

PRESBYTERIAN OR REFORMED?

Statements by Presbyterians Themselves

In our previous editorial about Anglo-Scottish-American Presbyterianism we reviewed an article by Professor Bruce Shelley, professor at Denver Theological Seminary. (a) He gave us an account of what happened at the Westminster Assembly (1642-49). Subsequently we came to "some concluding observations", and ended by stating that "the 'denominational theory of the church' occupies a prominent and dominant place in Anglo-Scottish-American Presbyterianism. It has also made deep inroads in the Reformed churches including the Canadian Reformed Churches." We continue our discussion by examining the terms "Presbyterian" and "Reformed." Are these two terms indeed synonymous, or do they denominate two mutually exclusive systems of confession and church polity? We'll take a look at what Presbyterians *themselves* have said on this subject.

STATEMENTS BY PRESBYTERIANS THEMSELVES

In the two quotes we examined last time we paid attention to what some Presbyterians *themselves* have said about the traditional Reformed position on the requirement for church membership (confessional membership or confessional binding) and admission to the Lord's supper. These "Presbyterian" statements were made at the time that the congregation at Blue Bell was forced out of the OPC (1983-84), and the message that was communicated via these statements was crystal clear and completely in harmony with the principles of the "denominational theory of the church." The message was simply this: The "TRADITIONAL REFORMED POSITION" is "INCOMPATIBLE WITH THE PRESBYTERIAN VIEW", and if we, as Reformed churches *maintain* this "TRADITIONAL REFORMED POSITION" we are "A SECT, NOT A CHURCH."

When we examine the statement - made by Presbyterians *themselves* - that "the traditional *Reformed* position is incompatible with the *Presbyterian* view," we cannot help but wonder how it is possible that this plain and rather straight-forward communication has not received somewhat closer scrutiny in our discussions toward unity and church union with the OPC. After all, it is the *very* reason that forced the congregation at Blue Bell to secede from the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (note the singular "church," RD) and seek affiliation with the Canadian Reformed Churches. The members of the Blue Bell congregation wanted to be *Reformed* in both confession and church polity, *instead of* Presbyterian. For our brothers and sisters in Blue Bell the terms "Presbyterian" and "Reformed" are not - as frequently thought - synonymous, but these terms "denominate two mutually exclusive systems of confession and church polity." (b)

Evidently the Presbytery of Philadelphia shared the aforementioned conviction of our brothers and sisters in Blue Bell. In May of 1984 Rev. K. Kok appeared before this Presbytery to be examined in order to be declared eligible for call. During the examination it was said that Rev Kok had an excellent grasp of the *Reformed* faith and that he should be encouraged to seek ordination within a *Reformed* church INSTEAD OF within the OPC. Apparently for the Presbytery of Philadelphia an excellent grasp of the *Reformed* faith is not an attribute that is deemed to be advantageous when a candidate seeks ordination as a minister in the OPC. Such a grasp of the *Reformed* faith is "incompatible with the Presbyterian view" because the perceived *sectarianism* of "the traditional *Reformed* position on the requirement for church membership and admission to the Lord's supper" stands diametrically opposed to the inclusiveness of the "denominational theory of the church" as drafted by the "Dissenting Brethren of Westminster."

And so we may conclude - on the basis of statements made by Presbyterians *themselves* - that "the traditional *Reformed* position is incompatible with the *Presbyterian* view." Therefore we can agree - also on the basis of what happened to our brothers and sisters in Blue Bell - that the terms "Presbyterian" and "Reformed" "denominate two mutually exclusive systems of confession and church polity." These brothers and sisters did not secede from the OPC on the basis of certain personal preferences, but on the basis of clear scriptural principles. They were forced to put aside "the traditional Reformed position" on the requirement for church membership and admission to the Lord's Supper because these Reformed "distinctives" as practiced by the congregation at Blue Bell are unacceptable to the OPC and "incompatible with the Presbyterian view."

CHURCH GOVERNMENT - PRESBYTERIAN OR REFORMED?

In an earlier issue of Reformed Polemics (April 25/98) we have dealt with the matter of Presbyterian church polity. We wrote: "Many people have erroneously assumed that there is very little difference between Presbyterian and Reformed church polity." And it is obvious that that erroneous assumption is still alive and well today. Time and space do not permit us to repeat all that was written in the aforementioned editorial, but we can again cite what Presbyterians *themselves* have said and written on the subject of Presbyterian church government.

We begin with a quote from the "The Assembly of the Lord", a book about "Politics and Religion in the Westminster Assembly and the 'Grand Debate'", by Robert S. Paul. In "The Battle for Presbyterian Government" (Chapter 9) we read that Thomas Goodwin, who led the "Dissenting Brethren", "contended that a *presbyterian* government exercised over several congregations 'is inconsistent with the scripture and principles acknowledged by *reformed* churches.'" Goodwin charged "that the presbyterian government was essentially hierarchical..." And Goodwin was not alone in his concern about hierarchy. Robert S. Paul writes that in the debate about church government, the Scots and the English disagreed on the matter of "the power of the congregation to act autonomously." We read that "the Scots were beginning to fear that some of their English colleagues were becoming too 'Presbyterian' and not sufficiently Reformed." We are informed that "even George Gillespie (an active spokesman in the Assembly, RD) became worried about the rights of a Reformed congregation in electing its own officers."

However, the words of Thomas Goodwin, George Gillespie and many other members of the Assembly fell on deaf ears. Having heard the arguments for a form of government that is *consistent* "with the scripture and principles acknowledged by reformed churches", the Assembly chose *instead*, to adopt the *Presbyterian* form of government. We read that at the end of a rather fiery and drawn out debate "it was put to the question that it is lawful and agreeable to the word of God, that there be subordination of the congregational, classical, provincial, and national assemblies for the government of the church; and so it was voted."

And so we see that the members of the Westminster Assembly chose a form of church government that is based on "subordination of the congregational assemblies" to higher assemblies, and subordination of these higher assemblies to still higher assemblies. What we encounter here are "higher" rather than "broader" assemblies, or simply put, a system of "ecclesiastical hierarchy." The Assembly put into place a form of church government that closely parallels that of Rome and its bishops, except that the bishop has been replaced with a plurality of presbyters.

From the Westminster Assembly (1642-49) we proceed to Edmund Clowney, professor of practical theology and past president of Westminster Seminary (mid 1900's). We encounter Prof. Edmund Clowney as he quotes Christian Reformed theologian W. Heyns as writing: "Only in the local church does the concept, the significance, the task of the church come to its rights." Clowney then goes on to note that "the authors of the Westminster Form of Government could not have written Heyns' first statement, and Presbyterians in general would feel called to dispute it." In fact, Clowney finds the entire Reformed emphasis on the "place and primacy given to the local church and its consistory" to be out of accord with the presbyterian distinctive concerning the power of presbytery. Clowney defends this Presbyterian distinctive "concerning the power of presbytery" and "subordination of the congregational assemblies" against the Reformed emphasis on the "place and primacy given to the local church and its consistory." Speaking from the Reformed side we would have to agree with Clowney that "the Reformed emphasis" is "out of accord with the Presbyterian distinctive concerning the power of presbytery."

BACK TO BLUE BELL

It is this Presbyterian government that is "inconsistent with the scripture and principles acknowledged by *reformed* churches" and based on the Presbyterian distinctive "concerning the power of presbytery" or "subordination of the congregational assemblies" that provided the Presbytery of Philadelphia with the power to impose upon the church at Blue Bell the specific elders and ministers it saw fit, since local churches and their sessions (consistories) are completely subservient to the regional church and its presbytery. The presbytery, which never ceases to exist, can therefore order whatever it deems pertinent to the well-being of the churches under its care. And that is exactly what the Presbytery of Philadelphia did as it exercised the Presbyterian "distinctive" "concerning the power of presbytery"

and "subordination of the congregational assemblies." Blue Bell's Reformed "distinctives", namely its views on the doctrine of the covenant and the church, as well as its practices concerning membership and the Lord's Supper, were not going to be tolerated.

And as we have witnessed in the recent developments in the Free Church of Scotland, (note the singular "church", RD) the nature of the "power of presbytery" is such that it can even bring about a charge of "contumacy", that is, "defiance of the Presbyterian courts." This power permits the presbytery to replace, suspend or depose ministers and elders as it sees fit, since "subordination of the congregational assemblies" has been the hallmark of Presbyterian church polity since the time of the Westminster Assembly.

And so it came to pass that elders elected by the congregation at Blue Bell were replaced with elders from *other* congregations to form an interim session (consistory). Blue Bell was ruled by elders imposed upon it by the Presbytery. A minister was also imposed on the congregation of Blue Bell. His name will, no doubt, sound familiar. It was none other than Rev. John J. Mitchell, the Presbyterian author of the statement that "there is no such thing as a Reformed church that limits itself to those who can FULLY ACCEPT ALL MAJOR DOCTRINES OF THE REFORMED FAITH; such a body is a *sect*, NOT A CHURCH." (Emphasis added) And such a body is a sect because "no church has a final and full grasp of divine truth." (Third principle of the "denominational theory of the church")

The "inclusiveness" of the "denominational theory of the church" does not extend to those who are so "sectarian" as to suggest that in the true church of Christ the truth *can* be *fully* known. Nor does the Presbyterian "Form of Government", which is broad enough to give credence to "the division of the Christian church into different groups or denominations", tolerate those people who insist on confessional binding to the truth that can be known; the truth as the church has summarized it in her confessions.

AN OBVIOUS CONCLUSION

We may conclude, on the basis of statements made by Presbyterians *themselves* that "the traditional Reformed position" is "incompatible with the Presbyterian view", and that "the terms 'Presbyterian' and 'Reformed' are not - as frequently thought - synonymous, but these terms "denominate two mutually exclusive systems of confession and church polity." Nevertheless, there continue to be people, also in the Reformed realm, who refuse to accept that obvious conclusion, even though many Presbyterians *themselves* echo that very sentiment. And that brings to the fore a question. Paraphrasing the concern expressed at the Westminster Assembly by the Scots about their English colleagues we may well ask: Do we need "to fear that some of us are becoming too 'Presbyterian' and not sufficiently Reformed"? We will discuss more about that concern, the Lord willing, in our next installment.

Ron Dykstra

- a) *Denominations - Divided We Stand*, Prof. Bruce Shelley, Christianity Today, Sept 7/98
- b) *Presbyterian or Reformed?* Rev. K. Kok.

The Unity of the Church

(Reformation Day Speech - Oct.31, 2000)

By Rev.J.Ludwig

[Part Two of Two]

One Church

In the Nicene Creed we confess that Christ is gathering *one* church. Lord's Day 21 repeats the same, "I believe that the Son of God is gathering...A church...chosen to everlasting life." This comes straight from the Word of God. In John 10 the Lord Jesus tells the Jews, "And I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice, so there shall be *one* flock, one shepherd." Now to that, you might reply, "Yes, but Jesus uses the future tense, "there *shall be* one flock"! Is

he not referring to the Last Day when all the faithful will be gathered together into one multitude before the throne of God and the Lamb?" That's true, the distant future is in view here. But the present reality is not excluded either. For in the same breath Jesus says "there shall be one Shepherd." And that certainly is not confined to the new heavens and the new earth. Already now we acknowledge that Jesus Christ is the Shepherd of His sheep who by means of under-shepherds, ministers and elders, cares for their every need. Further on in that same chapter Jesus declares, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life...and no one shall snatch them out of my hand." If we take these words about the "one Shepherd" as applicable today, we must do the same for the preceding phrase about the "one flock."

The oneness of the church is beautifully expressed in another Biblical image - "the body of Christ." This is a body of which Christ is the Head. Just as a body cannot function, cannot live, without a head, so the church cannot function or live without Christ. Without Christ the church is nothing but an association of like-minded people. In 1 Cor.12:12, 13, the apostle Paul writes, "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many are *one body*, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we are all baptized into one body - Jews or Greeks, slaves or free...." That imagery says a lot. Even though the Spirit grants a diversity of gifts, we *belong* together. There are many different parts but they are all connected and they function together as one entity.

In our day the remark is often heard, "Don't get so worked up about Church union as long as we're united with *Christ*. That's the main thing." In light of what we have seen so far, to speak that way is to trample on the honour of Christ, the King of the church. And that arouses the righteous anger of the God who sent Him. To dishonour Christ will sooner or later have harmful consequences. He left the glory of heaven for this sin-ridden world in order to save *His people*, (Matt.1:21) in order to gather for Himself *a church* chosen to everlasting life (LD 21; Q&A 54). How is it possible then to place Christ overagainst his Church, as if union with the one does not necessitate union with the other? John Calvin wrote about this in his *Institutes*. Book 4, chapter 1 is entitled, "The True Church, and the Necessity of our Union with Her, Being the Mother of all the Pious." "I shall begin with the church," says Calvin, "in whose bosom it is God's will that all his children should be collected, not only to be nourished by her assistance and ministry during their infancy and childhood, but also to be governed by her maternal care, till they attain a mature age, and at length reach the end of their faith. For it is not lawful to 'put asunder' those things 'which God has joined together.' And then he goes on to say, in the line of the church father, Cyprian, that "the church is the Mother of all who have God for their Father."¹ Later in that chapter he stresses the same point, "Let us learn, from her single title of Mother, how useful, no, how necessary the knowledge of her is, since there is no other means of entering into life unless she conceive us in the womb and give us birth, unless she nourish us at her breasts, and in short, keep us under her charge and government, until divested of mortal flesh....[Moreover] beyond the pale of the church no forgiveness of sins, no salvation can be hoped for...."

Did not Ruth, the Moabitess, acknowledge exactly that in her response to Naomi? You all know the story. Naomi and her family had sought salvation outside the church. They left Israel when famine struck, at a time when God sent covenantal punishment for disobedience. And that withdrawal to Moab had sad consequences for the family. But redemption came in the life of that Moabite woman because she confessed to her embittered mother-in-law, "your God shall be my God." But did she leave it at that? Did she stay

¹G. Van Rongen in *The Church: Its unity in confession and History*, notes this distinction that whereas Cyprian started with the church ("A person cannot have God as His Father unless he first has the church as a mother"), Calvin mentions God the Father first of all and only then speaks of the Church, p.81-2.

behind in Moab content to worship Naomi's God there? No, she refused to go back, insisting, "Your people shall be my people." She saw that the Lord had bound Himself to Israel - the church of the old covenant. To Jacob God had given His Word. Israel had the law, the ministry of atonement, and the promise of the coming Messiah. In order to serve the God of Naomi she knew that that's where she belonged!

There is one God and Father of us all, one Mediator - Jesus Christ, one Spirit, and one body.

The Basis for Unity

In what, then, does the unity of the church consist? In the truth. The whole truth. Not just the sections that appeal to our reasoning, or those that we consider important. *Tota Scriptura* was as much as principle of the Reformation as *sola Scriptura*. Christ gathers a church "in the unity of the true faith" (LD 21). And true faith is defined in the *Heidelberg Catechism* as "a sure knowledge whereby I accept as true ALL that God has revealed to us in His Word." So, the unity of the church consists of faithful adherence to the teaching of the prophets and apostles. We may not join a church for any other reason. We may not seek unity on the basis of a common culture, or because we find the members of a particular church more warm and welcoming than another. It is not people or culture or feelings that are determinative, but the Word of God alone, that word as summarized in the Reformed confessions. It is with that reality in mind that our forefathers put *The Belgic Confession*, *The Heidelberg Catechism* and *The Canons of Dort* into one package and entitled it, "The Three Forms of Unity." We may point to them and say, "This is what unites us. We all believe and practice what is faithfully summarized in them." Notice that I said, believe and practice. It will not do to say, "We have the same confessions therefore we are, by virtue of that fact, spiritually one." We must "discern diligently and very carefully" (Art.29 of BC) whether these confessions are being upheld. The true faith is a living one. It has to be visible in the life and conduct of the members, individually and communally. All too often, as we have seen from our respective histories, it happens that we let the confessions become dead, dry documents. We treat them like artifacts in a museum, admired and stared at, but not used!

The confessions do not merely contain the belief of God's people living in the 1500s. What is written in them is embraced by the church of all ages and places. The faithful during the Reformation were prepared to die for them rather than deny any part of them. Many, in fact, were burnt at the stake or hung on the gallows for that reason. The same confessions are pertinent, actual and binding today because they summarize the abiding truth of God's Word.

Paul, as you know, urged the congregation in Philippi to be united. What he says there, can, by extension be applied to churches within a federation and between different federations. There was division, conceit, and self-seeking within that congregation, to the point that Paul tells them, (2:3) "Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being of full accord and of one mind." He continues by directing them to the example of Christ. How did your Lord and Saviour show his love, humility and selflessness? By being *obedient* unto death. It is that obedience that Paul wants the church to strive after. He says that even in verse 12, "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always *obeyed*, so now, not only as in my presence, but much more in my absence...." What had they always obeyed? The apostolic teaching. The Word of God. In the sixteenth verse of that chapter He exhorts them to "hold fast the Word of life." Clearly then, unity in the congregation is rooted in, finds its source and power and meaning in the obedience of the congregation to the Word of God. That is the only path to true unity. And then we may not say, "Oh, that's how he thinks, and that brother over there has a different view on that issue. We all have our different opinions and views." Instead we need to bring each other constantly back to the one foundation: the truth as made known in Scripture and summarized in the confessions.

The Form of Unity

That leads us to the question, “To what extent or in what form must this unity, so clearly commanded in the Scriptures” be manifested?” Some have answered that question as follows, “As long as we are confessionally united, we may be ecclesiastically divided.” To put it another way, “The unity of the faith does not have to result in the unity of the church.” Is that really the case? Do the confessions of our faith allow us to be “united as Christians but divided as churches?” On the contrary, confessional or spiritual unity must lead to ecclesiastical unity. Article 28 says that “all and everyone are obliged to join the church and unite with it, maintaining the unity of the church.” All and everyone! Indeed, the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace must be practiced and maintained, first and foremost, in the local congregation of which you are a member. But there are more believers in this country than just those in your own congregation. We give recognition to that in that each of us belongs to a federation of churches - churches that are planted throughout Canada and the United States. We have also established ecclesiastical fellowship with reformed churches in other countries of this wide world. If we will go to such lengths, based on the Scriptural call to unite and on the principle of the communion of saints, then we should certainly be busy seeking unity with reformed churches in this city. At least here we do not have to overcome obstacles of language or distance.

I spoke just a few weeks ago with my next door neighbours on Viscount Road. They’re Muslims. As we chatted about the differences between Islam and Christianity, the lady of the house very quickly pointed out, “You know, the problem with you, Christians, is that you are so divided. You all form separate little clusters with your own distinctives. Sure, you serve the same God, but you lack a united front.” I had to agree with her, admitting to her that it shouldn’t be that way. That it was due to nothing else but our sins and our sinful nature that we were not all one - not to the point where the fullness of unity is made *visible* in our dwelling together in the same house, in celebrating the holy supper together, in membership transfers and pulpit exchanges.

In his high-priestly prayer, our Saviour prays that all those who believe in him may be one just as he and the Father are one. But that petition for unity doesn’t stop there. It continues, “so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me” (Jn.17:21). Imagine this scenario. Your secular neighbour, who sees you leave your house every Sunday all dressed up, asks, “What church do you attend, anyway?”

You reply, “The Free Reformed Church.”

Oh, is that the same as the Canadian Reformed Church? The one down the street from my parents? Gauging from the similarity in name you probably are closely affiliated with them or not? No. We’re different. They’re another denomination. Same historical roots though. End of discussion.

With such a presentation of the church how will the world believe that God has sent his Son? Our unity as churches must be as close, intimate and profound as that between the Father and the Son. Of course, Jesus is not referring to the eternal and natural union that He has with the Father, a union in Being and substance. Christ has a relationship to the Father that we do not have. That difference permeates his ministry. In chapter 20 of the Gospel According to John He says to Mary Magdalene, who had been weeping beside the empty tomb, “I am ascending to MY Father and YOUR Father.” He does not say, “OUR Father.” Here in John 17 Christ means the trusting and loving relationship that He has with the Father. The Father pours out all his love upon him. He holds nothing back. His Word, His glory, His wisdom, His power, He gives it all to His Son. We also have to show loving solidarity and oneness so that the unbelieving world can see in the expression of our unity that Christ has been sent by the Father. The glory of our communion must be visible to all, a communion that we have “as members of Christ” (LD 21; Q&A 55). It should be obvious to them that what we enjoy and taste is not from this world. It is “otherworldly.” A miracle of divine grace. A gift from heaven - from the God and Father of Jesus Christ! For unity is, first of all, a gift.² We know that from Psalm 133 where David describes the unity of God’s church with the images of dew and oil. And both of them have this characteristic: they come from above. The oil *descends* upon the beard of Aaron. The dew *descends* on the mountains of Zion.

At the same time these two images reveal how precious this unity is! The oil used to consecrate Aaron was mixed with a very special blend of expensive spices. It was not for common use. Dew also was so inestimable that it became in Scripture a symbol for blessing. In Hosea 14, that is, in the context of the coming Messianic restoration, the Lord says about Himself, “I will be as the dew to Israel.” We may not brush unity aside as something useful but optional, as a worthwhile cause, but not something mandatory. That does not fit with either John 17 or Psalm 133.

Pluriformity?

Perhaps you still are wrestling with the question, “Is such unity required? Can we not be satisfied with a solution whereby we acknowledge one another as true churches but then continue on our separate ecclesiastical paths? We could still cooperate in other areas; put our shoulders together for reformed education, reformed evangelism, reformed politics.”

One theologian that helped promote that way of thinking more than anyone else was Dr. Abraham Kuyper. This is not said in a spirit of condemnation. Dr. Kuyper was an instrument in the Lord’s hand for the reformation of 1886 (the Doleantie) and the subsequent union in 1892. There is more that binds us to him than separates us from him. And yet when it came to the doctrine of the church he espoused a theory that was not Scriptural. He taught that the wisdom of God was so wide and broad, that each individual church possessed and confessed only a part of this wisdom. He called this the “pluriformity of the church” - many forms of ecclesiastical institutions. There was a pragmatic bend to this. It enabled Dr. Kuyper to garnish support for the Anti-revolutionary Party from all the different churches in the Netherlands.

And yet this theory does not stand the test of Scripture. The wisdom of God is not filtered through some kind of prism of human understanding so that every church receives a different colour. In John 17 Christ very clearly says, “Sanctify them in the truth. Thy Word is truth.” Because the Lord is one, His Word is one. And to the truth of that Word belongs the reality of the church as the body of Christ, an assembly with distinct marks: the pure preaching of the gospel, the diligent exercise of discipline, and the faithful administration of the sacraments.³

²See the speech of Dr. C. VanDam “When Brothers Dwell in Unity in *The Challenge of Church Union*.

³W.G.De Vries, *Kerkelijk verdeeld en christelijk samen?*, p.7-8.

There is a great danger in working together in all kinds of Christian activities while remaining divided as churches. Interdenominational schools, political parties, outreach programs can accomplish much good, no one will deny that. But they do not begin where they have to begin: with the church! Let's take interdenominational evangelism as an example. Let's say an organization is set up by the three churches that are represented here this evening.⁴ The gospel is brought via pamphlets or radio broadcast. Someone responds to the gospel, is brought to faith in Christ. Being truly converted he asks, "Where is the address of the church? Where is the place that I can do the will of my Father? Is there a visible church that I must join?" If this person asks questions like that he will not get a straight answer. The one member of the board will say, "You should join the United Reformed Church; another member will say, "No, you should join the Canadian Reformed Church, and the other component of this multi-church organization will say, "Personally, I think its best if you join the Free Reformed Church." The intent of the Evangelism Committee was good: spread the good news of Jesus Christ. But you see that you run stuck, if you do not address the question of the church. As we saw, the Scriptures will not let us shrug this off with, "Even though we haven't brought him to church, we have brought him to Christ." There is indeed a certain order in evangelism. The people receiving the gospel must first embrace Jesus Christ as their only Saviour. But after that the church enters the picture. It has to. For where else does this new convert continue to hear the preaching of the holy gospel except in the church? We may not separate Christ from the church? Head and body belong together.

The Second Commandment

To be content with inter-church cooperation without first obeying the command for unity in the true faith is sin against the second commandment. That commandment tells us HOW we must worship God - not according to our human imaginations and fancies but "in no other manner than he has commanded in His Word" (LD 36; Q&A 96). We are commemorating the Reformation. And it is always good on an occasion like this to be reminded that deformation began back then with the breaking of the second commandment, not the first. That is usually the way it goes in the history of the church. God remains the object of our worship. We don't substitute him for another god. Very subtly and gradually we make changes to *the manner* in which we serve Him. And that God takes this very serious is clear from the fact that he expressly attached a sanction to the second commandment: "For I, the Lord, your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments." God is jealous. He wants us to serve him as He has commanded - also with respect to the command, "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Obedience is better than sacrifices. Yes, we confess that we have only a small beginning of the obedience that God demands. Let that not prevent us from seeking one another in the unity of the true faith. For we also confess in Lord's day 44 that with "earnest purpose" we begin to live not only according to some, but according to *all* the commandments of God.

Conclusion

The unity of the church, my dear listeners, begins with you and me. What are we doing in that regard? How fervently and frequently do we bring this matter before the throne of grace? Yes, our wills are stubborn, our understanding dull, and our love towards God, whom we haven't seen, and towards our brother, whom we do see, is often lukewarm and intermittent. But we have the Word and the Spirit.

⁴Example taken from W.Jelsma, "Gereformeerd en missionair" in Reformanda XXII, no.31 (May 2000), 258. The author draws on a pamphlet by K.Drost, "God's Huis - Open Huis; van harte Gereformeerd en missionair."

Through them we can work with earnest purpose at doing what are Saviour prayed for, "That they may all be one." The unity of the church is part of "the yoke of Jesus Christ." Let us bend our necks under it for His yoke is easy and His burden is light (Matt.11:30).

WHO IS 'SANTA CLAUS', ANYWAY?

Recently we came across a discussion about the issue of Santa Claus. Most of us would say, "old hat". But during the discussion the following piece was introduced. We thought it might be useful to parents and/or others who would be dealing with this issue at this time of year. PdB

Santa Claus is a mythical old man who brings gifts to children at Christmas. Today's Santa Claus developed from a real person, Saint Nicholas, who lived in the A.D. 300's. He was bishop of Myra, an ancient town of Lycia, now in turkey. According to legend, he was only a boy when he became a bishop. He was extremely kind, and often went out at night, taking presents to the needy. After his death, his fame spread throughout Europe. During the Middle Ages, Saint Nicholas became the patron saint of schoolboys. Schoolboys in various European towns celebrated his feast day on December 6 by electing a boy-bishop. Dressed in magnificent robes, the boy-bishop led a parade through the streets. There was much feasting, but on the whole the occasion was solemn.

Later, this custom died out, although Nicholas still remained the favourite saint with children. In Belgium and The Netherlands, both young and old still celebrate his feast day. A person representing the saint wears the robes of a bishop and rides through the street on a white donkey. In Germany, Nicholas sometimes appears as a hairy imp, Pelz Nichol, meaning Nicholas in Fur. Parents tell Pelz Nichol how their children have behaved during the year. Then good children are rewarded with presents, while bad boys and girls receive only a bundle of twigs or switches.

Children were so fond of Saint Nicholas and his habit of bringing gifts that the custom of celebrating his feast day was maintained. Dutch settlers brought the custom with them to New Amsterdam (now New York city), and English settlers eagerly borrowed the legends and festivities surrounding the kindly Saint Nicholas. English-speaking children tried to pronounce the Dutch name for the saint, Sinter Klaas. But they said it quickly and excitedly, and soon the name changed to Santy Claus or Santa Claus.

APPEARANCE.

Santa's appearance began to change about the same time as his name. For hundreds of years, Europeans had imagined Saint Nicholas as a tall, thin, stately person. But Washington Irving created a new picture of him as a fellow who looked very much like a typical Dutch settler in the state of New York. In his Knickerbocker's History of New (1809), Irving described the saint as the guardian of New York City. He pictured him as a jolly fellow wearing a broad-brimmed hat and huge breeches and smoking a long pipe. Irving's Saint Nicholas rode over the treetops in a wagon, took presents from his pockets, and dropped them down chimneys.

In 1822, Clement C Moore wrote for his children the poem "A Visit from St Nicholas," which describes the saint more as we know him today (see Moore, Clement C.) In this poem, which begins with the familiar line "Twas the night before Christmas," the saint is pictured as a round and jolly figure with twinkling eyes, a "nose like a cherry," and a white beard. He puffs a stump of a pipe and rides in a sleigh pulled by eight reindeer. Like the German Pelz Nichol, "he was dressed all in fur, his head to his food". In 1837, a painting by Robert W. Weir showed Santa as a friendly, tubby fellow, wearing a hood and knee boots, and carrying a bag of toys. He was grinning and, in Moore's words, "laying his finger aside of his nose."

Thomas Nast, the famous American cartoonist, further developed the figure of Santa Claus in a cartoon in 1863. Later, his famous drawing "Santa Claus and His Works", which appeared as a Christmas picture in Harper's Weekly in 1866, showed Santa Claus in his workshop with his record of the good and bad deeds of all children. The drawing also showed the reindeer drawn sleigh, the pack of toys, the stockings hung at the fireplace, and the Christmas tree.

FESTIVITIES

For hundreds of years, people celebrated the feast of Saint Nicholas on December 6, which is the anniversary of the saint's death. After the Protestant Reformation, Saint Nicholas was replaced by the Christ Child, called Christkindl, in parts of Germany and Switzerland. From this name came the character Kris Kringle, the angel-like figure who brings gifts at Christmastime. Sometimes Pelz Nichol accompanies him.

In England, Saint Nicholas Day festivities were banned when Henry VIII founded the Church of England. They were later resumed when Queen Victoria married a German prince, Albert. Then Saint Nicholas returned as Father Christmas, a gentleman dressed in a long tail coat and square beaver hat. He, too, appeared at Christmas time. But in many European countries, such as The Netherlands, Belgium, Austria, and parts of Germany and Switzerland, Saint Nicholas celebrations still take place on December 6.

In the United States, Santa Claus' activities always occur at Christmas time. The American version of Santa Claus has also become popular in Canada, England, and Australia as a person who brings presents and christmas cheer.

Arthur M Selvi. (The World Book Encyclopedia)

As we approach Christmas, the time of year that the Christian church commemorates the birth of Jesus Christ, we may rejoice that He is not only a truly good man but is also true and perfect God. He has accomplished what no mere man could ever provide. Let us rejoice in Him and Him alone, on Christmas day, on every Lord's Day, yes, every day. PdB