships between the different nationalities of the Union.
- EU membership acts as a check on national tyranny, abuse and corruption through the adoption of EU law and subjection of domestic legal jurisdiction to the European Court of Justice in assigned areas. Consequently, national governments' power to oppress and exploit their societies is curtailed. Christians in the UK have (occasionally) won protections under European legal rulings denied by domestic courts and legislation.
- UK exit from the EU will result in job losses in industries and sectors focused on trade with the EU, and raise barriers to academic collaboration. While the end position regarding UK trade is uncertain, the clear short-term costs to particular communities and regions should not be taken lightly by those not suffering them.
- UK exit from the EU will result in relational difficulties within the Union of the UK (notably in giving encouragement to proponents of Scottish independence), within communities (notably in Northern Ireland and across the UK–Eire border) and for some UK dependencies (notably Gibraltar).
- Withdrawal from the EU's free movement of labour would entail increased difficulty for UK-based mission organisations to help with evangelism in the EU27 (and *vice versa*).

Christians weighed these valid arguments differently and so legitimately came to different conclusions. Given the hurdles to wider EU reform, its probability is likely higher following the referendum and so one can interpret the Brexit decision as one of initial sacrifice to help neighbouring countries see the need for reform before a worse collapse occurs. However, the costs and risks of leaving should not be underestimated, especially the relational ruptures entailed.

¹ A fuller expression of some of these arguments can be found in the authors' Cambridge Paper *Should Christians Support the Euro?*, December 1998.

² See P. Mills, 'Globalization and the World Economy – for richer or poorer, for better or worse?', *Cambridge Papers*, March 2005.

short term, as a result. This cannot be a cause for celebration. The Remain side should accept that opposition to the UK's continued membership of the EU can rest on moral principle rather than just prejudice.

Third, both sides should acknowledge that they exaggerated their case during the campaign and some arguments used were specious. The Leave side was disingenuous when claiming the UK's gross EU budget contribution of £350m a week could be freed up for other government spending, notably health, while commitments of continued support were simultaneously being given to those in receipt of EU spending. The potential costs of leaving could be downplayed because there was no agreed proposal for how to do so. For their part, the Remain campaign were guilty of numerous exaggerations of the costs a Leave vote would entail. These included an imminent recession, higher interest rates, pension cuts and increased taxes. In addition, US President Obama said that the UK would be at the 'back of the queue' for a US trade deal. Prime Minister Cameron said he would not resign on a Leave vote. False promises and prophecies were made on both sides.

Fourth, both sides need to counter the view that exiting the EU provides a legitimate opportunity to express xenophobia and isolationism. Greater freedoms over migration and trade policies that EU exit should afford will allow the UK to strengthen historic trading and working relationships with non-EU countries (particularly in the Commonwealth and the US) while preserving close ties of cooperation with Continental neighbours. This is especially important to help Scotland, Northern Ireland and London to be reconciled to the outcome.

Fifth, UK churches can seek to inform and reconcile their members who continue to feel strongly about the result. This can take the form of regular, neutral presentations on Brexit negotiations and the hosting of fora for those on both sides to explain their positions and seek personal reconciliation, if needed.¹⁵ The referendum outcome was the most divisive event in recent UK history. It is incumbent on Christians on both sides to foster healing to ensure the scars are not evident for decades to come.

Relational peace-building: UK and remaining EU members

The EU Treaty has made provision for a member to leave since the Lisbon Treaty came into force in 2009. The UK will be the first EU member to trigger Article 50 of the Treaty, and the first country formally to leave the EU. Nevertheless, the UK and EU27 will remain each other's largest trading partners. Hence, the way in which the process is handled has the potential both to enhance or damage relationships between the parties while likely setting a precedent for future members considering exit. How can the negotiations be conducted to best promote positive future relationships between the parties?

Both sides need to work towards a mutually beneficial

outcome. From the UK's perspective, those negotiating need to understand that the UK's departure comes at a time of political upheaval in the EU27 due to the failings of the euro and dissent over the workings of the Schengen Agreement in the face of mounting migration pressures. Hence, the EU27 will find it hard to give the UK many of its desired outcomes for fear of encouraging others to depart. The EU27's task of delivering a mutually acceptable deal is made significantly harder by having to obtain approval from the Council of Ministers representing 27 member states, 27 national parliaments, additional regional parliaments and the European Parliament, each of which have a potential veto.



From the EU27's perspective, negotiators should try to comprehend that the UK's exit is understandable, if not justifiable, given its lukewarm support of the 'European Project' since entry in 1973.¹⁶ The large surplus in visible trade that the EU27 enjoys with the UK means that certain sectors of the EU27 economy would be penalised significantly if trade restrictions were raised, while the 'four freedoms' (movement of goods, services, capital and persons) that became increasingly promoted since the Single European Act in 1986 are not, and have not been, inseparable in EU history or current practice. To insist on their inviolable observance by the UK while outside the EU, to achieve any free trade access, would be foolhardy. While the temptation for negotiators will be to punish the UK for deciding to leave, to discourage others who may be tempted to follow, this would risk significant collateral damage to the EU27 and also be likely to deter potential future EU entrants.

In addition to considering UK and EU27 discussions from the perspective of political entities, negotiators need to remember that the welfare and livelihoods of households and communities are at stake. Hence, early assurances over the status of UK citizens resident in EU27 countries, and EU27 citizens in the UK, should be sought to avoid reducing people to bargaining chips. Christians across Europe should be taking the opportunities still open to build relationships in outreach to the whole Continent and strengthen ties with existing colleagues.

15 For instance, Initiatives of Change UK are hoping to commence this work.

16 The UK used its opt-out to remain outside stage 3 of Economic and Monetary Union (i.e. adopt the euro as its currency) while also not joining the Schengen Area of passport-free travel. It has actively opposed moves to greater military coordination at an EU level, consistently resisted attempts to

give the EU competence over taxation and fought to preserve its rebate from full contribution to the EU budget. UK political leaders and civil servants have tended not to prioritise EU matters to the same extent as their EU27 counterparts and have been less effective in building relationships and wielding influence as a result.

*Relational peace-building: Amongst remaining EU members*¹⁷

The UK's vote to leave comes at a time when a large proportion of many EU populations are also expressing their support for EU and/or euro exit, notably in France,¹⁸ Italy, Germany, Greece and the Netherlands. A durable settlement between integrationists and separatists is needed if there is to be harmony both within and across the EU.

The UK's exit is perhaps the crisis needed to shake the EU out of its complacency over its failing institutional framework.

The critical need for unity within the EU is especially urgent in the light of two current existential threats. The first is the desperate need for resolution of euro injustices (especially regarding Greece, Portugal and Italy). The second is the demographic crisis of falling and ageing populations in many EU countries (most notably Italy, Spain and Germany), in many cases with grossly underfunded pension and healthcare commitments, and fractured family and community care networks. In addition, there are huge pressures arising from mass economic migration from Africa, Central Asia and the Middle East, while Russian expansionism is coinciding with a US 'pivot' to Asia-Pacific, prompting the need for increased defence expenditure by EU countries.

Aspects of a possible way forward

Issues of identity: the relational option

The EU needs to agree how it collectively defines its identity and what makes it distinctive from other geopolitical entities. A relational agenda giving greater weight to Christian history, institutions and traditions could find many expressions in Europe's economic and social life. Public sector organisations and companies could build relationships more actively with their stakeholders through changes in reporting and measurement requirements. In education, values of European children could be influenced by a relational ethos, curriculum, culture and approach to assessment in schools. In welfare, development of local institutions at the level of extended families and communities would not only counter the growth of individualism but enable more effective financial, physical and emotional support for the elderly and vulnerable by those best-qualified to provide it. This would also reduce pressure on underfunded government health and social services departments.

A Confederal way forward

The EU is currently stuck. It is halfway down the slipway towards a federal state but finding increasing popular resistance to further federalisation. Conversely, it is hard to go back and abolish the quasi-federal institutions now in place, given the need for unanimity for treaty change. A middle way is needed to reconcile the growing gap between political

aspirations and realities. One option would be to adopt a more Confederal model.¹⁹

This could involve some countries being allowed to opt for even greater centralisation of decision-making, including pooling of some tax receipts, joint debt issuance and perhaps a coordinated defence force. Conversely, some members would

be permitted to move to a looser degree of membership without being corralled into pooling ever-greater portions of their national sovereignty. Such countries would be allowed greater flexibility in their choices around mobility of labour, welfare systems, border controls and security arrangements, while remaining within the EU's Customs Union. Euro membership would cease to be mandatory for EU members without an opt-out and a legal process for controlled withdrawal from the euro would need to

be included in the EU Treaty.

Nations wishing to act jointly in these and other areas should be free to do so within the overall Confederal structure. The adoption of such a 'multi-tier' approach to EU membership would help to reconcile those states that support greater integration with those who see it as antithetical to their traditions. Indeed, with sufficient flexibility over terms, it may be an arrangement that Switzerland, Norway, Turkey and Ukraine could join and the UK, perhaps, rejoin.

A new prerequisite: debt reduction

The architects of the euro recognised that it would not work without significant constraints on government debt levels. Otherwise, pressures would arise for the mutualisation of debts in a crisis for which no political mandate existed. Unfortunately, political expediency ensured that rules on debts and deficits were not observed, either by those seeking to join the euro or by members once inside. Also, the reduction in interest rates that euro entry produced sparked a dramatic rise in private household, corporate and bank debt in Spain, Ireland and Portugal. As a result of this, and the wider global (2008–09) and euro (2010–12) crises, government debt levels in many EU states are at record highs. Given the inability of euro members independently to relax monetary policy or devalue their currency, the euro can only work if either there is a mutualisation of most public debt by a central borrowing authority (for which there is currently no political appetite nor legal mechanism) or public and private debt levels are dramatically reduced through write-offs or debt-for-equity swaps.

None of this is a surprise to those with biblical financial literacy.²⁰ The Bible warns strongly against long-term debt²¹ because:

- Some debts will become unrepayable. Promises will then be broken resulting in breaches of trust – 'The wicked borrow and do not repay'.²²

Christians have a peace-building calling to propose a way forward which captures the imagination of a clear majority of Europe's population.

17 For a more detailed discussion see D. Lee et al., 2017, *Confederal Europe: Stronger Nations. Stronger Union*, Sallux and Relational Research, Brussels and Cambridge.

18 The proportion of the French populace who view the EU favourably dropped from 69% in 2004 to 38% in 2016 (Pew poll quoted in *The Economist*, 4 March, 2017).

19 J. Pisani-Ferry et al., 2016, *Europe after Brexit: A proposal for a continental partnership*, Bruegel, August.

20 P. S. Mills, 'The Great Financial Crisis – a Biblical Diagnosis', *Cambridge Papers*, March 2011.

21 e.g. Deut. 15:1–6; 23:19–20.

22 Ps. 37:21.

- Debt entails a power relationship prone to abuse: ‘The borrower is the slave of the lender’.²³ Vassal euro debt states, such as Greece, now deeply resent their creditors.
- Long-term debt enables acts of intergenerational injustice to be perpetrated as the borrowing generation passes debt onto their children to repay without consultation.

For the euro to be sustainable, and for the healing of relationships between its members, there is an urgent need to reverse the accumulation of national, corporate and personal debt. This will require radical changes to the euro regime,²⁴ the removal of the privileges and subsidies that debt enjoys relative to equity in tax systems, and mechanisms to restrain the growth of personal debt, including encouraging ways to finance housing without mortgages.

A Christian plea for European consensus

Europe is now deeply divided between those wanting the EU Treaty goal of ‘ever closer union’ to continue in place and those strongly opposed to the idea. Both sides make important points. The benefits of closer cooperation, through trade and gradual alignment of institutions, is matched by the gross injustices resulting from the shared currency and growing resentment consequent upon uncontrolled intra-EU migration.

The dangers of these deep divisions across the Continent are not just the ensuing political uncertainties as political groupings on each side of the debate potentially win or lose control in each national election, but the visceral hatred which the debate produces within and between nations when the stakes are so high.

We believe Christians have a peace-building calling to propose a way forward which captures the imagination of a clear majority of Europe’s population. We have identified this potential new compromise and basis for consensus as lying within the scope of Confederalism, as an alternative to both EU Federalism and the old pattern of totally separate national identities.

Conclusion

The UK’s departure from the EU is an event pregnant with risks and opportunities for the relationships between the communities and nations involved. If handled badly, Brexit could engender bitterness and resentment within the UK for years to come, sour relations between the UK and EU27, impose significant mutual economic costs, while catalysing the disorderly break-up of the EU27. Conversely, if handled in a relationally-sensitive way, the UK’s departure could forge a new consensus on the UK’s identity and polity, produce a mutually beneficial trade agreement with the EU27, and encourage the EU to move on from the failed attempt to create a Federal state to an agreed Confederal solution. Christians need to pray and work for a positive and peaceful outcome.



Dr Paul Mills joined the UK Treasury in 1992 after working at the Jubilee Centre in 1987–88 and completing his PhD at Cambridge University. He joined the IMF in early 2006 to work on global financial stability issues and in 2009 became head of the Fund’s London office; he left IMF in early 2017. Paul is an elder of Twynholm Baptist Church in Fulham.



Dr Michael Schluter is an economist, author and social entrepreneur. He founded the Jubilee Centre and the Keep Sunday Special campaign, and is now seeking to build an international movement of Relational organisations. He is also helping to develop Relational Peacebuilding Initiatives in Korea and Ukraine.

²³ Prov. 22:7.

²⁴ These would include potential debt write-offs and restructuring for unsustainable burdens and the symmetrical application of rules to excessive (trade) surpluses as well as (public) deficits.

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