

THE CHURCHES IN COMMON

Article 30 of the Church Order states that "A major assembly shall deal with those matters only which could not be finished in the minor assembly or which belong to its Churches in common." As our Church Order reminds us, the major assemblies have delegated authority and may not make pronouncements on matters that have not first been dealt with at a local consistory. Thus a major assembly may not formulate a doctrinal statement about marriage, divorce, union membership, alcoholism, homosexuality, or any other matter, unless it comes on its table via the minor assemblies.

We may understand from this order that when such matters come to these major assemblies that they are difficult. We may conclude that the minor assemblies could not come to conclusions regarding these matters. To assist in these difficult matters delegates from additional jurisdictions are gathered together to add objectivity to the matter and to give direction - Scriptural direction, to be sure.

This Reformed arrangement of Church Government has grown out of the Scriptural direction that each church is autonomous. At the same time the unity of the Church which Scripture depicts implies a method of church unity. Rev. Van Oene elaborated on this in his book, *With Common Consent*, where he says, "Joining the church federation is a voluntary act. No church can or may be compelled to take this step....This is not to say - we repeat - that a church is not disobedient to the Lord by either refusing to join or by deciding to break away. There are sufficient indications in God's Word that show that the bond of faith between the various churches was also being maintained and practiced by mutual contact, cooperation and consultation....This mutual assistance was also needed with a view to the heresies that emerged." (Page 139-140).

So we can see that the task of major assemblies includes dealing with matters that could not be finished at the minor assemblies, and concern the churches in common, and in so doing they are to give direction with regard to heresies or errors in the churches.

An active and living church member should review Acts of Synods and Press Releases of Classis and Reg. Synods to confirm if this is truly taking place. When we consider the various issues that have faced the Canadian Reformed Churches in its short life we may wonder if these assemblies have faithfully fulfilled this task.

A number of Classis' have faced the question of divorce and remarriage. Union membership has been debated in a number of congregations. Church boundaries and the trend modality churches have been topics for delegates at more than one Classis, especially in metropolitan areas. Underlying these issues is the larger issue of the Church. What is it? How should it be defined?

These matters have all been debated at the consistory level. Each consistory often is sure about how to deal with the matter, while a neighbouring or sister church may be of a differing view. Together they search for answers at the Classis, but very seldom is an answer forthcoming. Often the matter is dealt with on a technicality... "Not enough information was given to make a decision"; "the information did not arrive in time"; "in this matter, but not necessarily as a rule"; etc. It appears that our major assemblies are reluctant to make definitive decisions about doctrinal matters.

Another problem that plagues these assemblies is the teeter- totter effect. One Synod will lean in one direction and the next one will lean in the other. This difficulty is no more clearly displayed than in the matter of the Church.

The Acts of Synod 1980 show how that major assembly minimized the concern of the Consistory of the Church of Neerlandia when it complained about a sermon delivered in its congregation by Rev. D. de Jong (Acts of Synod, 1980, Art.143).

That same Synod explained to a brother from the Edmonton Church that he should address his consistory again about the preaching of Rev. de Bruin. Both these matters fundamentally dealt with the issue of what is the Church. Synod 1986 did give some very good direction in the de Bruin case, but when the consistory, in consultation with the neighbouring church deposed Rev de Bruin, it was advised that this should be done on the grounds that he was schismatic rather than on the grounds of his erroneous teaching.

The issue of the Church again received prominence when it was raised in connection with membership in the ICRC and in connection with contact with the OPC and other presbyterian churches.

The ICRC compromised by stating that churches could become members when they lived in accordance with their own reformed standards. Not, when they lived according to one another's standards, but each to his own. This is not unity, but shows a leaning toward pluriformity. In the case of Presbyterian churches, synod after synod has dealt with these matters. From one synod to another the approach varies. None of them have dared to speak out clearly against full ecclesiastical unity until differences have been resolved, while at the same time there are many voices in the churches that complain about the persistent direction to seek unity under these conditions. On the other side those who seek to establish unity in spite of the differences have not explained how that is possible. The refrain has been, "... but this is not an impediment to further unity".

Major assemblies are there to help the churches in the difficulties that they have in common. They must realize that the issues that face them are difficult issues and must be resolved by turning to our Father's guiding light, His holy Word. Only there will we be able to find the solutions to our problems. With this Word in hand let our major assemblies shine the light of life on the darkness of our problems. Let God's Word speak. Then our major assemblies will be able to show from that Word what God's will is. Then we will collectively be able to correct a church that allows divorced members to the Lord's Table. Then we will collectively direct a church to discipline a union member, and then we will be able to show that the unity Christ demands is a complete unity in doctrine and life style. We pray that our officers (ministers and elders) not be afraid to let God's Word speak out. Yes, this may bring division, but living in obedience to the commands of Jesus Christ does bring division. "Do you think that I have come to give peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division;" Luke 12:51.

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The editors of Reformed Polemics wish to express their deepest gratitude for the numerous letters of encouragement and subscription renewals we have received. We are not always certain if they

are meant for publication as well as encouragement. Here are two examples of the many we have received.

"Dear Gentlemen: Enclosed please find payment for my recent subscription to Reformed Polemics. I thank you for sending a number of issues on good faith. I also wish to express my gratitude to each of you for taking on the enormous challenges associated with such a venture. The need for your editorial perspective is great in these times when the scriptural view of the Church is repeatedly undermined by some within the Federation of American and Canadian Reformed Churches. The tiresome appeals pertaining to the admittance of Denver, the odd basis for recognition as true church of L'Eglise Reformee du Quebec by Classis Ontario North ("...with your [Can. Ref.] recognition we would not be dismissed as a fundamentalist sect."), the ongoing OPC and Free Reformed unity debates require an information outlet like your magazine to ensure that the diversity of opinion and the basis of such is sufficiently explored. Only by debating the real issues can true unity, both within and outside of our federation, be pursued legitimately."

"Gentlemen; Please renew my subscription. Your efforts are really appreciated and I am always looking forward to the next issue. Enclosed please find a cheque forI would appreciate it if you would send Reformed Polemics to my son also. May the Lord continue to bless your endeavours. Keep up the good work."

LINKING HANDS ACROSS CHURCH BOUNDARIES

J. BRUNING from Una Sancta, October 14, 1995

We live in a world where differences between churches and creeds are increasingly minimized and where the focus is rather on similarities, common beliefs and unity. One of the aims of this is to increase solidarity among Christians in order to make a strong and united stance in an increasingly corrupt and ungodly world.

THE GOSPEL FOR A NEEDY WORLD

There is a dire need, it is rightly said, that the society should be confronted with the gospel, the only true answer to its problems. From around the globe we hear of "Youth for Christ" rallies, beach missions, "gospel" radio stations and Christian coffee shops; there are inter-church organizations to advance mission and literature. Many of these activities are typically done by Christians from various churches who, in an effort to make action possible, combine talent and forces. We read in the Reformed press too that members of our (sister) churches are dealing with the question of inter-church activities. This matter has been raised in the Una Sancta several times. This same question is receiving attention in the Reformed press in The Netherlands.

ECUMENICAL BASIS FOR INTER-CHURCH ACTIVITIES

In relation to these inter-church activities a fundamental question arises: on what basis do Christians from various churches link hands and do things together? (I will restrict my field to those activities which are clearly related to Christ's church gathering work such as mission, Christian witnessing, home mission and prison mission work. "Inter-church activities" means co-operation in the above areas between people from different churches usually by mean of umbrella associations).

The basis for co-operation appears to be the view that all Christians have one vital thing in common: faith in Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Such common faith makes people from various churches brothers and sisters, saved by the one Saviour, Jesus Christ. Biblical evidence for this underlying bond is to be found, it is said, for example in John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life".

It is said that such believers are children of God regenerated by His Spirit and we should recognize such work of the Holy Spirit. Who are we then to judge if other children of God have a different view on matters such as infant baptism, church liturgy, how the Holy Spirit works or where you go to church? We must be realistic and accept the presence of sin and the brokenness and weaknesses of life, it is said. We should however focus on our common faith and regeneration that makes us brothers and sisters, which gives us a common basis for Christian witness and the like. We should strive for the honour of the same Lord; we should work towards the coming of the one Kingdom.

A RANGE OF CHURCHES?

This matter is also tied to the view of what is church. This century has seen a tremendous move towards ecumenism. It would have us believe that the true/false church distinction to too rigid and cold; we should recognize instead that there is a range of churches of our Lord. These churches have different histories and, because of sin, have degrees of purity. We cannot however deny them the name of Church of Jesus Christ when they hold as true the core of the gospel.

According to this view various churches can sit along side each other in one place recognizing each other as legitimate churches, where possible encouraging each other to walk in the truth. It is said that church "boundaries" are not so important, so long as you both believe in the same God.

There is also the belief that the concept of true church can be exchanged for the concept of "the communion of saints" that is bigger than your own church. The communion of saints in that context comprises Christians around you with which you feel a relationship, even though they are not members of the true church. People used to call it the "invisible" church or the world-wide Church with a capital C to which all believers belong. That such a view is anti-Scriptural and anti-Confessional has been shown many times in Reformed literature including the *Una Sancta*.

These views are very common today making it possible to link hands across church boundaries and be active together. It is a view that is also affecting our own churches. It begs the question: What do Scriptures and our Confession say about these matters?

CALLED TO JOIN THE TRUE CHURCH

A very important question is: How are we to view a person who believes the Christian faith, believes in Jesus Christ and salvation through Christ's redeeming work, yet does not belong to the true church, but is happy to remain in a church that we cannot recognize as a true church? Is such a person our brother and sister in that the sense that we are one in creed and life? In article 28 of the Belgic Confession we confess that such a person is called by God to leave his/her own church and join the true church. What if that person does not do so?

Dr. J. Faber makes the following observation: "But are all true believers already within the assembly of God's people (i.e. the true church p. 128)? Then I say: no. Therefore I myself must be obedient, time and again, and must call others to obedience, in order that they may join the true church of Christ... There are people, who read their Bible and all kinds of edifying words, and they believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, but they live by themselves. They are disobedient children of God... I would make the following distinction. The church is the assembly of the people of God. But someone can be a child of God, and therefore a member of God's people, without joining- and this is a sin- the assembly of the people of God."

Dr. Faber says that those believers who do not join the true church are disobedient" and calls their refusal to join "sinful". This is what we confess in Article 28 of our Belgic Confession of Faith (BCF).

There are, furthermore, differences in doctrine between the true church and those believers who will not join that church, but who remain in their own false of church; otherwise they would not remain where they are. Yet God demands that we are totally obedient to the doctrine as revealed in His Word; God is not satisfied with obedience just in the "important" issues, or belief in just the "core" of the Gospel, and a bit of latitude in what we might see as minor issues. In Deuteronomy 5:32 and 28:1 & 15, and in Matthew 28:19 for example the Holy Spirit tells us that God's holiness demands obedience in ALL that the Lord has written and commanded. Obedience to this demand will then result on true unity between believers.

FIRST UNITY CHURCH

Rev. Joh. Francke writes that our first calling is to keep the body of Christ ONE body in doctrine and creed, on the basis of Scriptures and our three Creeds and Confessions. In other words, we are called by Christ to be one in faith and doctrine, members of the one Church (Ephesians 4). Where this is not the case there is no real communion, because one person continues to live in error and disobedience. This divides the body of Christ and is sin. He writes (ibid p 279) that "the communion between believers is disturbed and broken when the unity of doctrine and the communion of the Holy Supper table and the Church unity are (or remains-JB) broken..."

These matters indicate that there are very major differences between believers who are faithful in their church membership and those who are not. There are significant issues at stake. It is not for us to minimize this sin by glossing over it and working with such people who continue to live in that sin. Such co-operation would also inevitably give mixed messages to the listeners about the

points of difference in doctrine and conduct of life. What church, for example, would say your hearers should join?

CHRISTIAN CO-OPERATION AND THE CHURCH

Another important matter is the significance of what the church means to us. As revealed in Scriptures and professed by us in our Confessions, God has given the true Church a very unique and vital task. The true church is the mother of believers that brings forth covenant children and has the authority to raise and nourish them (Galatians 4:26).

To that church is entrusted the proclamation of the Gospel, the commandments and promises of God and the revelation of God's norms for all of life's activities (Psalm 147:19, 1 Timothy 3:15). In the Church the Holy Spirit grants to the believers His treasures. All that is taught in the Church guides, yes binds the believer in all aspects of life. The Church, through the offices, is the believer's teacher and shepherd. Through the Church the Lord is pleased to rule and regulate us. For this reason we confess with article 28 of the BCF that everyone "must submit themselves to its instruction and discipline, bend their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ."

THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

From this true Church springs the communion of saints, the gathering of believers who accept each other as God's fellow labourers, united in faith and doctrine; who are willing to be guided and corrected on the basis of their common confession. Through this communion of saints the work of God's kingdom takes place; through this church-based communion of saints God sets us to work as a prophet, priest, and king (Lord's Day 12 of Heidelberg Catechism).

From this stems the multitude of Church and daily life activities such as the education of the children, family life, Bible study, mission, political activities, Christian witness to the world, home mission / evangelization. The congregation of believers does this work together in true unity of doctrine and faith, on the conviction that there is "one body and one Spirit ...one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Ephesians 4: 5,6) and that they "stand firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the Gospel" (Philippians 1:27).

THE BASIS FOR CHRISTIAN CO-OPERATION

Rev. Francke writes (ibid p 238): "The activities of faith (e.g. mission, Christian witness- JB) unfold in this manner: (they occur) under the supervision of the Word, by God's commandments and promises, preached and confessed by the Church, accepted and confessed by all its members; the activities of faith are therefore grounded on the Church's Confession. IN THE CONGREGATION OF THE CHURCH (emphasis mine - JB) lies their religious unity and communion, anchored and sealed in the Word of promise which is the norm of all their thinking, speaking and doing. Thus they labour in the broad arena of their lives on the foundation of the Confession out of the covenant of grace worked from within the Church."

Where lies the one true basis of working together with other brothers and sisters to promote God's kingdom? Where do we find the unity, even the right, to do this? It lies in the communion of saints, the congregation of the true Church where each person gathers in unity and bends his neck under the yoke of Christ!! It is in the true church that preaches the pure Gospel that maintains the pure administration of the sacraments and exercises church discipline. It is the true church that will ensure that Christian witness is indeed Scriptural. That is the unity from which we may work. Break this unity of doctrine and faith and such co-operation has the foundation chopped from beneath it.

Do we wish to give a Christian witness to the world? Then we and all with whom we work must remain under the leadership and guidance of the Word preached in the Church; for it is the Church that God has instituted to the supervisor of our lives as we confess in Article 27 of the BC. It is impossible to give true Christian witness outside the context of the Church offices of Jesus Christ. Do this with anyone who does not subject themselves to the yoke of the true church and you cancel out what Christ has instituted.

There is clear Scriptural evidence for not co-operating with those who are not faithful on their membership of the true Church. In 2 Chronicles we read that the Lord is displeased with Jehosephat, king of Judah, for co-operating with Ahab, king of the (disobedient) covenant people of Israel. The Lord wants His church in Judea to stand alone in their struggle (See 2 Chronicles 14, 20) and blesses them in it (2 Chronicles 26: 7, 8; chapter 32). In Ezra 4 we also read that the Israelites turn down assistance from the Samaritans who believed in God, but who were disobedient through idolatry.

In dealing with this same matter in relation to our schools, Rev. K. Bruning wrote: "Some people, also among us, believe that the matter of Church (membership) should not be so sharp and decisive". He added that some believe that there is the possibility with others who are not members of the church. He continues; "But we must witness to God's order. Our witness is: "Therefore come with us and do as we do. Come to the Church gathering work of Christ. There you will find the treasures of eternal life. Also the school and many other things'. Call them to seek the Church, THEN you show love. 'Seek first the kingdom of God and all these things shall be added unto you', and 'For whoever has, to him more will be given.'" For he who comes to the source, that is to the proclamation of the living Word, will be fed; he will find grace and riches, for their whole life and for eternity."

CONCLUSION

True Christian unity and co-operation go hand in hand. As mentioned by Rev. Francke (ibid p280, 281) true unity has its basis in the Word of God, our Confessions and the preaching of that Word in the true Church as instituted by God. This unity is expressed in the communion of saints and the Holy Supper. Where the communion of saints is broken and where there is not one Lord's supper

table, the foundation for co-operation between Christians in matters promoting the Gospel is broken.

The foundations on which we stand must be one foundation; otherwise life will be broken into little unrelated pieces. It is for us to understand from Scriptures and Confession that the communion of saints and the Lord's Supper table form the basis on which we build our Christian activities. If we separate Christian activities and organizations from the unity in the Church we will rob those organizations and activities from that only legitimate basis, and therefore of God's blessings.