

## **The continuing struggle/or unity**

In obedience to the instruction of Scripture, the Canadian Reformed Churches seek unity with those who are of the household of faith. Yet, while searching for this unity much division becomes apparent. Does this indicate that we are on a wrong path? Or are we overlooking something? In the matter of unity we want to praise, honour and obey our God.

### ***The Urge/or Unity***

Over the years of the history of the Canadian Reformed Churches, minutes and acts of its meetings clearly show an active interest in the unity of Christ's church. The founding fathers of these churches first sought membership in existing Reformed churches in Canada. After they discovered that this was not possible, thus not in accordance with God's Word, they formed the Canadian Reformed Church(es). Since that time they addressed those same Reformed church-es about the reasons they could not join them and besought them to return from their wrong paths. All, in order to seek unity. Although they saw deformation taking place, they were able to call churches back to Scripture because every-one maintained the same truths about God's holy Word. Over time these calls were not heeded and the contact was eventually broken off.

During those same years other contacts were established with Presbyterian Churches. Although these did not hold to the same confessions, it was considered that both the Reformed Confessions and the Presbyterian Confessions hailed from the same Reformation, and efforts should be made to recon-cile any divergences or differences in order to seek unity. We are all aware of the status of these discussions today.

Since discussions have been broken off with the Christian Reformed Church many of its members have seen its decline continue. In addition to the matters contrary to Scripture, pointed out by the Canadian Reformed Churches, also new and resultant issues were raised. Further deformation took place and many had to separate themselves from the Christian Reformed Church. They, in turn, formed new fed-erations; and, again, Canadian Reformed Churches sought and continue to seek unity with these new federations, there-by showing leadership in obedience to the Scriptural ordinance for unity of God's people, those for whom Christ died, His body.

### **Division Within**

Throughout the years, as these efforts continued, the matter of unity received increasingly more attention. At first, when addressing the Christian Reformed Church, Canadian Reformed members were very confident that the correct, i. e.

Scriptural, approach was being taken. Unity was not possi-ble until reformation took place.

As unity discussions broadened to the Presbyterian churches the same approach seemed to be taking place. Differences were identified and discussion was initiated. But over time it became apparent to many that the differences were not being solved. Rather the differences were being minimized. As Synods met every three years, sentiment swayed back and forth. One Synod

considered that unity was already there while another Synod again pointed to the differences that prevented unity. In addition to minimizing differences, changes have also been made to the definition of unity.

While there is much optimism about the reformation among many past members of the Christian Reformed Church now federated as the Fellowship of Uniting Churches and the Orthodox Reformed Churches, there are also differences there that have not been carefully examined. Major assemblies of the Canadian Reformed Churches have also shown evidence of division on contact and unity with these churches.

Consequently, while many believe that they continue to strive for the unity in obedience to Scripture, many others believe that the unity presently being pursued is not that which is in obedience to the call of unity in Scripture.

### ***What To Do?***

The call to obedience when we addressed the Christian Reformed Church did not create much division. We were clear on the issues and we were clear on the goal. The later urge for unity with Presbyterian churches created more division because the issues were not defined and the goal became more flexible. When dealing with reformed Christian Reformed federations we don't have a clear method in mind and we are uncertain of the differences or obstacles.

It appears that we must clear up the difficulties we have within before we can clearly move outward. Of course, such an argument, similar to the one used against evangelism - how can you reach out when there is so much work inside - should not hold us back from seeking unity in obedience to Scripture. But such a realization may help us back onto the right track in our unity efforts. Such a realization may help in enhancing the unity within.

We need to realize that we do not agree amongst ourselves what Scriptural unity really means. We need to compare our present methods of seeking unity in light of the Scriptural call for unity. And these matters must not only be debated among theologians at major assemblies, but they need to live in the congregations. The present situation where one congregation has a completely different idea about what the Church and church unity are than another congregation should alert us to the danger of church breakup rather than a complacent feeling that everything is progressing well. Let us join together in an edifying study of God's Word to come to a Scriptural understanding of what unity is all about. Then we can strive for it together, rejoice in it together, and serve our Lord together. PdB

The/allowing article was submitted for publication by Reformed Polemics after the author was unsuccessful in having it placed in Clarion. It was submitted in both 1990 and in 1995 for publication there.

## **Is the OPC a Sister Church?**

It was, obviously, interesting to read in Clarion<sup>1</sup> “ the opinion of Prof. Van Dam re the OPC, Rev. Hofford’s remarks, and Prof. Van Dam’s response to it because both writers represent the thoughts of many members of the Am./Can. Reformed Churches<sup>2</sup>. It seems, however, that some more clarification is needed for a better evaluation of the issue. Following remarks are based on a long time involvement with, and a thorough evaluation of the OPC.

It is certainly important, as Prof. Van Dam points out, that the amount of time we have expended on examining the OPC is unprecedented in the entire history of the Reformed churches. The reason seems to me rather clear: a large number of A/CR people are not sure that the OPC is a true Church of Jesus Christ in spite of all the investigations.

Prof. Van Dam refers frequently to the decisions of Am./Can. Reformed synods and committees, but they are, in general, not valid because their statements are the very heart of this contention. Therefore, I like to mention a few important aspects and misunderstandings, which in my view, have been given too little attention.

### ***A neglected criterion for judging a church***

Prof. Van Dam belittles Rev. Hofford’s opinions that issues like the admittance to the Lord’s Supper should be used as criteria in judging the OPC as a true Church of Christ. He states that a church should be judged by its confessional standards and other official statements that deal with the church. It is, in his view, unfair to use the experience of members of either the A/CR Churches or the OPC in judging the possibility of an ecclesiastical relationship.

His statement contradicts history as well as common sense. A few examples will do to illustrate it. In 1944, the ‘synodical’ churches officially had the same standards as the ‘Liberated’ churches. Yet, they were false churches. The Dutch Reformed Church in 1857 officially adhered to the same confessional standards as we do, but life in this church had deteriorated so much that elder de Haan, Rev. van den Bosch and Rev. Klyn understood that the need for reformation justified their separation and the start of the Chr. Ref. Church.<sup>4</sup>

Prof. Van Dam should have emphasized that the Body of Christ is the Church of Christ as it reveals itself as a gathering (assembly) of believers.<sup>5</sup> In other words, in determining if a church is true or false, we must not only investigate its official confessions, but also if it lives up to them. Therefore, in my view, Rev. Hofford’s argument is certainly valid.

### ***The OPC is a federation! Be careful!***

The decision of the Synod of Coaldale in 1977 to recognize the OPC as a true Church, ... as confessed in Art. 29 of the Belgic Confession, was for me in that time a surprise and disappointment, - especially so because I knew that some representatives of our churches knew about the administration of the Lord’s Supper table in the OPC.

It is interesting to note that this synod referred to Art. 29 of the Belgic Confession, but showed either a misunderstanding of, or a neglect for the most important aspect of the church: it is a holy congregation and assembly of the true Christian believers...<sup>6</sup> In fact, most members of the A/CR Churches know, at least in theory, that the churches to which they belong, are gatherings of Christians with a church government based on the Scriptures. Its office bearers have received their authority directly from the Lord, the Head of the church. Therefore, the Consistory (Session) of the church, consisting of the elders and deacons, cannot relinquish its authority to another body. It is well known in the A/CR Churches that classes and synods of these churches, voluntarily united in a covenant, are not higher, but broader assemblies. Consequently, this covenant is a confederation.<sup>7</sup> To call it a federation (as nearly all A/CR authors do) is essentially a denial of the Scriptural basis of the A/CR Churches.

This is not new. It was emphasized during the Union of 1892, as explained by Dr. D. Deddens, "The covenant of churches has a confederating character. Every local church with her institution of office bearers, given by Christ, is a complete church, which is not submitted to any power, but the authority of Christ."<sup>8</sup> In light of the above, the OPC is a federation, which is also a covenant, but its highest authority is centralized, and its members have to submit to it. In other words, the government of the OPC is a hierarchical government. Its church order, the Form of Government, states that the general assembly.... is the governing body of the whole church. It is the supreme judicatory of the church.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, the OPC lacks one of the essential marks of a church as mentioned above: regular meetings in which all members gather together with their office bearers. This cannot be done in the OP Church because it means that all members and office bearers in the USA should meet together regularly (it is only one church!). It has never happened, and will never happen. The OP Church is therefore, according to our confession, not a church at all.

Some members of the A/CR Churches may not feel that the difference between confederation and federation is important. Yet, they are because, in my view, it is the underlying cause of the disagreement re the relationship between the A/CR Churches and the OPC. The statements of the 1977 Coaldale Synod probably would have been different or better explained if this had been considered.

The name OPC is ordinarily used as a name for a church (which it is not), or as a collective term, in order to denote the sum of all its local congregations (which are churches).

We should always be aware that possible ecclesiastical relationships can not be made with the OPC church, a misnomer, but only with all the local OPC churches, belonging to a federal covenant, which is called by a simple collective, an expression for convenience sake.

In discussing a relationship with a large number of local congregations, either an investigation of all the local congregations is necessary, or the assumption must be made that all of them satisfy the marks of the true church as mentioned in Art 29 of the Belgic Confession. It is, obviously, in most cases well-nigh impossible to determine the characteristics of the local congregations of a particular

church federation, like the Korean church. In such cases, our synods commonly take the word of its representatives that the churches of the denomination uniformly live in agreement with their confession(s). With the OPC it is a different story. These churches (mind: not ‘church’) are nearly on our doorstep so that some investigation is not only possible, but necessary.

In my view, two of the most important characteristics of the OP Churches are their dedication to bringing the gospel to outsiders, and the very large non-uniformity of these churches. It is obvious that these characteristics have influenced each other more than is desirable. The different churches of the A/CR community, including the ‘Liberated’ churches in the Netherlands, have, of course also a certain degree of non-uniformity, but it is far less than in the OPC. For example, the celebration of the Lord’s Supper varies in the OPC churches from a very strict supervision method (Session controlled) to a liberal, ‘open’ communion table. The same kind of variation exists also in baptism and other issues.

### **Administering the Lord’s Supper in the OP Churches**

Prof. Van Dam quotes extensively from the report of our Committee for Contact with the OPC (CCOPC), and seems to agree with its statements. It would take too much space to go into detail about this report. Besides, it is not necessary. The issue is not so much the complaint of some members of the Burtonsville congregation, but, essentially, the administration of the Lord’s Supper. In this case, we do not need to go by hearsay or experience, but are able to use official statements.

1. The Fiftieth General Assembly, virtually unanimously, commended to the Burtonsville members the Lord’s Supper study, prepared in 1972 by the Presbytery of the Mid-Atlantic. The report mentions, among others, that an acceptable method for determining the eligibility of visitors to par-take of the Communion table is a simple warning by the minister from the pulpit. This recommendation reads, “The first, and most common (method) in the O.P.C..... is to have the minister make a statement at the beginning of the service, clearly setting forth the scriptural qualifications....leaving it to the individual to decide whether or not he is eligible.”<sup>10</sup>
2. Rev. G. I. Williamson<sup>11</sup> in an article against the open Communion table writes, “In the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, however, persons are commonly admitted (to the Communion Table) of whom the Session knows nothing.”
3. Rev. J. J. Peterson<sup>12</sup> in one of his articles rejects the fencing of the Lord’s Table against casual visitors by having them questioned by Session members. He defends passionately the ‘open’ Communion Table. It is interesting that he refers to the above mentioned decision of the General Assembly re the Burtonsville complaint. He states, “The oral, verbal fencing of the Table of the Lord ...rise from the Lord Himself as He gives the church instruction about His Supper. It is the LORD’S Supper.”

The Communion table, fenced by nothing more than a verbal warning, is maybe not a 'pure' open table, but certainly a 'pseudo-open' Communion table.

### ***Confessional membership in OP Churches***

#### **1. Infant Baptism.**

Rev. Hofford brought forward the simple fact that rejection of infant baptism by some members of the OP Churches is easily accepted. Prof. Van Dam in his reply rejects this argument by stating that these cases are just rare exceptions, and that such members are being instructed in the proper doctrine concerning baptism.

I believe Prof. Van Dam is mistaken. It is not uncommon in the OP Churches that members of the Reformed Baptist Churches join them for the simple reason that their own church is not available in a particular area. They are, obviously, accepted as communicant members, but it is not unusual that their infant children are not baptized. Mentioning that they ought to be instructed does not prove that they are. It is interesting that the quoted decision of the 1967 General Assembly just states that such parents must be informed of the position of the church re infant baptism. This is not 'instruction', as generally understood. Indeed, some churches may give real instruction, but other ones may think it enough to inform the parents in a casual way.

Parents, who refuse baptism for their infants, can not and will not be appointed as office bearers in OPC churches because office bearers must agree with the confession, etc. Nevertheless, it happens that such members are very active, and, non-officially have important functions e.g. as Sunday school teachers.

#### **2. Communicant members**

Communicant members do not have to subscribe to the Confession (office bearers must). A/CR Churches give instruction (catechism classes, etc.) prior to accepting members, the OP Churches give the instruction after having the persons accepted as members. Here again, the amount and quality of the instruction varies from church to church. It is, obviously, difficult to compare the instruction of the A/CR Churches with the OP Churches. OPC churches conduct Adult Sunday School classes for interested members, where most often biblical instruction will be given by an elder or a more knowledgeable member. These churches do not have catechism preaching. In general, the instruction of the confession and catechism is far less than in the A/CR Churches.

Another stumbling block for the proper relationship between the A/CR Churches and the OPC church is that a certain number of churches accept children as young as ten years as communicant members with the same rights as adult members (admittance to the Lord's Supper, voting, etc.).

#### **3. Relationship with other denominations.**

The OP Churches, in general, are more inclined to cooperate with members, and even office bearers of other denominations. Again, the variety in these churches makes it difficult to make it a general statement. Some churches may even invite a minister of Reformed Baptist churches or community churches to preach, if no OP minister is available, others may not. The same applies to the calling of a minister by a vacant congregation. Some congregations may even call a minister from a different denomination, e.g. the PCA, provided he has a satisfactory track record and is willing to subscribe to the confessional standards.

### ***Conclusions***

The above mentioned characteristics of the OPC seem to warrant some conclusions.

1. The OPC is not a church, and it is impossible to use its name as a collective term for all the local churches due to their large non-uniformity.
2. The separation of the Laurel A/CR congregation from the Burtonsville OPC congregation was based on the Scriptures. Office bearers, who accept the 'open' or even the 'pseudo-open' Communion table are guilty by association if a person, eating and drinking in an unworthy manner becomes guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. (1 Cor 11: 29)
3. Unrestricted pulpit exchange with OPC ministers is impossible, because some of their ministers adhere to non-scriptural standards like the open Communion table, a wrong vision of the Church of Christ, etc.
4. The A/CR Churches could, probably, accept attestations from OPC churches, if they were given (they would be given to members in good standing only, and not to unknown visitors). Nevertheless, the A/CR Churches can not give attestations to its members in order to celebrate the Lord's Supper in OP Churches (they cannot partake of an open Communion table)-

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1 Clarion: Year End Issue; Vol. 44, Nos. 4 & 5.

2 Am./Can. Reformed will be denoted as A/CR in this article.

3 For 29 years (starting in 1959), my wife and I have worshipped in OP Churches at least three Sundays every month.

4 Dr. Henry Beets, The Christian Reformed Church, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA.

5 Prof. Dr. K. Schilder, De Kerk, College Dictaat, Kampen, the Netherlands.

6 Belgic Confession, Art. 27

7 Webster's Third New International Dictionary defines: Federation: a sovereign state formed by the union of several states that have given up certain powers to a central government. Confederation: a group of independent nations, states or tribes more or less permanently united by a treaty for joint action.

8 Doleantie-Wederkeer, Editors: D. Deddens & J. Kamphuis, Vijibrief, Harem, the Netherlands.

9 The Form of Government, Chapter XV, subs 1 & 8

10 L. N. Vail, Report of Special Committee on Restricted Communion, April 15, 1972

11 G. I. Williamson, "On a more Adequate Fencing of the Lord's Table", Ordained Servant, Vol. 3, No. 4.

12 J. P. Peterson, Fencing the Lord's Table, Ordained Servant, Vol. 3, No. 4