

“.., maintaining the unity of the Church.”

The words of this title can be found in Article 28 of the Belgic Confession. In this article we confess the duty of all believers to be joined to the church. The Article also warns against withdrawing from the church. The conclusion of the article is that all “who draw away from the Church or fail to join it act contrary to the ordinance of God.” Within this framework we read that “all and everyone are obliged to join the Church and unite with it, maintaining the unity of the Church.” To maintain the unity of the church is thus connected to joining the Church and uniting with it.

I ask your attention for these words as we remember God’s work of Reformation this coming Oct.31. Reformation is the work of the Lord by His Word and Spirit whereby He brings His people back from error and sin to the proper service of His Name. It means to do away with deformation and deviation and obey the Word of God. The church of Christ is created by this Word and lives from this Word. This is why a reformation is not the work of man, but God’s powerful work of redemption.

Reformation also means that you break with something. In reforming, the believers break with the errors and sins of the past. It also leads to a break with those who still maintain the errors and sins. Such a break is not easy. It goes against our human inclinations. Often when a reformation occurred, the believers were accused of breaking the unity of the church. The Reformers, for example, were accused of schism. That leads to this question: who breaks the church? Who is schismatic? The one who returns to the Word of God or the one who holds on to false teachings? The answer is the latter. For this reason the Reformers were not afraid to turn the accusation around. They said we are not breaking the unity of the church; in fact, we are maintaining it in fighting against what is wrong and deviates from the doctrine of God’s Word. Those who maintain and defend false teachings are breaking the church. It is like Elijah who met king Ahab. Ahab said: “Is it you, you troubler of Israel?” Then Elijah answers: “I have not troubled Israel; but you have and your father’s house because you have forsaken the commandments of the LORD and followed the Baals.” (1 Kings 18: 17-18)

To elaborate on this, I like to take you along back to the year 1539 and two letters that were written in that year. In April 1539 the romanist Cardinal Sadolet wrote an open letter to the people and leaders in Geneva. Remember that by this time Geneva is no longer under the tyranny of the Pope. The Reformers are allowed to do their work there. The other letter is Calvin’s reply to Sadolet. I cannot deal in detail with these letters, but will restrict myself to the element of maintaining the unity of the Church.

Cardinal Sadolet wrote this letter because he had heard “that certain crafty men, enemies of Christian unity and peace” had sown in Geneva the wicked seed of discord.” What is the discord? These preachers lead the people away from what the church teaches, and thus endangered the salvation of the believers. They have broken with what the church accepts as normal and instead came with their own innovations. Sadolet warns, because salvation is only for those who follow the church and what it says. He can say this because “the church errs not, and even cannot err, since the

Holy Spirit constantly guides her public and universal decrees and Councils.” These new preachers, writes Sadolet, “attempted to tear the spouse of Christ in pieces.” The conclusion of the letter is to call the leaders and people of Geneva to return to the fold of Rome.

Calvin responded to this letter. He takes the accusation of being an enemy of unity and peace very serious. He even agrees that “there is no salvation for those who have violated the unity of the church unless they repent.” But the question is whether indeed the Reformers violate this unity. Calvin’s answer is a definite - No. What the Reformers preach is the Word of God. It is Rome that has introduced false teachings and wrong practices. He agrees too with Sadolet that the Church is led by the Spirit. But then Calvin adds, this guidance of the Spirit is through the Word of God. He accuses Sadolet of separating the Holy Spirit from the Word. The result is that no matter what the church does or teaches, she is the Bride of Christ. The church can only remain church when she lives from the Word of God. Calvin then goes on to show that the teachings and practices of Rome are not in line with scripture at all, nor in line with what the church confessed in earlier centuries. That means, says Calvin, Rome may have the form of church, but lacks the reality.

This leads Calvin to answer the accusation that he and others are schismatic.

Let me quote:

“But the most serious charge of all is, that we have attempted to dismember the Spouse of Christ. Were that true, both you and the whole world might well regard us as desperate. But I will not admit the charge, unless you can make out that the Spouse of Christ is dismembered by those who desire to present her as a chaste virgin to Christ ..”

It is clear what Calvin is saying here. He says, as Reformed church we desire to present the Church as a chaste virgin to Christ, whereas Rome has polluted her. Not the Reformed break unity and peace, but Rome.

Who maintains the unity of the Church? Or to put it the other way, Who breaks the unity of the Church? The believers, or the churches that listen to the Word of God and the commandments of the Lord, maintain the unity. Those who go their own way make human ideas more important than God’s Word and break the unity. When talking about this unity we must first of all deal with obedience to the doctrine of God’s Word.

In conclusion, I would like to point to two things. This exchange of letters teaches us that the accusation of schismatic actions can be used too easily or even misused. It was used by Sadolet to bring the church back to the tyranny of Rome. Rather than to be blown over by or give in to such an accusation, we must examine whether what we say and do, is according to the Word of God. On the other hand, if we, as the Reformers, maintain the unity of the church, then we must be prepared to show from the Word of God that what we believe and preach is nothing but the doctrine of God’s Word. Then we must be prepared to show, as Calvin did, that the other side has twisted the Word of God and bound the consciences of the believer over and above the Word of God. If we do not do this, our words become hollow.

We remember the Reformation. We hear a lot about unity among Reformed believers. Wonderful indeed, but this is where it starts, with obedience to the doctrine of God’s Word. The unity of the Church should begin with the Lord and end in the Lord. He is the only bond for preserving it. The

church that maintains the doctrine of God's Word, maintains the unity of the Church. All believers who bend their necks under the yoke of Christ, the Head of the Church, maintain the unity of the Church.

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THE CHURCH UNIVERSAL

In the Apostles' Creed we confess the following: "I believe a holy catholic Christian church." Let us look at each of these words separately.

The first word that describes the church is the word "holy." "Holy" means to be set apart, consecrated to God. When we say that the church is holy, we mean that God has set apart His people to be a distinct people on this earth. They are distinguished from unbelievers and people who live in sin. They receive the sign and seal of God's ownership (baptism). Out of thankfulness for this privilege of being members of Christ's holy church, we are to be holy in all our conduct, that is, we are to set ourselves apart from sin and evil.

The second word that describes the church is the word "catholic." The church of Rome claims that she is the "catholic" church, and sometimes we distinguish Catholics and Reformed. Yet that is not a good distinction. For the Reformed Church is the catholic church, whereas the Roman Church is not catholic.

What does "catholic" mean, and why do we call ourselves the "catholic church?" "Catholic" means "universal, encompassing the whole." In what sense is it universal? What does it encompass?

The church of Christ is "catholic" or "universal" in three respects.

- 1) Geographical: it encompasses the whole human race. The church is not limited to Israel, the Netherlands or America. The church is gathered from all peoples, tongues and races.
- 2) Temporal: it encompasses the whole of time. The church exists from the beginning of time to the end thereof. There is never a time when the church fails to exist.
- 3) Doctrinal: it encompasses the whole truth. Christ gathers this church in the unity of the true faith. The church of Christ hears the voice of the Good Shepherd, but does not listen to the voice of any other. One of the marks of the true church (which are found in Art 29 of the Belgic Confession) is that the Word of God is faithfully preached. This means that the church believes all the truth and only the truth. It rejects all things contrary to the Word of God.

The third word that describes the church is the word "Christian." This word was not added into the Creed until the time of the Reformation. It is for this reason that not all churches which confess the Apostles' Creed, have this word to describe the Church. This word "Christian" shows the basis upon which the church is built. Christ is the cornerstone and foundation of the church. The existence of the church rests upon His gracious work.

The last word to be defined is the word “church” itself. This word is taken from the Greek word KURIAKOS which means “belonging to the Lord.” It is from this Greek word that the word church is derived in various languages: kirk, kerk, kirche, church).

From the Catechism we learn that the church is universal, uniform and unified.

The Church is Universal

Since we are discussing the doctrine of the church, we would do well to listen to a definition of what the church is. We confess in Art 27 of the Belgic Confession that the church “is a holy congregation and assembly of the true Christian believers who expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, are washed by His blood, and are sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit. “

The author of these words said elsewhere, “There is only one church, which is the gathering of all the elect who were from the beginning of time and will be to the end thereof.”

Olevianus wrote, “There is one universal church, just as there is one Head of the church, namely, Jesus Christ, and because all believers from Adam to the end of the world are His members and are one body through the Holy Spirit.”

Ursinus spoke about “an invisible universal church which is the assembly of all the elect through the ages.”

Concerning the church Calvin wrote, “All the elect are so united in Christ that as they are dependent upon one Head, so they grow into one body, joined and knit together as are the limbs of a body. “

In all these quotations you see one common feature: the connection between God’s sovereign decree of election and the universal church. And that is a connection that the Reformers based on the Scriptures. They refer us to John 10: 14, 16, where we read, “I am the good Shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice, and there will be one flock and one shepherd. “ Christ speaks about “My” sheep. These are the elect, which the Father has given Him. Christ brings all the elect together into one fold.

God’s decree of election does not automatically make them members of the church. Covenant children only become members of the church when they are grafted into it by way of baptism. Adults only become members of the church when they make confession of faith and are baptised.

As a result, we cannot say that all the elect are already members of Christ’s church. We must not view the church of Christ in a static way, as if it is complete and unchanging. We must realise that Christ’s work of church gathering is not yet complete. It is a process that occurs through the ages and will become complete only at the end of the ages. Only then does the Church Universal reach its fullness and perfection. Only at the end of the ages will all the elect be gathered in. It is important to realise that the Universal Church is not yet what it will be at the close of the age. The church is being gathered.

That the church is being gathered comes out clearly in what Christ says in John 11:52: Christ “would die for the nation [of Israel], and not for that nation only, but also that He would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad.”

Knowing this fact allows us to speak about the Universal Church in two ways. We may speak about the Universal Church as it now exists. And we may speak about the church as it will exist at the end of the age, when Christ returns.

It is the latter view that the Reformers had in mind when they described the Universal Church. They spoke of the church as it will be, the gathering of all the elect through all the ages.

It is good to pay attention to this time distinction, for some have confused the future with the present.

Some believe that all the elect belong to the church now already. And since faith is the fruit of election, some have said that all believers belong to the church now already, as it exists today. They realise, however, that all true believers do not belong to a true church. There are believers who are members of false churches. Yet they say that they are members of Christ’s church. Which church? Certainly not any true visible church on earth! Therefore they invent a church, an invisible church. A true believer, they say, who is a member of a false visible church is still a member of the invisible church.

Scripture never speaks about an invisible church. In the land of the living there is only one church now, and that is the Universal church, which is visible in many localities and which all display the three marks of the true church (cf. Art 29, Belgic Confession)

It is not in harmony with either Scripture or confession to say, then, that all the elect, i.e. all true believers are already members of the church. Christ spoke in another way. He said, “Other sheep have I that are not of this fold. Them also I must bring in.” (John 10:16) The fold is not yet complete.

Why is it not complete? For a number of reasons! In the first place, all the elect have not yet been born. Many names that God has written in His book of life have not yet come into existence. They will come to life, and they will join the church. Yet we cannot speak about those belonging to the church who do not yet exist.

Furthermore, the Universal Church is not yet complete because there are some who have not yet heard or responded to the call of the gospel. Some of the elect have not yet come to faith.

Still further, there are some elect who have come to faith, but who live in disobedience to Christ’s call. They resist Christ’s church-gathering work. For whatever reason, they refuse to separate themselves from the false church. Perhaps they have not understood the truth well. Perhaps there are certain consequences to joining the church that they are not ready to accept. Perhaps a marriage would be threatened; perhaps a job would be lost. Through weakness of faith, some true believers resist Christ’s church-gathering work. I think of Nicodemus, who did not approach Christ openly for fear of the Jews. It would appear from Scripture that he did not join the group of disciples until after Christ died. Only then did he openly declare his sentiments for Christ.

Those believers who refuse to join themselves to the true church cannot rightly be said to belong to the church so long as they resist Christ's work. They must be exhorted, for they act contrary to the ordinance of God.

Some continue to resist Christ's church-gathering work all their life. While they have joined themselves to Christ through faith, they have not joined themselves to Christ's church. Are they condemned? No. In this life, there is much weakness and shortcoming amongst all believers. That is also true in the area of obedience to Christ's church-gathering work. Nevertheless, if they have truly joined themselves to Christ, then at the time of their death, Christ takes them to Himself. And that, too, is a part of Christ's church-gathering work.

When believers who resisted Christ's church-gathering work on earth pass through the portals of death, they leave their sins and weaknesses behind. For death puts an end to sin. When they pass through the portals of death, they join that assembly of all believers in heaven. Death puts an end to their sinful resistance. Through death, they have become members of the Universal Church.

This Universal Church here on earth is not perfect yet either, for in the church there are hypocrites mixed along with the good. Throughout their life, their hypocrisy may go undetected. Yet when they pass through the portals of death, they will not be admitted into the assembly of the saints in heaven. Their hypocrisy will then be exposed, and they will be judged for their unbelief.

Furthermore, the Universal Church is imperfect because the sanctification of the believers is not yet complete. The church of Christ is made up of men who are still beset with great weaknesses.

It should be clear that the Universal Church as it is today is not what it shall be when Christ returns. Then it will be complete. Then all the elect will belong to it, and only the elect. It is this Universal Church in all perfection and completion, which the Reformers had in mind when they spoke as they did. This is the church as God sees it.

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RCUS Report on Women Voting at Congregational Meetings²

III. The third point in our study of the place of women in the church is that women are restricted in the realm of authority or rule. The restriction is simply that women are to exercise the office of believer in subordination to the authority of the male believers. This point is at the heart of our investigation and we must be most careful that what we have just said is an accurate statement of what the Scripture teaches. Let us point out that by "subordination" we do not mean the subjection of slavery or any inferiority of person but simply that a priority of order belongs to the man in the realm of authority. To see this we must consider in some detail the various Scriptural data involved.

We turn first then to the account of creation in which certain principles and laws are established concerning the order of this world. Man is created on the sixth day of creation for the purpose of having dominion over all the cosmos that God has made. He is the last and highest creature, whose duty is to rule over all things to the glory of God (Gen. 1:28, 1 Cor. 11:7). In this order woman is created as man's helpmeet, she is made after man, out of man, because of man and for man. That, primarily, is her place in the economy of creation: man is by physical and psychological nature and

by God's ordinance placed in the position of authority and government over the world and woman is his helpmeet. She is equal in sharing the divine image but is subordinate in his rule of the world (Gen. 2:18; 1 Cor. 11:8, 9).

In the fall of man we have another index of the positions in the world's economy that man and woman occupy. The sin of Adam is that which defiles the human race because he is the representative head of the race. His sin is that of rebellion against God his creator. The sin of Adam's wife, however, is, at least in part, a rebellion against her husband as well as against the command of God. In eating first she is guilty of overturning the natural order of government in the family (Gen. 3:6, 12), and this fact is noted in the curse upon Adam (Gen. 3:17). The way in which depravity is noted in the women is another indication of the proper order of authority, for her sinful nature is shown in an evil desire to rule over her husband. This is clear upon a careful exegesis of Gen. 3:16, where the KJV reads, "and thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee." The nature of the desire stated in the first clause can be determined by nothing else than reference to the second clause and thus must be a desire to rule. Furthermore the second clause does not make sense coming where it does unless there is indeed that meaning in the first clause. Thus the consecutive readily takes the meaning "but" and the meaning of the passage is, "and thy desire shall be [to rule] thy husband but he shall rule over thee." This exegesis is supported by a passage of very similar wording (Gen. 4:7), in which the same kind of relationship between the two clauses is necessary for the whole passage to make good sense. Here we would read, "and his [that is, sin's] desire shall be [to rule] thee but thou shouldest rule over him."

Another scriptural datum on this point is that man is the head of the woman even as Christ is the head of the church (1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:22-25; 1 Pet.3:1; Col. 3:18). Just what point of correspondence Paul and Peter have in mind when talking in this way is clear from the familiar, "wives submit yourselves to your own husbands," which they derive from this principle. They are always careful to limit this submission and headship to the matter of authority in the order of home and church however, and we too must do so. Paul is also careful to point out that Christ as head of the church so loved it that he gave his life for it, even as he speaks of its submission to Christ and that of woman to man. This makes it apparent that the subordination of woman to man is one of governmental order rather than of inherent worth.

It is sometimes argued that this subordination of woman to man applies only in the case of a wife to her husband and that outside of marriage the principle does not apply. That this is not the case can be demonstrated quite conclusively as follows:

1. The subordination of woman to man is not based in marriage but rather in the very nature of man and woman as created. The position of each in the creation economy reflects the purpose God had in making each of them as he did. This becomes even more apparent when we note that marriage itself is based upon the fact that man and woman complement each other in the natural economy. That is to say, marriage is based upon the complementary natures of man and women rather than that man and women must complement each other if marriage is to work (Gen. 2:24).
2. When Paul speaks of the respective positions of men and women in the church he refers to the creation order, thus showing us that it is inherent differences in the sexes that require

this subordination in the church (1 Cor. 11). To state it negatively, it is not in a given man-woman relationship that Paul bases his argument but in the very nature of each as created.

3. First Corinthians 11 cannot be limited, even on the surface, to speaking of wives only.

4. First Timothy 2:9-13 clearly speaks of all Christian women and again Paul refers to the creation ordinance. That this principle of subordination applies outside of marriage and indeed specifically in the exercise of the office of believer in the church is shown also by the close conjunction in which Paul places the office of rule in the home with the ruling office in the church (1 Tim. 3:4, 5, 12). This chapter of Paul's letter deals directly with the special offices of the church but it also shows the close conjunction between government in the home and government in the church. Particularly the permeation of this principle into the area of church government is established. Note too that chapters 2 and 3 are a unit applying certain principles to the services and government of the church and that one of these principles is that which we are here trying to establish, namely, the headship of man.

Another commandment concerning the restriction upon women in their exercise of the office of believer is that they are not to hold the special office of rule and teaching in the church. That this is true is clear from 1 Cor.14:34 and 1 Tim. 2:12, and has been almost universally accepted among those who hold the Scriptures in high esteem. It is well to observe here that the reason women are denied the special offices of the church is that the principle of the headship of man would be violated by a woman pastor or elder. Women are to be in obedience. The reason is not that women are less intelligent, or in every case less able than the men in teaching but that they are to be subordinate in the realm of authority.

Our principle is perhaps most clearly and definitely stated by Paul in 1 Tim. 2:12 - "I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence." The Greek authentain is translated a bit more accurately in modern English by "assume authority" or "govern." The meaning of this statement is quite clear, the subordination of woman to man requires that under no circumstances is a situation to exist in which a woman assumes authority or governs a man in the church. Furthermore the act of teaching includes a governing function. Therefore no woman is to teach in a situation where men are students. Because there is no mention of marriage in this context and because Paul bases his statement upon man's priority in time of creation, it is clear that this applies to all men and all women in the church.

This finishes our study of the examples and principles of Scripture. We must now list our conclusions concerning the exercise of the office of believer on the part of women. We have above pointed out the value of dividing the serving work of the church into three parts:

1. The administration of the Word,
2. The administration of mercy, and
3. The administration of rule.

This work of the church is carried out, on the one hand, by every Christian in his calling as a Christian (that is, in the general office of believer) and, on the other hand, by the chosen officers of the church (that is, by the members of the church as they are called to the special offices of the

church). The special officer in the administration of mercy is the deacon, the special officer in the administration of rule is the elder, and the special officer in the administration of the Word is the minister of the gospel. We will then use the term "special office" to refer to the offices of minister, elder and deacon in their respective administrations of the Word, rule and mercy, For example, the minister of the gospel exercises the special office in the administration of both the Word and rule, for he is an elder, set aside to the particular duty of administering the Word. The term "general office" refers to the ordinary members of the church as they are called to its serving work in any of these three administrations. Our conclusions then will be six, one concerning the general office and one concerning the special office in each of the three administrations of the church's serving work.

1. The woman is both by principle and example called to active participation in the administration of the Word of God in the general office of believer. She, as well as the man, is to be engaged in the teaching and nurture of children in the Word of God. She is to ask questions and take part in Christian discussion in the home and in other circumstances. There is nothing wrong in a man learning from a woman's words, as did the apostles of the resurrection of Christ, in the proper situation. The woman is simply not to assume the authority of teacher over man as student. Women are also called to teach each other (Titus 2:4) and are at all times to be ready to give reason for the faith that is in them.

2. Perhaps the foremost service of women in the general office of believer is in the administration of mercy. This is because the woman is usually by nature far more gifted with compassion and tenderness than is her male counterpart. The opportunities for this work are seemingly endless and the examples of Lydia, Dorcas, Abigail and Mary Magdalene are multiplied many times in the Bible.

3. Women also find several places of activity in the general office of the administration of rule. It is in this administration, of course, that the principle of the subordination of woman to the headship of man finds its most direct application. Thus we conclude that women may exercise authority in the church only in such circumstances and positions in which they are subordinate to the men of the church. Women, of course, have authority over the children and are to guide in the home (1 Tim. 5:4; Exod. 20:12). How widely this activity can actually reach is seen in Proverbs 31.

4. The Scripture by specific injunction limits the special office of the administration of the Word of God to men. No woman shall under any circumstances be ordained to the gospel ministry (1 Tim. 2:11-12; 1 Cor. 14:34-35).

5. In the same way the special office of the administration of rule is restricted to men (1 Cor. 14:34-35; 1 Tim. 2:11-12; 3).

6. The question of the special office of the administration of mercy is not as easily settled as are the above two because there is no specific statement of the matter either way. It must be admitted,

however, that in accord with the evidence previously given the burden of demonstration certainly rests on those who would say that there is or was such a special office. Since Reformed practice rests upon positive scriptural evidence rather than in indulging in everything the Bible does not specifically forbid, it is concluded that such an office is very doubtful. We must conclude in addition that if there is such an office it is definitely not the same as that held by the male deacons who rightfully have a part in the official government and teaching of the church (cf. the activity of the deacons ordained in Acts 6, see chaps. 7 and 8).

- Guido de Brès, *Le Baston de la Foy Chrestienne* as quoted by C. Vonk, *De Voorzeide Leer*, Drukkerij Barendrecht, 1956, p.91.
- Casper Olevianus, *De Vaste Grond, De Vuurtoren*, Urk, 1980, p. 148.
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