

ECCLESIASTICAL FELLOWSHIP

For some thirty long years the American / Canadian Reformed Churches (A/CRC) have been in discussion with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC). During Synod Abbotsford 1995, the hope was expressed that ecclesiastical fellowship can be established between these two federations within the next three years, and finalized at Synod 1998. What is ecclesiastical fellowship and why is it being so hotly pursued? By looking at some of these questions we hope to come to some suggestions for future actions.

From the beginning of our existence as churches, the A/CRC have referred to churches with whom they stood as one in the faith as sister churches. During Synod 1992 this appears to have changed. Although the Acts do not say so precisely, one can sense a change. In the observations input is said to have been received from sister churches in the matter of establishing new rules for ecclesiastical fellowship (Art.50, Acts 1992). By the time Synod 1995 was held, the Committee for Contact with Churches Abroad noted that it had received from Synod 1992 the mandate "To continue the ecclesiastical fellowship with the FRCA, the RCN and the FRCSA in accordance with the adopted rules" (Art. 19, Acts 1995).

When one examines the rules for sister church relationship versus the rules for ecclesiastical fellowship there is much similarity. Although, in its report to Synod 1992 the Committee for Contact with Churches Abroad suggested that the first rule be re-worded because it was considered to be too inquisitorial and judgmental. Instead of taking mutual heed that the churches do not deviate, the language has been changed so that the churches shall now assist each other and be watchful for deviations. Yet, when we compare both sets of rules there is also the requirement to communicate about relations with third parties, the need to inform each other about agendas and decisions of major assemblies, the requirement to accept one another's attestations, the principle of open pulpits for ministers from fellow federations, the requirement to allow as much consultation as possible when major changes are contemplated to the confessions, and finally to admit each other's delegates to the meetings of major assemblies. It can be loosely said that the terms "sister churches" and "ecclesiastical fellowship" seem interchangeable.

Yet the Committee for Contact with the OPC feels that there is a much greater difference. In section A.2 of their report to Synod 1995 they say:

"Reflecting on this situation, we note that our discussions now take place within a different framework from what was in place when the contact with the OPC began. Two changes have contributed to this different situation. First, there is a change in our concept of foreign relations. We used to speak of 'full correspondence'; now we speak of 'ecclesiastical fellowship.' The rules for determining inter-church relations have been changed by Synod Lincoln 1992"

One wonders how there can be a perception of great change to now allow a permanent ecclesiastical fellowship whereas, under the previous rules only a temporary ecclesiastical contact was possible.

Different Unity for Different Folks

Ecclesiastical fellowship might rightly be defined as the unity of church federations internationally, just as there is unity between local congregations of the Canadian Reformed Churches. The principle of such unity is Scriptural and is confessed in Lord's Day 21 of the Heidelberg Catechism and Articles 27-29 of the Belgic Confession. When we work out this principle we follow the lead of Scripture, summarized in Q/A 55 of the Catechism, and apply the need of communion, of sharing in all Christ's gifts and using our talents and gifts for the benefit and well-being of fellow members. But when we apply this principle to churches in separate countries we run into some difficulties. Churches that have fought the good fight of faith and struggled to maintain the truth have different summaries of God's Word.

When the Can. Ref. Churches seek discussions for unity with the Free Reformed Churches and those congregations that leave the Christian Reformed Church, there is a call to unite around the common summary of Scripture, the Three Forms of Unity. Yet, even in these discussions, there is much difficulty in attaining organizational unity as confessed in Q/A 55. Remarks are made that caricatures have been formed of one another that each group has come to these discussions via a different history. Still, a number of Canadian Reformed Churches have declared that a local Free Reformed or Orthodox / Independent Church is a true church. It appears that a variety of true churches in one locale is permitted for a season while discussions take place about those matters that jeopardize ecclesiastical fellowship, or full unity, or sister church relationships, or (as it should be in a local place) the communion of saints.

While the differences that exist between churches with the same confessions keep them apart, much larger differences are deemed to be no impediment to full unity with churches that have different confessions. While Synod 1995 correctly mandated its Committee for Contact with Churches Abroad to raise the matter of contact with third parties and some questions concerning the blessing elder with the Churches in the Netherlands (Art. 19, Synod 1995), it believes that the differences between the Westminster Standards and the Three Forms of Unity concerning the covenant, the concept of church, church government, saving faith, etc. no longer need to be dealt with before establishing full ecclesiastical fellow-ship (i.e. communion of saints) with the OPC.

Throughout the church unity discussions, synods have had to field numerous appeals against decisions regarding contact with presbyterian churches. It is apparent that a substantial number of consistories and individuals within the Canadian Reformed federation are extremely concerned about the differences between the reformed and presbyterian confessions. The number and the nature of these concerns threaten to divide rather than unite and indicate that there is an unwillingness to accept what may be considered a theoretical, top-linked unity. Yet there are only a few, if any, who would wish to declare that they recognize the Free Church of Scotland, the Presbyterian Church in Korea, or the OPC as false churches.

Would it not be wiser to review the whole matter of ecclesiastical fellow-ship? Maybe there should be a distinction between sister churches and churches with whom we have ecclesiastical fellowship. We must be careful and responsible with what God has given us, also in our confessions. We do not need to throw away the heritage of the Three Forms of Unity and the gift of a reformed Church Order. While we recognize the FRC and the OCRC as true churches who we must call to unity

where we live, may we not also recognize faithful presbyterian churches as true churches where they live? We don't accept attestations from the FRC or the OCRC, nor do we exchange ministers with them. Why such a hurry with the presbyterians when we seem to have even more differences with them? Let us recognize them for what they are. Church federations where the truth of scripture is pro-claimed, where they strive to live in obedience to those Scriptures, but a church federation that has not received the same riches God has given us. Before we enter that full communion of saints as it is described in the rules for ecclesiastical fellowship, let us ascertain that we can indeed readily and cheerfully be of benefit to the well-being of the other, rather than an obstacle or diversion from serving our God in the time and place He has placed us.

That is not an argument from pride and arrogance, but a humble thankfulness for what we have received. It is an appreciation of the rich heritage both reformed and presbyterians have received. Together we must struggle to find a way to mesh these heritages. Not by compromise, but by testing them against the truth of God's Word. We must be vigilant in showing our presbyterian brothers what we have received. Conversely, we must be open to what they have received. We must be willing to accept their brotherly admonition and correction. The differences and divergences should be the topics of discussion at international meetings and of exchange of correspondence in the church press.

Then the biblically founded arguments can be weighed by the believers. Then the matters can be thoroughly discussed and understood rather than being hidden in appendices of Acts. Difficulties will remain, but in faith we may and must go forward, first in ecclesiastical fellowship (re-defined) and always with the focus on full communion of saints.

PdB

Letter to the Editors ...

In Mr. Dykstra's editorial "Feel Free to Disagree" the following is quoted from Robert L. Dabney: 'We expressly repudiate the claim of right or authority to dismiss, exclude or expel any person, lay or clerical, from the catholic or universal Church of Christ on the mere ground of his dissent from or rejection of parts of our creed'. This quote is then used to point out the erroneous ways of the OPC.

Yet, earlier you write that "There are also members in the Canadian Reformed Churches who, although they are willing to sign the Form of Subscription and are disposed to consider themselves bound to the Reformed creeds, do so with 'mental reservations'. They bind themselves to the confession 'insofar as' or 'to the extent that' they are Scriptural." One could probably find more examples within the CanRC where the doctrines taught in the confessions are not strictly adhered to or believed; and that the difference in opinion is considered irrelevant or unimportant. Can we then use quotes such as Dabney's to point to the OPC and say they are wayward when we ourselves seem to be the same? Perhaps if a person came to join with us we would demand doctrinal adherence first, but what can/should be done about those who have grown up within the CanRC and whose beliefs have 'wandered'? Do we just leave them be so long as they don't rock the boat?

Yours in Christ,
Bernice Vandebos

We regularly hear about Presbyterian churches, but do we know enough about them? I will take a closer look at their church-political background.

By A. Boersma (Reformanda, November, 1995)

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH POLITY

Every elder must have a good knowledge of church history. One has a certain right to expect this from reformed office bearers, but from elders in the presbyterian churches it is expected. When they are ordained into office - according to the rules of the Free Church of Scotland - they are also asked to declare agreement with the testimony of the General Assembly of 1842 as well as a protest by ministers and elders from 1843. In these it is clearly noted that the church of Christ must remain free of interference from government. She has her own rights and her own government; and the civil government has no jurisdiction or control over the church.

This is a clear example of the fundamental principle that church polity has a deeply rooted historic basis. To obtain a clear understanding and explanation of certain rules and articles of a church order, it is important to have knowledge of the past. That is equally valid for the reformed church order as it is for that of the presbyterian churches.

Presbyteries

Where does the name ‘presbyterian’ originate? It is derived from the name of the most important church assembly, the presbytery. This type of assembly goes back to the 16th century. In the time that Scotland received the Reformation (through the work of John Knox) the Roman hierarchy was abolished. Bishops were replaced by superintendents, ministers who as mentors had to supervise all the office bearers in their region. As the result of a shortage of ministers, each one received increasingly larger areas to supervise.

However, after some years this system was changed to the forming of so-called presbyteries. These were meetings of all the ministers and theological professors along with one permanently delegated elder from each consistory in the region. From these presbyteries stems the focal point of the presbyterian church polity. (“It is the radical court of the Church, of which the whole presbyterian government derives its form”).

An Office Bearers Meeting

For the sake of simplicity we could compare this type of church assembly with a classis. But such a comparison is not completely accurate. What then is the difference? A classis is a meeting of delegates from local churches, not an office bearers meeting. The members of a classis are there on the basis of the credentials they received from their consistory and not on the basis of their office. The classis also gets its agenda from the churches (i.e. instructions, proposals, etc.). In the presbyterian system the opposite occurs, there the presbytery has much more official authority than a consistory.

This is particularly noticeable in the case of a minister; he is in service to the presbytery. He has been entrusted with the task of spiritual growth of all the members in a local area. Every means necessary for this task are made available to him - the church building being one example. He is only responsible to the presbytery for his official work, including the preaching. The consistory (called the Kirk-Session in Scotland) has no authority over him, although it can lay a complaint against him with the presbytery when he does not faithfully perform his task.

In addition to the visits that take place, each local church must submit an annual report to the presbytery. These reports are reviewed and passed on to higher assemblies.

In certain circumstances the presbytery may intervene in local church life. When a vacancy occurs a minister is appointed to become the chairman in the local consistory.

When a vacancy occurs among the elders and there is no one to fill it the presbytery will appoint one from within the region until an election can be held to fill the vacancy from within the congregation. All told the initiative in many church matters in presbyterian church polity does not lie with the consistory but with the presbytery. This body plays a pivotal role in all of church life, both in its relationship downward to the consistory, as well as upward to the major body (synods). There is much similarity here with the church order in the Nederlands Hervormde Church.

In the formulations of church polity one sees very little difference. The churches in the English-speaking world (which this article is about) have the presbyterian church polity, while reformed church polity is often referred to as presbyterian - synodical. Still in this we see the difference. In

the presbyterian churches the presbytery - de presbiterio (Brazil) - is the most important body. While the cornerstone of reformed church polity is the local consistory where the office bearers of the church meet; and there is a special task for major assemblies such as classis and synods to maintain the bond as federation of churches. These latter bodies consist of delegates from the churches and are instructed by the churches as to their agenda.

At this point it might be interesting to take a short look at the hervormde church polity. According to this polity when a synod makes a decision pertaining to the church order the decision is sent to all the classis meetings for consideration and the responses are expected at the following synod where a majority of favourable responses will allow the decision to stand. At the moment this process is underway regarding the matter of the 'Samen op Weg' (On the Way Together) process. Several decisions regarding this matter have to be ratified at these lower assemblies. That is why there is so much pressure to agree or disagree with the decisions.

It is interesting to note that in this procedure the regional synods are bypassed and that consistories are not consulted, but that the majority of classis must agree. In this there is similarity with the presbyterian system, for there too, a decision of a General Assembly, affecting the church order, can not be considered valid until a majority of the presbyteries agrees (the Barrier Act).

The Highest Meeting

In practical presbyterian church life the provincial or region-al synod does play an important role. It is a body that is mainly occupied with the examination and revision of decisions of lower bodies. Members can address their com-plaints and appeals against decisions of presbyteries to this body. Lower bodies may direct requests for advice to the regional or provincial synods, but if a General Assembly is to be held soon, presbyteries may also address it instead.

The General Assembly is not a permanent body; however, the chairman or moderator of the General Assembly does maintain his office and task as chairman from the time he is elected until the next General Assembly. This places great importance on the election of a chairman. This can, at times

(as recently happened in Brazil) lead to an election campaign. After all, such a person is a focal point for all the time he functions in this office.

The General Assembly can require justification from any lower body and can send well-documented demands to them. It also reviews all reports and archives all documents of the provincial synods. The final decisions with regard to appeals are also made at the General Assembly. There is no further route of appeal. There is no higher body. If a brother can still not come to agreement with the decisions made, he may "dissent with reasons". In this way he can keep his con-science clear and does not have to consider himself responsible for the decision. His appeal will then go to the Head of the Church. He leaves it to the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the past this matter has also been under discussion among the Reformed Churches. It was considered possible to maintain one's own understanding and principlial convictions about a matter and still accept a contrary decision of several major assemblies (it was referred to as conforming 'de facto'). This is an important question, for decisions made by man are not to bind the conscience. For then the appeal must go to Christ, Who is the only Head of the Church.

ICRC to be held in Seoul, Korea in 1997

Rev. M. van Beveren, Secretary of the ICRC, says the purpose of the ICRC is five-fold:

1. To express and promote the unity of the faith;
2. To encourage the fullest ecclesiastical fellowship among member churches;
3. To encourage cooperation in the fulfillment of the missionary mandate and other mandates;
4. To study the common problems and other issues that confront member churches;
5. To present a Reformed testimony to the world.

Asked whether the ICRC is achieving its goals, Rev. van Beveren, retired minister of the Church in Edmonton, said it's still too early to tell. "We're still at the beginning stage."

Speeches being prepared for the Seoul conference include:

1. Biblical Principles for the Relation between Church and State by Dr. R. C. Beckett of Northern Ireland;
 2. The Principles of Reformed Worship by Mr. Mark T. Bube of the U.S.;
 3. The New Paradigm in Theology by Drs. E. A. de Boer of the Netherlands;
 4. Challenges of the Charismatic Movement to the Reformed Tradition by Dr. Richard Gaffin, Jr. of the U.S.;
 5. Women in Office (especially about deaconesses) by Dr. Soon Gil Hur of Korea;
 6. The Ministry of the Word amongst Asian Religious People (Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, Zoroastrians) by Rev. David John of India.
- (Excerpts from Christian Renewal - November 13, 1995)

PdB

DRUG ABUSE

By Anthony Byl

Drugs are available in so many places these days, in tech schools, universities and in and around the workplace. Tragically, even pupils of our Christian schools have been, or still are involved in the abuse of drugs.... ..does not Peter say, "Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour" (1 Peter 5:8)? ...

Show the world that you are different. Remember that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. Do not give in to peer pressure if the time ever arises when you are faced with drugs at a party, for example. Rejoice not in drugs and their temporary happiness, but rejoice in the riches of your faith and the eternal happiness that is coming.

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