

DRESSED TO CELEBRATE *

Excerpt from "Credo Chronicle", June 8/97. (Newsletter of Credo Christian High School) "Graduation is just around the corner. Please allow me (to pontificate) some personal reflection just for the moment. Last year, at one of the elementary graduation there was a real party atmosphere - people were dressed in shorts and Hawaiian shirts; the audience was very noisy and boisterous; they continued to talk with each other through a musical piece done by a number of students; there were very young children who received nothing from the proceedings, but contributed lots (of noise) - and I wondered "where has our sense of decorum gone?" Even the live audiences at America's Funniest Home Videos seem better dressed than many of the people at grads. Perhaps, in this time when society is encouraged to "just do it" and to "be yourself" we should remember that we shouldn't just think of ourselves, and that we shouldn't crowd the left edge of propriety - perhaps we should be far from the edge, and be willing to be an example so that others may want to get away from that edge too. In this way, hopefully graduation can remain a formal and somewhat solemn occasion where we most of all can show our thankfulness to God for what He has given in our graduates. J. van Laar." (Chairman)

Excerpt from "Church News", June 1/97. (Church News of the Can/American Ref. Churches) "ATTENTION ALL CULTUS LAKE CAMPERS... If you are planning to camp at Cultus Lake this summer we welcome you to worship with the Yarrow congregation. We, however, request that you come to church dressed in a way reflecting that we are worshipping the LORD in his holy presence. We ask that you honour the same standards which we try to maintain in this respect. We believe that this is important toward God, but also as a witness to our surrounding community. Thank you for your cooperation in this matter. The Council of the church at Yarrow."

When we scan the pages of Church News we note that in the course of the year the Lord provides us with many opportunities for commemoration and celebration; numerous occasions for joy and festivity. There are many wedding ceremonies and anniversaries. Some of us will also attend dinners or graduation banquets and ceremonies.

Since these events were public and formal, we make every effort to dress accordingly. We would for example, not think of attending a wedding ceremony without being dressed at our best. To do otherwise would be an insult to the bridal couple. We would clearly give the message that for us this occasion of celebration was not worth getting dressed up for. We would show an attitude of apathy and indifference; an unwillingness to take the wedding celebration seriously.

Now we are indeed blessed in that our occasions for public celebration are not limited to weddings, anniversaries, graduations banquets and ceremonies. As children of God, we also receive the first day of the week from the hand of our heavenly Father as a day of public celebration and festivity. And that should be evident in our words and deeds.

Among these deeds is our mode of dress. For in our mode of dress we convey the message that we are celebrating. We have been invited by the Creator of heaven and earth to come into His presence to listen to Him and worship Him. We may, as the community of those who have been saved, rejoice that God in Christ has forgiven us all our sins. For us the Lord's Day is a special day, for on this day Christ has been raised for our justification. Therefore it behooves us to come before

Him with an attitude of deep reverence and awe; of rejoicing and thanksgiving. We should then be careful not to insult our God by our refusal to be appropriately dressed for worship and celebration.

It is remarkable that so many of us will get dressed up for dinner, banquets, concerts, weddings and anniversaries, etc., but when it comes to appearing before the Lord in order to worship Him we dress rather casually and even sloppily. Some will even try to rationalize such behavior. We sometimes hear the argument that our mode of dress is irrelevant since it is what is in the heart that counts. Now we recognize that the attitude of the heart is indeed important. However, what is in the heart will also be seen on the outside. Our mode of dress during the worship services reveals what lives in our hearts, i.e., whether it be sincere love for the Lord or indifference.

Most of us will agree that our mode of dress during the worship services should reveal that we are celebrating before the Lord; but what about our mode of dress for the rest of the Sunday? It seems that there is quite some difference of opinion on this matter, yet there ought not to be such a marked difference in thoughts and practices among those for whom the Lord's day is a day of festivity and celebration. We are different from the world which is not celebrating, and therefore it is inconceivable that we should rush home after the worship service and change into clothes other than those that reveal the spirit of celebration.

As parents of the same community it is important that we stand united in the teaching of our children. They need to see that there is a great measure of consistency among us in the way the Lord's day is used. We can begin by giving a good example. Children are quite able to discern whether or not father and mother love the Lord and desire to honour Him, especially on His Sabbath. Being dressed for a celebration is always obvious. We can continue by forbidding a mode of dress that does not identify with Christ, but rather with the children of the world. Such a mode of dress is a disgrace to oneself and to the Lord.

Finally, we must all do our utmost to show, also in our mode of dress on the Lord's Day, that we are truly celebrating. It must be evident by what we do or do not wear that our love for our Lord is deep and genuine, and that also in our mode of dress it is our desire to worship, honour and please Him.

When we take look at the excerpts from our Church News and our high school newsletter some reflection and introspection is certainly warranted. Do we still have our "sense of decorum"? Do we dress to "suit ourselves" or to suit the occasion? Is it still obvious to others that on Sundays we are celebrating?

Ron Dykstra

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ART.61 AND VISITORS TO THE LORD'S TABLE

By Rev. B. R. Hofford

In a recent "Reader's Forum" (Clarion, Year-End Issue, 1996, p. 584 ff.), Rev. Van Spronsen addressed the question of our use of Art. 61 of the Church Order, especially as it relates to visitors. (Art.61 states: "The Consistory shall admit to the Lord's supper only those who have made public profession of the Reformed faith and lead a godly life. Members of sister-churches shall be admitted on the ground of a good attestation concerning their doctrine and conduct.") What Rev. Van Spronsen writes in this article raises three main questions about Art.61: the authority of Art.61, the scope of Art.61, and the implications of Art.61.

THE AUTHORITY OF ART.61

Rev. Van Spronsen says Art.61 is "one way and a good way" to exercise oversight, but "not necessarily the only mode of exercising supervision over the Table." He warns us against what he views as the danger of institutionalizing our way of deciding admission. Later he speaks of consistories that require written travel attestations as "strict." It is clear from what he writes that Rev. Van Spronsen, has, as he himself says, "nothing against Art.61 of the Church Order." Yet, the questions he raises, and the manner in which he speaks about Art.61, convey a wrong impression.

The fact of the matter is that Art.61 does institutionalize the way we decide admission to the Lord's Supper. Indeed, it is the only mode of exercising supervision over the Table allowed in our federation, by reason of agreement together in the Church Order. Furthermore, consistories which require written attestations are not being "strict," they are being faithful to their agreement. This does not mean one cannot question the basis for Art.61, but we are not helped in this matter by effectively undermining the authority of Art.61 as it presently exists and functions in our federation.

Someone might object to what is argued above on the grounds that nothing is said in Art.61 about the attestation taking a written form, and thus opening the door for other forms. In answer, attention must be directed to Art.62 (Attestations) which makes it clear that when attestations are in question, we are speaking of written forms which are signed by two members of a consistory. The connection between the two articles is also made clear by the fact that in both cases the same matters are being attested: i.e., doctrine and conduct (Art.62), profession of the Reformed faith and godly conduct (Art.61).

It may be noted, in passing, that the essence of an attestation is not the writing, per se, but the testimony being given (cf. II Cor.13:1, "Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." --NIV). And such testimony could be given verbally rather than in writing. However, it is imperative to guard what is essential to the attestation, i.e., the official witness of the overseeing elders to the doctrine and conduct of the person. Thus, Rev. Van Spronsen's reference to phone calls or faxes to the office bearers of the home congregation is appropriate. But Rev. Van Spronsen's assertion that the visitors can give their own testimony, confirmed by local members,

misses the mark. As we shall see later, this by-passes the Christ-given role of the elders. But for now, it is sufficient to note that such personal testimony, while possibly acceptable regarding doctrine/profession, is not acceptable regarding conduct.

We see then, that Art.61 possesses a functional authority within our federation by virtue of our consent together to submit to this Church Order. Functional authority, however, doesn't automatically presuppose Scriptural authority. Rev. Van Spronsen points out that when our rule is criticized by others, we shall have to support this with scriptural grounds. Space does not permit an extended discussion of this aspect of the subject, but a study of questions and answers 82-85 of the Heidelberg Catechism, with their accompanying proof texts, should provide the interested reader with the necessary foundation.

In summary, we may conclude that the elders are the Christ-ordained officers given the responsibility for admitting and excluding from the sacrament. Furthermore, the two criteria in Art.61, profession and life, are clearly ones to be evaluated by the elders, not left to personal recognizance.

The role of elders with visitors can perhaps be seen more clearly when we consider their role with their own members. Every time the Lord's Supper is administered, the communicant members come by the permission of the elders administering the Supper in Christ's Name. And this permission is not arbitrary, but it is based on these two criteria: the communicant member has professed the Reformed faith, and the member is living a godly life (of course we have in view the public life of the individual which is over-seeable by the elders; personal/private sins must in the nature of the case be addressed in the self-examination). If the individual were living in sin, it would be the duty of the elders to exclude such a person according to Christ's command and our confession (LD 30).

Once we understand the principles involved with the elders admitting their own members to the Supper, we can more easily see what their role must be with visitors. Indeed, it can be no different: the principle of the elders' authority in admitting and excluding must be maintained, and the principle of those elders making these judgments based on the two criteria (profession and life) must be maintained. Hence, the reason for an attestation, for an attestation is simply the way in which we honour the Scriptural principles in admitting visitors. And since the elders of the church which is being visited do not have oversight in the case of the visitor's life, they must have testimony from those whom Christ has appointed to exercise such oversight: the elders of the visitor. For practical reasons, it is also advisable to receive similar testimony from the visitor's elders regarding their profession as well. For although it may be theoretically possible to interview a visitor to determine if they profess the Reformed faith, it is usually not practical if it is going to be done in a manner consistent with the usual format used in interviewing people for profession of faith. It may be true that members, even officers, of the church being visited have some knowledge of the visitor. However, it is not their duty to oversee the visitor, and so their knowledge will, in the nature of the case, never be complete in a way that is commensurate with the duty given by Christ to the elders responsible for the visitor. Furthermore, given the confidential nature of much church discipline (e.g., so-called "silent censure"), friends and acquaintances of the visitor able to testify will not have the complete picture.

The procedure outlined above for admitting visitors to the Lord's Supper is confirmed by what is said in Art.62, C.O. It too properly reflects the role of the elders testifying about doctrine

and conduct. Also, the fact that attestations are required when people move to another one of our congregations is not unrelated to this matter of admittance to the sacrament.

Thus, we see that official testimony from the office-bearers responsible for overseeing the visitor's profession and life is needed before a visitor can be admitted to the Lord's Table. This is not just "one way and a good way," but a Scriptural way. We may even say, "The Scriptural way." No other method has been conceived which still insures that the Biblical principles of oversight are preserved. There are other methods, of course, but they all, in one way or another, compromise the principles at stake.

THE SCOPE OF ART.61

The second question raised by Rev. Van Spronsen has to do with the scope of Art.61. There is no doubt this Article regulates how we handle visitors from within our own federation, but does this Article regulate how we treat visitors from outside our federation? He believes that such questions are beyond the scope of the Church Order, and therefore, it remains a matter for the local consistory to decide. He does admit, however, that Art.61 may be confusing to some and perhaps should be clarified.

It is true that Art.61 speaks explicitly about members of sister-churches, meaning of course, other churches in our federation, and nothing explicit is said about those beyond our circle of churches. However, it would be specious to suggest that Art.61 has no relevance to these other visitors. It is patently clear that if the criteria for admittance to the Lord's Supper for our own members must be profession of the Reformed faith and a godly life, then nothing less can be required from visitors from outside our churches. Otherwise we would be guilty not only of a double standard, but we would undermine the order established by the Lord Himself for guarding His Table.

Furthermore, if the reasoning behind the need for an attestation for visitors from within the federation, as outlined above, is valid, then how can anything less be required for a visitor from outside? To not require the same is, as we saw above, to flaunt Christ's regulation of His supper. The only question left open then is which churches are those from which we can accept attestations?

Rev. Van Spronsen has in view the increasing possibility of visitors from churches with whom we have ecclesiastical fellowship or other forms of contact. I suspect that he is especially concerned with the latter, since the rules for ecclesiastical fellowship as adopted by our General Synods are clear: rule 4 states, "The churches shall accept one another's attestations or certificates of good standing, which also means admitting members of the respective churches to the sacraments upon presentation of that attestation or certificate." (Acts of G.S. 1995, p.165)

The next closest relationship maintained by our churches is the one of temporary ecclesiastical contact with the OPC. Whatever one thinks about this contact, it is clear from repeated Synodical statements that it precludes inter-communion. In fact, one of the issues which have prevented this contact from becoming full ecclesiastical fellowship is this very matter of fencing the Lord's Table (see Acts of G.S 1995, p.75).

Beyond the two categories just outlined, we as churches have no other official forms of contact, other than those being pursued by the Deputies for the Promotion of Ecclesiastical Unity, by the Deputies for Contact with the ERQ, and by local churches. In all of these cases, the level of

contact is even less developed than it is with the OPC, so one could hardly argue that those contacts warrant anything beyond what is practiced with the OPC.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF ART.61

It is clear in reading Rev. Van Spronsen's article that he is motivated to have us rethink Art.61 and its use because of his concern for our discussion with others who share the Reformed faith. He believes that our present practice, if applied strictly, places unnecessary obstacles in our discussions with these churches. What, after all, is the root of this ongoing problem of fencing the Lord's Table?

If it has not become clear in the course of this article so far, let it be said now that what lies behind the differences on this issue is one' doctrine of the church. The question is not a matter of relative strictness in guarding the sacrament. But as we have seen it is a matter of understanding and applying the correct Biblical principles. In my judgment, one of the major reasons we as a federation have so much difficulty in our contacts with others is because we do indeed hold a different view of the church. Invisible and pluriform church views are rampant among Presbyterian and Reformed people especially on our continent. When such views are held, our principles for fencing the Table, as expressed in Art.61, in connection with the Heidelberg Catechism, LD 30, 31, are seen as intolerable. Or as Rev. Van Spronsen warns us regarding our practice, "we may find ourselves in situations which seem contrary to the intent of the Lord's commandment." And there are many Presbyterian and Reformed people who believe that our practice places us in exactly that kind of situation. It must not be ignored that the main issue involved in the Laurel congregation seceding from the OPC was this very question of the proper fencing of the Lord's Table. It was also a major question in the situations in both Blue Bell and Denver.

The answer to this problem does not lie in altering our practice as we find it in Art. 61, for it is indeed based on a Scriptural view not only of the role of the elders, but also of the church. If we believed in the pluriformity of the church or in an invisible church, then there would be no need for regulations like Art.61. But since we believe in the uniformity of the church, such regulation is necessary. This means that the direction of our discussions with others must not devolve into talk about more-or-less strictness in admitting visitors to the sacrament, but rather must center on the real differences in ecclesiology which divide us.

Does our view of the church and subsequent view of fencing the Lord's Supper render us sectarian as some allege? This would only be true if we had no interest in seeking unity in the true faith with others. At the same time, we must not allow our desire for unity to be compromised by diluting or discarding what we confess regarding the church. We may find ourselves in the somewhat unpleasant position in which Prof. Schilder found himself on these matters. He was willing to live in the same church with those who held views of pluriformity. The problem was that they were not willing to live with him! The situation today does not seem much different. The reason is not hard to find: where the rubber meets the road - admittance of visitors to the Table - those who hold to pluriformity find our views unbearably restrictive along the lines of Rev. Van Spronsen's warning: we are seen as acting contrary to the intent of the Lord's commandment.

Can this impasse be removed? In the end, of course, it is not up to us to change others. However, we must be patient, prayerful and diligent in explaining what we confess and practice.

Only in this way may we pursue our ecumenical task with integrity and trust that under the Lord's blessing unity in the truth may be achieved with others.

N.B. The foregoing article was refused for publication by Clarion. Reformed Polemics deplors such censorship of the very issues that need to be discussed among the membership of the church. Please pass on this article by photocopy or fax to friends and others who might be interested.

R.D & PdB

ECCLESIASTICAL NEWS

Orthodox Presbyterian General Assembly Breaks Long-standing Christian Reformed Fraternal Relationship

The Christian Reformed Church lost its oldest and what was once its closest sister church relationship in North America on June 10 when the Orthodox Presbyterian Church voted to break fraternal relations with the CRC over the issue of the ordination of women. Meeting at Geneva College in the Pittsburgh suburb of Beaver Falls, the 22,000-member Orthodox Presbyterian Church took nearly a dozen hours over a period of two days to decide whether to break its 60-year-long relationship with the CRC. While the OPC has cited a number of reasons for concern in recent years, the formal motion adopted cited only the CRC's 1995 decision to allow the ordination of women to the offices of minister, elder, and evangelist. Responding to CRC concerns, the General Assembly passed a motion without audible dissent noting that last year's decision "was carefully worded to avoid saying that the CRCNA is not a true church of Jesus Christ" and that "no OPC General Assembly has ever made such a judgment." That didn't mean this year's decision to cut ties rather than continuing the suspension was easy, however. "You don't cut ties with people that you've had for sixty years without some pain and without being sorrowful," said Rev. John Galbraith, appointed by the OPC General Assembly to bring the final fraternal address to next week's CRC synod expressing the OPC's reasons for severing ties. "At our first General Assembly, they were the only ones to greet us and to express their affection for us." After voting to break ties with the CRC, the General Assembly established "corresponding relations" with the largest group of churches seceding from the CRC, the United Reformed Churches, and voted to express "thankfulness to God for their love for the truth of God and the purity of the church of Jesus Christ, welcome them to the family of Reformed churches, and pray for the blessing of God on their ministry."

"Corresponding relations" is a new category created this year by the OPC ... The Corresponding Relationship is like the level of 'correspondence' in the Dutch Churches. The OPC has invited into a Corresponding Relationship the African Evangelical Presbyterian Church [Kenya], the Presbyterian Church of Uganda, the United Reformed Churches in North America, the Church of Christ among the Tiv [Nigeria], and the Liberated Churches in the Netherlands; the latter in response to the action of their last synod to want a closer relationship with the OPC.

Presbyterian Church in America General Assembly Cuts Ties with Christian Reformed Church Over Women's Ordination

For the second time this week, a conservative Reformed denomination has voted to cut ties with the Christian Reformed Church over the issue of women's ordination. Meeting June 11 at Village Seven Presbyterian Church in Colorado Springs, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America affirmed the unanimous recommendation of an advisory committee to "terminate our recognition of the Christian Reformed Church as a church in ecclesiastical fellowship immediately." The CRC voted in 1995 to allow each of its 47 classes to decide whether to allow women to be ordained as ministers, elders, and evangelists, and has allowed women deacons for over a decade. The PCA bans the ordination of women to any office but allows churches to appoint women to assist the male deacons and permits them to be called "deaconesses." The administrative secretary of the CRC's interchurch relations committee, Rev. Leonard Hofman, said he was "stunned" by this week's actions by the Presbyterian Church in America and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. "I'm obviously emotionally moved when churches in close fellowship with us in a period of a week remove ties with us," said Hofman.