

DOUBLE STANDARDS

In the fall of 1994 the Presbytery of the Dakotas (POD) sent a communication to Classis Alberta-Manitoba and to the Committee on Ecumenicity and Interchurch Relations (CEIR) of the OPC. It deals with wrongful actions by the Canadian Reformed Churches (CRC) in encouraging the Churches at Blue Bell and Denver to leave the OPC and join the CRC. It also deals with the double standard with which the CRC measure when establishing ecclesiastical fellowship with the Free Church of Scotland and the Presbyterian Church in Korea, and not being able to do so with the OPC.

OUR DOUBLE STANDARD

With the latter complaint we must agree. Synod 1992 was warned by the Church at Port Kells: "Let us not pre-empt the discussions we are having with the OPC by extending sister church relations to similar groups abroad. It seems unwise to ... establish full sister church relations with churches abroad when we have not reached that stage with churches in our own area who have the same confessions and church government. Such a step abroad would tend more toward disunity than unity on the home front." Synod Considered "...that entering into Ecclesiastical Fellowship with the FCS need not be a cause for disunity on the home front. The reason Ecclesiastical Fellowship has not been finalized with the OPC is because of certain specified divergences still under discussion and not due to their different confessions or form of government as such." (Art. 111 & 128, Synod 1992).

A cynic might wonder if the correction of the double standard is not the easiest way to overcome other obstacles that many see in full ecclesiastical fellowship with the OPC. Consider the articles of Prof. van Dam in *Clarion* shortly after Synod 1992 and now in the 1994 Christmas issue of *Clarion* just before Synod 1995. Prof. van Dam admits that he does not know how the Korean churches deal with the fencing of the Lord's Table. It does not seem to matter. We have indeed measured with a double standard. But that should not lead to automatic ecclesiastical fellowship with the OPC in 1995. Rather we should recognize our error and admit our double standard and perhaps revise our relationship with Korea and Scotland to that of ecclesiastical contact.

This would allow ongoing discussion about the matters that are different from one church to the other. A discussion, not at international meetings of ministers only, or as delegates to each others Synods only, but in *Clarion* and at meetings of the Study Centers and at study societies where there can be discussion. And such a relationship must always have the eventual goal of sister church affiliation.

THEIR DOUBLE STANDARD

In their communication the POD complains about the encouragement by the CRC to members of the OPC to leave the OPC and join the CRC. They specifically complain about the actions of Rev. M. Pollock of Denver. As we reported last time, Rev. Pollock never was a minister in the OPC, nor was the Church at Denver ever part of the OPC. They both had intentions of becoming members,

but during the process they came to the conclusion that they could not in good conscience join the OPC and therefore saw the need to affiliate with the CRC.

In several reports, and at the Classis where Rev. Pollock was examined, the matter of his vows has been dealt with. Each time it is confirmed that the vows that Rev. Pollock made would go into effect if and when he would become a minister in the OPC. What motivates the appellants to continue? Is it to lay the ground work for a sympathetic hearing at Synod 1995?

In connection with the charges against Rev. Pollock it is interesting to read what Rev. G. I. Williamson wrote in *The Westminster Confessions of Faith*:

“In conclusion, we believe that in a case of uncertain diagnosis, where there is opportunity to become a member of a church concerning which there is no doubt that it is a true church, a believer should separate with a clear statement of the reasons which have made him doubt that the church he is leaving is a true church. We even believe that it is proper to leave a true church that is much less pure to join a true church that is much more pure, provided the motive is the glory of God, the welfare of one’s spiritual concerns (and that of his children), and a testimony against error.” (page 192)

Having read the history of the Denver situation several times in various reports it appears that the criteria laid out by Rev. Williamson have been met. It seems that the OPC brothers are also measuring with a double standard.

PLURIFORMITY

We would be remiss if we failed to mention the obvious reference to the pluriformity of the Church which Rev. Williamson advocates in this quotation. In a booklet *PRESSING TOWARD THE MARK*, Essays Commemorating Fifty Years of the OPC, Rev. John P. Galbraith writes, “In recent years the validity of this recognition of the pluriformity of the Christian church has been called into question by certain able Reformed theologians who seem to take the view that only a truly Reformed church deserves to be denominated a church and that other communions are more accurately described as sects. While it is possible that coming decades will bring much discussion of this matter, it is obviously the part of wisdom at this time for the OPC to adhere to the historic Presbyterian position and to permit that position to determine its policy with reference to cooperation with other than Reformed churches. Now if that be done, the conclusion is warranted that a measure of cooperation of the OPC with other than Reformed churches is not out of the question. The question may even be asked whether the principle that the unity of Christ’s church must be manifested as fully as possible does not render our cooperation with such churches desirable and even obligatory.”

In their appeals to Reg. Synod West - 1993 the Churches at Coaldale and Taber were concerned that the CRC dealings with the Church at Denver would create pluriformity in the Church. Deputies of Regional Synod, Rev. C. Van Spronsen and Rev. J. Visscher, who could not give concurring advice to admit Denver to the Federation also propose that the decision to do so would promote pluriformity in the Church, something that goes against the Belgic Confession, Art.27 & 28, and therefore against Scripture. (Cf. Acts of Reg. Synod West - 1993, Art. 11, Observations).

The earlier quotes from Rev. J. P. Galbraith and Rev. G. I. Williamson about pluriformity indicate that there is a strong acceptance of pluriformity within the OPC. Would it not be part of wisdom to solve these matters before we enter into a sister church affiliation? Or must we continue to measure with double standards?
PdB

BLESSED NEW YEAR

As editors of Reformed Polemics, we would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your increasing support in this, our first year of publication.

We continue to see substantial growth in our readership as the news of our publication spreads across the country, and even over oceans.

We have not made much publicity about our paper this year for several reasons. One of them is lack of time. In this regard we appreciate your efforts in telling others about us.

We also appreciate your willingness to put up with some of the typos that have crept into the paper. We pledge to continue to improve our product so that you will be well served with thought-provoking and Scriptural articles.

Please do not hesitate to contribute by way of writing articles or letters.

May our heavenly Father strengthen us all in this coming year.

Ron Dykstra and Pete de Boer

THE DOCTRINE BEHIND INTERDENOMINATIONAL COOPERATION

A certain scholar (HRT Brandeth, Priest of the Oratory of the Good Samaritan in Paris) studied the history of interdenominational relations and the ecumenical movement. He states that the 19th century was one which saw the blossoming of interdenominational co-operation in the realm of conferences and councils. Conferences which were first formed to deal with denominational matters changed their character and became interdenominational conferences where various churches met together, such as Lutherans, Reformed, Old Catholics, Eastern Churches, etc. These various councils ultimately led to the formation of the World Council of Churches.

The 19th and 20th centuries are characterized as the age of the church or the age of ecumenism. But it would be better to call (these centuries) the age of false ecumenicity or the age of syncretism. Syncretism means that all religions are to be united in a certain way, because in all religions there is found something good. Therefore instead of maintaining the antithesis, the boundaries were to fade away. What was it that led to this fading away of the boundaries, to this interdenominational cooperation? Brandeth -remarks that running parallel to this interdenominationalism in the 19th century was a wide-spread recovery of the sense of the Church and new theological understanding of its nature as a spiritual society. The centre of ecumenical interest was slowly shifting to the areas of "ecclesiology", the doctrine of the Church. It is easy to see how this came about. To find the Church is to find its unity; both that essential unity which belongs to the purpose of God, and that unity which still somehow exists in the midst of division, and is in some way already a part of Christian experience. To become aware of the unity of the Church in the purpose of God is to

realize the obligation resting on all Christians to seek by all worthy means the recovery of manifestation of that unity upon earth. I would draw your attention to Brandeth's remarks on the recovery of the sense of the Church as a spiritual society.

Theologians no longer viewed the church as a visible assembly of the people at a specific address, whose names are recorded in registers maintained by a clerk, over whom office bearers are appointed, and to whom the gospel is faithfully proclaimed and the sacraments are faithfully administered, and over whom church discipline is faithfully exercised. Rather, theologians began to view the church as an invisible, spiritual entity with its address in heaven, where God is the clerk, and in whose heavenly registers the names of all believers are written in virtue of their faith though they on earth belong to the Church of Rome, or the Eastern Orthodox Churches, or the Anglican Church.

Brandeth is perceptive enough to see the role which the "new" doctrine of the Church played in the rise of interdenominational cooperation, but he evaluated it wrongly. For this "recovery" of the sense of the Church was no recovery at all, but human conjecture and a departure from the Scriptural description of the Church.

This new ecclesiology did not pass by the Reformed Church. Some of the leading Reformed theologians of the 19th/20th centuries were influenced by it. Dr. H. Bavinck had difficulties with the doctrine of the Church as confessed in the Belgic Confession Articles 27-29, and closely approached the typically 19th century constructions of A. Kuyper, who became the great promoter of this new ecclesiology in the Reformed Churches. This new ecclesiology obliterated the boundaries between the true Church and the false, eroded the antithesis, and led to the formation of various interdenominational organizations.

Through the labours of men such as K. Schilder, B. Holwerda, Joh. Francke and others unscriptural ecclesiology was refuted. Over the course of time, people became increasingly aware that they had to uphold the boundaries of the Church and maintain the antithesis in all sphere of daily life. They applied this awareness also in the realm of interdenominational cooperation in kingdom work, and found that they could no longer work together with those who acted contrary to the ordinance of God. Instead they formed organizations whose members were faithful to the Church gathering work of Christ. It is true that not all came to this conclusion immediately, and not all applied this conclusion consistently and to the same degree. And sadly it must be said that some did not come to this awareness at all.

We must maintain the Scriptural doctrine of the Church so clearly confessed in the Belgic Confession. Let us not emphasize Art-27 of the B.C. (which speaks about the Church as an assembly of true Christian believers) at the exclusion of Art.28 (which speaks about the Lord's demand to join the Church) and Art.29 (which speaks about the marks whereby the true Church can be identified). Let us maintain the borders of the Church and uphold the antithesis. Then interdenominational cooperation and association will be clearly seen for what it is, the unscriptural application of the doctrine of the Church.

Rev. A. Van Delden, Una Sancta

[Ref. HRT Brandeth, Approaches Of The Churches Towards Each Other In The 19th Century.

K. Deddens and MK Drost, Balance of Ecumenism]

THE CELEBRATION OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

The Westminster Confession speaks about the Lord's Supper in its chapter 29. However, we will now focus on chapter 25 with the heading "Of the Church" because there is an important relation between understanding the doctrine of the church and the question concerning who may participate at the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

It was especially the practice of Lord's Supper admittance that led the Churches at Laurel and Blue Bell to leave the OPC. The practice was that almost anyone who claimed to be a Christian was permitted to this celebration. Thus members of Evangelical or Baptist denominations, who out of convenience happened to be in Church, were permitted to participate upon request. This made for meager supervision of the Lord's Supper and also hampered church discipline. The Church at Laurel appealed this matter to the General Assembly of the OPC and were told that there was nothing wrong or unscriptural with this practice.

The continental Reformed Churches, which includes us, are convinced that only members of good standing in the church may attend the celebration of the Lord's Supper. This is based especially on how the Lord addresses this matter in 1 Corinthians 11 to the church as a whole. The Corinthian congregation was addressed concerning how it had let the table of the Lord be used in an unholy way. The congregation as a whole is to celebrate the Lord's Supper knowing that those who eat and drink without discerning the body eat and drink judgment upon themselves. The elders as overseers have a particular task in this.

Rev. H.B. Hofford, previously minister of the Word of God at the Church at Laurel, presently at Grand Rapids, wrote a booklet entitled Open Communion in the OPC (Interleague Publication Board, 1990) in which he says that after having left the OPC and having joined the Canadian Reformed Churches he realizes more clearly that the lack of supervision at the Lord's Supper in the OPC has everything to do with the doctrine of the Church as found in the Westminster Confessions.

You may recall that after his booklet was published, Dr. H.N. Gootjes wrote an article in Clarion, "The Invisible Church and Open Communion" in which he tries to show that, historically, there is no connection made between the invisible church and the sacraments among the Presbyterians. He says that the Westminster Confession in Chapter 25, section 3 connects the sacraments to the visible church. This section reads: "Unto this catholic visible church Christ hath given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world: and doth, by his own presence and Spirit, according to his promise, make them effectual thereunto."

Dr. Gootjes is right when referring strictly to this one section. However, Rev. Hofford (p. 11) says that chapter 25 section 4 "becomes the guide for viewing non-OPC churches." This is a point which Dr. Gootjes does not mention. Section 4 of this chapter says, in part: "This catholic church hath been sometimes more, sometimes less visible. And particular churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure..." Rev. Hofford writes (p. 11), "What distinguishes the OPC from Baptists,

not true vs. false, but more pure vs. less pure.” Thus, in practice, this section of the Westminster Confession undermines a clear distinction between the visible and invisible church and therefore also undermines the clear connection which this confession makes between the visible church and the sacraments in the previous section.

That Rev. Hofford is correct in making a connection between who may attend the Lord’s Supper and the doctrine of the church as is shown by how Rev. G.I. Williamson writes about it in his commentary. He writes:

“No doubt the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper was administered in the apostolic church according to the practice which has been called ‘closed communion.’ In view of this view the sacrament is to be administered only to those who are baptized and professing members of the Church administering the sacrament. When there was relative purity in the visible Church such a practice was both practical and proper. Under such circumstances it would have been the only alternative to open communion, which is improper. If conditions were such today that all churches were true visible churches, it would be incumbent upon each church to receive from every other church all members certified as in good standing, and to admit them to the Lord’s Table. But closed communion is not scriptural today for the simple reason that some denominations (and congregations) have ceased to be true churches, on the one hand, and because no single denomination alone is “the true Church,” on the other. Open communion is wrong because it would admit members of false churches without evidence that they are Christians, and closed communion is wrong because it would exclude members of true churches without evidence that they are not Christians.

The proper administration of the sacrament is therefore, ‘restricted communion.’ This simply means that a particular true church does not indiscriminately admit members of other churches to the Lord’s Supper.

If a person comes from another denomination and desires to partake of the Lord’s Supper, it is necessary (1) to determine whether or not such a person has sufficient understanding of the truth to be a believer, and (2) whether or not such a person professes faith in Christ and gives evidence of walking in obedience to his commandments....But if such a person comes from another denomination the integrity of the denomination must be accounted for...Thus in every case there must be admission to the Lord’s table only on the basis of a credible profession of faith, or rather a profession of faith that is considered credible by the church administering the sacrament.” (op. cit. pp. 229-230) So far this lengthy quotation from Rev. Williamson.

However, it shows the reasoning and practice in the OPC. It is based on the premise that denominations are more or less pure and not true or false. The supervision by the church administering the Lord’s Supper sounds good, but should not one of the questions of examination be: Are you faithful in being a member of Christ’s church? By Rev. Williamson’s reasoning this question becomes superfluous and is apparently of little concern. However, for one to show “faithfulness in his walk of life” he must show faithfulness in being joined to Christ’s flock in the place where Christ gathers it. Rev. Williamson’s whole reasoning is based on a church pluriform (ie. denominations are more vs. less pure) way of thinking. This way of thinking undermines how the Lord calls us to be faithful in joining His flock.

Rev. Williamson is correct when referring to the practice and circumstance in the apostolic church. Circumstances have also changed but this change includes an unscriptural doctrine of the church and ecumenism. It is especially this unscriptural doctrine of the church and false ecumenism which leaves doors open to the kind of change about which Rev. Williamson writes. We may not permit this sad and unscriptural deviation from the doctrine of the church.

When we maintain that only confessing members of the church may attend the Lord's Supper we do not judge individuals concerning their salvation. However, by it we declare the importance of being faithful concerning church membership. If someone loves the Lord and desires to attend the Lord's Supper, that is fine. Let him first confess his faith and join the church, then he will be received with joy. Moreover, if there is a church which is faithful to the Lord, then we have no business being separate. Then we should right away work towards being united together.

In section 2 concerning the sacraments the Westminster Confession says: "There is, in every sacrament, a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between sign and the thing signified: whence it comes to pass, that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other." You all know how during the time of the Reformation the Roman Catholic Church had insisted that the bread and wine change into the real body and blood of Christ. This changing is known as 'transubstantiation'.

When the reformers, in particular U. Zwingli, insisted that the sacraments are no more than signs, Rome very strongly objected suggesting that the reformers took all the meaning out of the sacraments. The Lutherans, in particular, Melancthon, tried to compromise. They reasoned that since Christ is also true God ascended. His body and blood is everywhere present and therefore we eat and drink His real body and blood along with the bread and wine at the Lord's Supper. This teaching has been called "consubstantiation". We reject it in Lord's Day 18 of the Heidelberg Catechism. Along with Calvin and from Scripture we insist that the Lord is spiritually present, and He works faith in our hearts by the Word and the use of the sacraments. The Holy Spirit makes us receive the bread and wine at the Lord's Supper in true faith.

Maybe the Westminster Confession tries to say the same thing we say, but it is not clear. What is meant with a "spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified"? Compare this to the Heidelberg Catechism question and answer 78 where we confess that the bread is called the body of Christ "in keeping with the nature and usage of sacraments." Our Catechism is clearer because it does not join the sign and things signified together. Instead, the Catechism confesses how we should speak about the sacraments. The Westminster Confession, by using the word "union" seems to lean more towards the Lutheran teaching of consubstantiation.

In his commentary Rev. Williamson does not give particular attention to this "union". We can agree with what he says about the sacraments being a sign and seal.

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