

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF GENERAL SYNODS FOR THE CHURCHES

In this issue we have decided to focus on recent General Synods. To most of us the word “Synod” is not new. The dictionary defines it as, “an ecclesiastical council” or “any deliberative assembly.” It comes from the Greek word *synodos*, literally meaning “a coming together.” However, over the course of time the word “Synod” has taken on a particular meaning among church people, especially Reformed people. Synodical decisions are frequently the subject of discussion at consistory meetings, study societies, and even at birthday parties.

General Synods are the place where the federation, as a whole, makes decisions. If a new Bible translation is deemed necessary the matter is discussed at Synod. If the Book of Praise must be revised Synod will address the matter. Contact, and especially Ecclesiastical Fellowship, with other federations is also dealt with at Synods. Each time a Synod meets one of its members is selected to record all the discussions. Day after day the record of the discussions is reviewed and approved by the whole meeting. In the end all the discussions are compiled in a book called the Acts of General Synod. Recently the Acts of Synod 1998 of the Canadian Reformed Churches have become available to the members. In most, if not all churches, enough books are acquired so that all the communicant members may have one.

Often church members shrink back from a detailed reading of “the Acts” when they have a first glance of them. One can easily understand that a person would feel intimidated by the numbers of pages with small type, and with a book that looks more like a mortgage contract than a cozy read to curl up on the sofa with. Yet, we want to encourage every one of our readers to take the time to have a serious look at the Acts. So often discussions about what Synod has decided, about the motivation and background for decisions, etc. give clear indication that misunderstanding and misinformation have replaced the facts.

As the church of our Lord Jesus Christ journeys toward the end of time the devil will increase the frequency and intensity of his attacks. Satan will tempt Christians to tolerate life-style and doctrinal errors that are contrary to the Word of God. Many of these attacks will end up on the agenda of Synods. If “the evil one” is able to divert whole federations from the way of truth he will surely do so. At the same time the church will continue to strive to follow her Lord and Master according to the light of His Word. This antithesis will (and must) become increasingly stronger as we approach the last days. As in the past, so also in present and coming days, Synods can become one of the main battlefields of the church. There decisions are made that affect whole federations, directions are given that (according to the rules of federation) will be followed unless they are contrary to Scripture.

Because Synods provide the material, observations, considerations and conclusions that lead to their decisions, it is possible to understand the nature of the decisions that are made. It is imperative that church members take note of these in order to determine if the decisions are in accordance with God’s Word. Just like the words of the sermon in a worship service are considered to be the words of God, so the decisions of Synods are to be considered settled and binding, unless they are contrary to the Word of God. As the congregation listens to the preaching it must consider itself under the Word of God, but still it must keep an attentive ear to hear if what he minister is saying is

truly Scriptural. In the same way the decisions of Synods must be scrutinized by the members to see if they are truly in accord with the Word of God.

In the last number of issues of Volume 4 we already presented some news and articles about decisions made at Synod 1998 of the Canadian Reformed Churches. In this issue we present an article by one of the delegates of that Synod that deals with several aspects of our life as federation and how they were dealt with at Synod. We are also able to pass on some matters that were dealt with at Synod 1998 of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia.

PdB

SYNOD OF THE FREE REFORMED CHURCHES OF AUSTRALIA 1998

Following are parts of some of the articles of the Acts of Synod of the Free Reformed Churches in Australia as they were provided on the Internet.

Presbyterian Churches

Observations:

I. Deputies report that they could not complete their mandate. They

A. do not report on the FCS, EPCI, and the RPCI

B. do not deal with the concerns of covenanting and the purity of worship.

II. Deputies have gone beyond their mandate and on their own initiative have proposed that if the PCEA will agree to prepared statements regarding the Fencing of the Lord's Table and the supervision of the pulpit, Synod will acknowledge the PCEA as true and faithful churches of the Lord Jesus Christ and offer sister church relations.

III. Deputies have included in their report to Synod three papers which served the deputies in coming to their recommendations.

A. As far as the matter of children in the covenant is concerned, deputies conclude that "Although there is the possibility that there are differences of accent, the deputies have no indication that in the preaching or publications other (unscriptural) opinions about the position of the children in the covenant are taught or allowed to be taught." Therefore the deputies state that they "do not consider this issue as being an impediment to recognizing the PCEA."

B. As far as the matter of fencing the Lord's table, the position paper states, "Inasmuch as the PCEA has not furnished us with more definite information concerning their practice of fencing the table, we are not in a position to make any concrete evaluation whether we can progress with our contacts. In this report we have seen that there might be some serious inadequacies in the policies of the PCEA regarding the admission of guests from other evangelical churches. This is a serious matter since it touches upon the purity of the Lord's Supper, which is one of the marks of the true church. We have also expressed the concern that the doctrinal barriers which prevent official recognition and unity of churches are overlooked when determining participation at the Lord's Table. This gives reason for further investigation whether the PCEA embraces the notion of

interdenominationalism. This, too, is a serious matter, since it touches on the purity of doctrine, which is the second mark of the true church.”

Deputies state: “the elders do not discharge their office sufficiently by an oral warning from the pulpit. ...We may conclude that only those guests should be admitted to the Lord’s Table who the session/consistory are satisfied, on the basis of an authentic intimation from the minister or elder of his congregation, are members of good standing of another true church.”

C. As far as the matter of the supervision of the pulpit is concerned, the position paper concludes ‘The PCEA open pulpit practice leaves open the door to preaching that is not “the whole council of God” and “doctrine of the Confession of faith”. It does not safeguard the congregation from preaching that renounces “all doctrines, tenets or opinions whatsoever contrary to or inconsistent with the said doctrine”. The PCEA practice of opening the pulpit to ministers of churches with which it has no fraternal relations is therefore a serious area of concern and carries such weight that the PCEA can only be recognized as a “true and faithful Church of the Lord Jesus Christ” when the PCEA adequately fences its pulpits.’

The Deputies state: “It is the recognition of another Church as a true church that lays the basis for opening the pulpit to guest preachers. When a church is recognized as a true church its Gospel preaching is accepted as true and consequently its ministers can be recognized as faithful servants of God. After recognizing a church it should be possible that ministers from that church are invited to preach. Therefore only guest preachers from churches in ecclesiastical fellowship (sister church relations / fraternal relations) should be invited to preach.”

IV. Regarding what weight the FRCA should give to the areas of concern and whether all areas of concern must be cleared before the FRCA can progress with contacts/relations, the Deputies state that the PCEA’s manner of supervising the Lord’s Supper table and their supervision of the pulpit “are two areas of concern, which are of such weight that they need to be dealt with before the FRCA enters into sister church relations with the PCEA.

V. The church of Kelmscott has responded to the deputies’ report, giving reasons why they do not agree with the deputies who do not consider the PCEA’s view of children in the covenant as an impediment to recognizing the PCEA.

A. The Larger Catechism (Q/A 31) states: “With whom was the covenant of grace made? The covenant of grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed.

B. The PCEA’s practice of occasional pulpit exchange with Baptist ministers leads the Church of Kelmscott to “seriously question the effective significance of both baptism and the covenant within the PCEA.”

Decision 1

I. To adopt the statement which deputies have drafted concerning the supervision of the Lord’s Supper table with this emendation: that the phrase “another true church of Christ” found in the last line of the statement, is to read “...another church of Christ which displays the three marks of the church.”

II. To adopt the statement which deputies have drafted concerning supervision of the pulpit with this emendation: that the last sentence “Therefore only guest preachers ...invited to preach” should be exchanged for the following: Therefore no one should be invited to preach except ministers or licentiates who have undergone the proper ecclesiastical examinations according to the rules of our respective churches.

III. To acknowledge that the doctrine of the church, as mentioned in mandates to deputies by Synod 1990, 1992 and 1994 is implicitly addressed in the statements on fencing of the Lord’s Table and supervision of the pulpit.

IV. To add and adopt a third statement regarding the position of children in the covenant which follows below:

Statement regarding Children in the Covenant

When God established his covenant with Abraham, the father of all believers, he said, “I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you” (Gen 17:7). Peter confirmed this when he said, “For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:39). From this we conclude that God establishes His covenant, not only with believers and their elect children, but with believers and all their children.

When speaking about the children of believers, the Heidelberg Catechism teaches that they, “as well as adults belong to God’s covenant and congregation. Through Christ’s blood the redemption from sin and the Holy Spirit who works faith, are promised to them no less than to adults. Therefore, by baptism, as a sign of the covenant, they must be grafted into the Christian church and distinguished from the children of unbelievers” (Q/A 74). The Belgic Confession speaks in the same vein when it says, “We believe that these children [of believers] ought to be baptized and sealed with the sign of the covenant, as infants were circumcised in Israel on the basis of the same promises which are now made to our children. Indeed, Christ shed His blood to wash the children of believers just as much as He shed it for adults” (Art 34).

The Westminster Confession of Faith states: “Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible church, but also to be to him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, or remission of sins. ...Not only those that actually profess faith in, and obedience unto Christ but also the infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptized” (Chap. 28). Similar thoughts are expressed in the Larger Catechism: “Unto whom is baptism to be administered? ...Infants descended from parents, either both or but one of them professing faith in Christ, and obedience to him, are, in that respect, within the covenant, and to be baptized” (Q/A 166). The form ‘Of the Administration of the Sacraments’ in the ‘Directory for the Public Worship of God’ states: “Before baptism, the minister is to use some words of instruction, touching the institution, nature, use and ends of this sacrament, showing...that the promise is made to believers and their seed; and that the seed and posterity of the faithful, born within the church, have, by their birth, interest in the covenant, and right to the seal of it...”.

The Larger Catechism ask and answers the following: "With whom is the covenant of grace made? The covenant of grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed" (Q/A 31). As proof text, reference is made primarily to Galatians 3:16 "Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, 'And to seeds,' as of many, but as of one, 'And to your Seed,' who is Christ" (Gal 3:16). In this context, Paul affirmed that salvation comes, not through the good works of all Abraham's descendants, but through the good works of one of Abraham's descendants, namely, Jesus Christ. Although the promise was made with Abraham and all his seed, yet the promise focused upon the one descendant, Christ. With a view Christ's mediatory work, God established the covenant of grace with Abraham and his posterity. Apart from Christ the promise would be void. Contrary to the thoughts of the Judaisers, against whom Paul contended, the introduction of the law four hundred and thirty years later did not annul that covenant promise of salvation through faith alone.

When the Larger Catechism (Q/A 31) states that the covenant is made with the elect, it does not deny what it expressly professes elsewhere (Q/A 166), namely, that all the children of believers are included in the covenant of grace. Neither do the words of Paul in Galatians 3:16 deny that all the children of believers are included in the covenant.

While the promise is sincerely made to all the children of believers, only those who through faith are grafted into Christ receive what is promised. (We are not speaking here of those children of believers who die in infancy). For Paul says that "they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, 'In Isaac your seed shall be called.' That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed"(Rom 9:6-8). Paul goes on to speak about God's electing love. In this context, it becomes evident that only the elect who are grafted into Christ by faith "are counted as [Abraham's] seed" (Rom 9:8).

Inasmuch as all the children of believers are included in the covenant of grace, and therefore belong to the church of Christ (Heid. Cat. Q/A 74), the church must exhort and assist parents in fulfilling their duty to instruct their children in the doctrine of the Old and New Testament as soon as they are able to understand, and to have them instructed therein to the utmost of their power (cf. Form for the Baptism of Infants). Or as stated elsewhere, the parents are to "bring up these children in the knowledge of the grounds of the Christian religion, and in the nurture and admonitions of the Lord" (Directory for the Public Worship of God, Of the Administration of the Sacraments, and first, of Baptism).

Grounds:

- a) The statements regarding the supervision of the Lord's Supper table and the fencing of the pulpit are based on Scripture and the Reformed Confessions.
- b) In light of the statement in the Larger Catechism (Q/A 31) together with the occasional pulpit exchange with Baptist ministers it would be prudent to address this matter by means of a statement as well.
- c) These statements resolve the problems associated with these areas of concern in a Scriptural and responsible manner.

ADOPTED

Decision 2

To offer the PCEA sister church relations as a first step toward full unity if they can agree to the above mentioned statements about the supervision of the Lord's Supper table, the supervision of the pulpit, and the place of children in the covenant. This decision to enter into sister church relations is to be confirmed by the FRCA synod upon agreement and implementation of the above mentioned statements.

Grounds:

I. Apart from the three areas of concern, the PCEA give evidence of faithfulness to the Word of God, maintaining the Reformed confession.

II. The PCEA's agreement with the proposed statements takes away the concerns we have expressed.

III. The 1990 Synod considered "where two federations of sister churches are found in the same country there is the demand of God that, 'brothers dwell in unity' (Ps 133:1). However, because of the different cultural and historical background between the two bonds of churches, such an eventual organic unity, although a goal, cannot be expected to be achieved quickly and may need to develop slowly" (Acts 1990, Art 77, Cons 23).

ADOPTED

Decision 3

To appoint new deputies with the following task:

I. to personally communicate synod's decision about the statements mentioned in Decision 1 & 2 to the PCEA

II. to indicate to the PCEA that deputies are willing to discuss these statements with them if the PCEA so desires.

III. to allow deputies to attend a PCEA synod if an invitation is received

IV. to assess the response of the PCEA to the three adopted statements and come with recommendations to Synod.

Grounds:

I. It is good to communicate Synod's decisions regarding the PCEA in a personal way to avoid misunderstanding.

II. Although Synod is convinced that it expresses in the statements the Scriptural position regarding these three matters of concern, we are open to a dialogue with them about these matters on the basis of Scripture and confession.

ADOPTED

Decision 4

I. To assess the areas of concern with respect to the contacts which the FRCA have with the FCS, the EPCI and the RPCI. (These areas of concern are: the supervision of the Lord's table, the supervision of the pulpit, the position of children in the covenant, covenanting and purity of worship.) This assessment should include:

A. In what way the statements referred to in Decision 1 affect our relations/contacts with these churches.

B. How in a manageable and responsible way the FRCA can fulfill their obligations towards these churches since they are geographically/culturally far away (cf Acts 1994, Art 111).

Grounds:

I. Our method of approach to the PCEA will affect our approach to other Presbyterian churches.

II. Deputies were not able to complete their mandate regarding the FCS, EPCI and the RPCI given by the previous synod.

ADOPTED

RAISING THE BAR TOO HIGH?

By Wayne Pleiter

Are the Canadian Reformed Churches raising the bar too high? Are we elevating matters of church order to a confessional status? Are we making decisions that amount to nothing more than a conditional agreement to the OPC? These are just some of the questions that are being expressed amongst the church membership and raised in the past issues of the Clarion.

Over the past six months the Clarion has focused on the events and committee reports leading up to Synod Fergus 1998, particularly with regard to Church unity matters. Post-synod reports were also provided to the readers to inform them of the basic decisions and directions charted by Synod 98. Upon the completion of Synod 98, Rev. G Van Popta correctly noted in his editorial that the '...consistories and membership of the churches must begin their work – the work of testing the decisions.' While he attempted not to go into the particular issues of the decisions, Rev. Van Popta did question whether Synod 98 had, '...in some cases, raised the bar too high.' (Clarion: Vol. 47 No.12.)

In yet another issue of Clarion, it was Rev. Mulder who voiced concern about the consistency of the decisions made from one Synod to the next. Rev. Mulder expressed general disappointment with the OPC decision, and questioned in particular how Synod 98 could do what Synod 95 said cannot be done without refuting the judgment made by Synod 95. He states: 'My concern is that Synods are in danger of losing their credibility when they ... make conflicting judgments in serious matters.' (Clarion Vol.47 No.14 page 338.)

In a subsequent issue it was Rev. WWJ Van Oene who registered a strong protest in his 'letter to the editor' against what the Rev. Van Popta wrote in his editorial section. (Clarion: Vol.47. No.16 page 386.) Rev. Van Oene questions the editor of Clarion whether it is by the means of the two issues of confessional membership and fencing of the Lord's Table that the CanRC's are putting up barriers that are condemned by the Lord. In his response, Rev. van Popta makes reference to several decisions of Synod 98, in order to defend his premise that the Canadian Reformed churches 'are raising the bar too high'. In doing so he refers to the decision made by Synod 98 regarding the OPC, as well as the RCUS and ERQ. It is Rev. van Popta's reference to these two Synod decisions, along with the background information mentioned above that form the focus of this article.

"The OPC decision – a church order matter and conditional offer?"

The first matter relates to the decision of Synod 98 pertaining to the OPC. Rev. G. van Popta states that Synod made a practical matter - the matter of how the Lord's Table is supervised - a confessional matter. In doing so he concludes that 'we have made a church order matter a final condition' which in his opinion is 'an unwarranted barrier.' To support this claim Rev. van Popta refers to Rev. Mulder's article to demonstrate how Synod 98 raised the bar by making the offer for Ecclesiastical Fellowship to the OPC a conditional one.

When we consider these comments we may surmise that the argument is of practical application over against the basis of the confessions or Church Order. This practical / theoretical argument is in some way a deceptive one, and one that even Synod 95 wrestled with. Synod 95 expressed the concern '...that there is the danger of judging the "body" [by the practices] of its weakest members.' (Acts, Synod 1995, Art 106 Con. B.6. page 72) However there is also the other concern when we too easily state that a problem 'is more theoretical than practical'. All too often, such a statement quickly minimizes issues that are of a major concern to our federation (see for example the CRCA Report. X.6, page 23)

One wonders whether such terminology creates a false dilemma. Is it not so that theory will provide the basis for practice but also the accountability for that particular practice? While it would indeed be unwise for a Synod to make judgments on the apparent practices of individual churches within a federation, it is equally unwise not to judge common practices within the church federation standards. In making this judgment, a Synod must evaluate common practices as they relate to a federation's confessional standards, particularly if there are concerns that arise out of mutual discussions, committee reports or in the publications of the church federation in question.

Getting back to the point, is the supervision of the Lord's Table merely a matter of church order? It is true that the church order deals with the supervision of the Lord's table (see Art. 61 C.O.), but it is questionable if these issues are purely practical. While this article may not spell out the practical details of how the Lord's Table is to be administered, it does provide the criteria for those that may attend. These criteria, the need for a Reformed confession and godly lifestyle, are not just based on historical and traditional differences, but they are based on principles derived from the Scriptures and the confessions (i.e. both the Heidelberg Catechism and Westminster Catechism). This is clearly outlined in Synod 98 decision regarding the OPC. (Acts Art. 129; Con.C.3) While the assertions of Rev.'s Van Popta and Mulder is that these matters are merely of a church order

nature, Synod 98 sufficiently established that they of a scriptural and confessional nature. In its decision Synod outlines that this common OPC practice of fencing the Lord's Table is actually contrary to their own confessions, i.e. the Westminster Catechism.

The subsequent argument that Rev. Mulder presents in his article is that Synod 98 made a decision in conflict with Synod 95. You may recall that this Synod stated that practices of the Lord's Table supervision and confessional membership should be discussed but it "cannot in the end be made a condition for Ecclesiastical Fellowship" (Acts, Synod 1995, Art. 106 B.3.) Rev. Mulder is indeed correct when he made reference to this. However this does not undermine the fact Synod 95 did require that an agreement be reached with the OPC prior to formalizing a relationship of Ecclesiastical Fellowship (Acts, Synod 1995, Art 106 Rec. D.1, page 75). When dealing with the proposed agreement as presented by the Committee for contact with the OPC (COOPC), Synod 98 was confronted with the concerns from the various churches. The numerous letters from the churches expressed that the proposed agreement was too vague and did not sufficiently address these issues. (Acts Art.129 Cons. C.2) With this in mind, Synod 98 decided to add the following sentence to the agreement: "a general verbal warning by the officiating minister alone is not sufficient and that a profession of the Reformed faith and confirmation of a godly life is required"

However it is this addition that leads Rev. Mulder and others to conclude that Synod 98 undermined the considerations of Synod 95. They claim by altering the agreement Synod raised the bar too high, so that it became a conditional offer for Ecclesiastical Fellowship. Yet the addition of this sentence was consistent with the previous decisions of Synod 92 and 95. In fact, this addition was the very guideline in which the COOPC committee was mandated to work within in order to reach agreement with the OPC on these matters. (cf. Acts Synod Abbotsford 1995, Art 106 Cons.D.1) Synod 98 did not make statements that conflicted with previous Synods, as Rev. Mulder claims. Synod 95 required that the committee formulate an agreement on these two matters with the OPC. There can be no argument that Synod 98 did not maintain this decision of Synod 95, as it was the very agreement that was proposed by the COOPC to Synod 98 that was put to use. The only changes Synod 98 made was the addition of one sentence regarding the Lord's Table supervision as mentioned above and the addition of one word regarding Confessional Membership. Synod 98 believed that these modest but significant changes would provide an unmistakable and unambiguous understanding of the two issues in the agreement. Such clarity would not only be of benefit to the OPC, but also to the CanRC membership.

It is rather ironic that the addition of this sentence would cause such problems. One only need turn to the Theological Affirmation article in the 1993 ICRC proceedings to find practically the same wording of the agreement adopted by Synod 98. (Proceedings ICRC 1993, Report of the Committee on Theological Affirmation, 4.B.3, page 80, 81) Furthermore, in the same ICRC article there is agreement by the various authors that an attestation or certificate of good standing (i.e. concerning doctrine and conduct) is required to allow participation in the Lord's Table. Why is it now that the change to the proposed OPC agreement causes it to become a conditional offer, when it reflects the very sentiments expressed in the ICRC article which was authored by scholars who include members of CanRC and the OPC? Perhaps what we should really be concerned with is why an agreement on the Lord's Table supervision could be formulated at the ICRC some 5 years before it was presented to Synod 98!

“Sunday Observance – a condition for Ecclesiastical Fellowship?”

The next matter for discussion is Rev. G. van Popta’s second reference to the decision of Synod 98 in his response to Rev. Van Oene. At this time he claims that Synod 98 has ‘raised the bar’ when it declined the invitations of ecclesiastical fellowship with the Reformed Church in the United States (RCUS) and the Reformed Church of Quebec (ERQ). The premise for his statements lie in the fact that ‘one of the grounds in both cases was Sunday observance’ (Clarion Vol.47 No.16. page 386) Matters that are, in his view, historically, ethical matters. By making the correlation between the actual decline of ecclesiastical fellowship and the fact that Sunday observance is mentioned in both these decisions, Rev. van Popta concludes that Synod 98 has elevated an ‘ethical matter’ to function as a barrier to ecclesiastical fellowship. But is it true that Synod 98 was actually making the matter of ‘Sunday observance’ a condition to ecclesiastical fellowship with the RCUS and ERQ?

While the phrase ‘Sunday observance’ may not be ideal, particularly with its legalist connotations, it was a phrase taken directly from the ERQ committee report. This report (as well as the RCUS report) mentions several aspects of the worship services, as well as apparent common Sunday ‘activities’ amongst the ERQ and RCUS membership. While Synod 98 was somewhat concerned about the apparent practices of the members, it was more concerned about the lack of explanation of these matters. It could be said that there is no reason to require further explanation for either way these are merely ‘ethical matters’. However Synod 98 disagrees. In some cases Synod 98 needed more information to determine whether the Scriptural norm and the Reformed confessional standards of these church federations were being maintained, i.e. the function of church discipline. In other cases Synod 98 simply required clarification as to the reasons for certain practices. An example would be when a church had only one worship service per Sunday – was this because it was a mission church, or did they lack a minister or was there no facility to rent? Etc.

It should be clear then, that the main reason Synod 98 mandated the committee to discuss the matter of ‘Sunday observance’ was to gain additional information and explanations about matters that were not sufficiently expounded upon in the committee reports. Synod 98 does not make these matters grounds for ecclesiastical fellowship, as eluded to by Rev. Van Popta, but simply mandates the committee to ‘discuss the matter’ of Sunday observance with the RCUS and to seek ‘further clarification’ from the ERQ.

To isolate and emphasize the one issue of Sunday observance with respect to the RCUS and ERQ is to take the issue out of the context of the entire decision made by Synod 98. Such comments do injustice to the spirit and nature of the decisions made by Synod and merely creates a negative perception of CanRC exclusivism. In some ways such insinuations do more to dishearten, what really are promising developments, in the relationship between the CanRC’s and these church federations.

So the question remains, did Synod 98 raise the bar too high? That indeed will have to be determined by church consistories and by the membership. However during this process, it should be clear that Synod 98 worked consistently within the framework of the decisions of previous Synods, particularly as it related to the OPC (cf. Acts, Art129 C.1.) It should also be clear that Synod 98 did not place legalistic conditions regarding ‘Sunday observance’ in its church unity talks

with the RCUS and the ERQ. As we reflect upon the proceedings in the Acts of Synod 98 we would do well to study each decision within its entire context, before questioning whether or not we are 'raising the bar too high.'

A Brief Response and Clarification

In the September 12 issue of RP, brother Bill Doekes responded to my article on Hendrik De Cock's opposition to hymns. First of all I want to thank br. Doekes for his kind remarks and second of all I would like to further the discussion by clearing up what appear to be some misunderstandings.

First of all, with respect to Amos 5:23, it should be noted that Rev. De Cock was simply giving the same exegesis of this passage as John Calvin. Calvin, in whose steps followed the Geneva Bible (see here also the notes of the Staten Bijbel), argued that the Hebrew word usually translated as "noise," should be here translated as "multitude." Calvin (in his commentary on Amos) goes on to say: "He might have simply said, 'Thy songs please me not;' but he mentions their multitude, because hypocrites, as I have said, fix no limits to their outward ceremonies: and a vast heap especially follows, when once they take to themselves the liberty of devising this or that form of worship. Hence God testifies here, that they spend labour in vain, for he rejects what he does not command, and whatever is not rightly offered to him." Evidently, Calvin and De Cock, on the basis of this old exegesis, both considered the introduction of extra-Scriptural songs to constitute a part of the unrepentant way of life of the apostate Jews of which br. Doekes writes.

Second, br. Doekes asks whether Deut. 12:8,32 is a passage which speaks specifically of worship services on the Lord's Day. The Reformed fathers seem to have understood it in this way. I refer here only to the author of our Belgic Confession, usually assumed to be Guido de Bres. The original Belgic Confession did contain Deut. 12:32 as one of the proof texts for Article 7.1 Article 7 contains that notable expression: "The whole manner of worship which God requires of us is written in it at length." In my short booklet, "The Whole Manner of Worship: the Sufficiency of Scripture and Worship in Belgic Confession Article 7" (Edmonton: Still Waters Revival Books, 1997), I have argued that worship here cannot be referring to anything else but the regular public worship services on the Lord's Day.² At the very least, this indicates that our Reformed heritage has seen the principle given in Deut.12:8,32 (and reproduced in our confessions in BC Arts. 7 and 32 and HC QA 96) as having reference to public worship.

Third, br. Doekes writes that "Paul would not have made the distinction between psalms and/or hymns if there were none." Here I sense some major misunderstanding. De Cock, the commentators of the Staten Bijbel, H.P. Scholte, and countless Scottish and English Presbyterians, have understood the terms "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" to be synonyms referring to the

book of Psalms in the OT. As I mentioned before, they did this because the same words used by Paul in the Greek NT are found in the titles of the Greek translation of the Psalms in the Septuagint.³ This use of synonyms, or a piling up of words to define one object or idea occurs more often in the Scriptures.⁴ For instance, “the law and the prophets” is often used in the New Testament to refer to the Old Testament. Another example can be found in Exodus 34:7 where God describes Himself as “keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin...” In a similar way, the Psalter was considered to consist of three parts: psalms, hymns and songs.⁵ When Paul, as a Jew familiar with the Septuagint, would speak of “psalms, hymns and songs,” the thoughts of his readers would turn to the OT Psalter. Therefore, at the very least, this passage cannot be used as a Scriptural warrant for the introduction of uninspired songs into our public worship.

Finally, what about the Lord Jesus Christ and His disciples singing a “hymn” after the celebration of the last Passover? All commentators seem to be agreed that this hymn consisted of Psalms 115-118.⁶ These Psalms (known as the Hallel) were sung by the Jews after every Passover. This only serves to bolster the argument of De Cock and others that “hymn” in the New Testament should not be understood to mean what we normally understand by the word in our modern context.

I appreciate the opportunity to clarify the Scriptural background of what Rev. De Cock wrote and I hope it will help in better understanding his arguments. Likewise, I am thankful for the concern which br. Doekes shows regarding the renewed introduction of (more) hymns in the Reformed world—but I must hasten to point out that his arguments will place an ineffective blockade before such efforts in our own situation. If we will oppose hymns and their introduction, we need Scriptural reasons for doing so—and our Reformed forefathers have already provided those reasons for us.

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1 Cf. De Nederlandse Belijdenisgeschriften (Tweede Druk), J.N. Bakhuizen van den Brink, Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Ton Bolland, 1976, p.78. I would note that the Gallican Confession (upon which the Belgic Confession is based) also contains a reference to Deut. 12:32. One may also find similar references throughout Calvin’s writings, compare Institutes 4.10.17 with what may be found in Article 17 of the Confession of Faith in Name of the Reformed Churches of France, printed in Tracts and Treatises Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), p.141.

2 The argument centers around the 16th century usage of the French word “service,” which appears at that time to have specific reference to public worship.

3 John Murray and William Young clarify this further: “The case is simply this, that beyond all dispute there is no other datum that compares with the significance of the language of the Septuagint in the resolution of this question. When taken in conjunction with the only positive evidence we have in the New Testament, the evidence leads preponderantly to the conclusion that, when Paul wrote ‘psalms, hymns, and spiritual

songs,' he would expect the mind of his readers to think of what were, in the terms of Scripture itself, 'psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs,' namely the Book of Psalms." "Minority Report of the Committee on Song in the Public Worship of God," Minutes of the OPC 14th General Assembly (1947), p.63.

4 For more examples than those given above, see also Lev.16:21, 1 Kings 6:12, Rev. 5:12, 2 Thess. 2:9, 2 Cor. 12:12, Acts 2:22 and many more texts.

5 Here an argument has often been made that "spiritual" qualifies all three terms, not just songs, for are (if the modern line is taken) we to believe that psalms are less spiritual than songs? See on this point *The Songs of Zion*, Michael Bushell (Pittsburgh: Crown and Covenant, 1977), p.90 and *The Psalms in Worship*, J. McNaugher (Edmonton: Still Waters Revival Books, 1907 (1992)), p.132.

6 As representatives, I checked J. VanBruggen (*Matteus: Het Evangelie Voor Israel*), William Hendriksen (*New Testament Commentary: Matthew*), and R.T. France (*Tyndale New Testament Commentary: Matthew*).