

## **LONG-ESTABLISHED REFORMED PRACTICES (2)**

### Explaining What We Confess and Practice

In the editorial “Getting Rid of Idiosyncrasies” we stated: “If we truly see the need to do something, also in the context of coming to unity and church union with other churches, we can begin by making a serious effort at coming to a better understanding of the reasons we have for doing things in a certain long-established Reformed way.” (1) We made this statement in response to those who called the Reformed practice of “closed” communion “a Canadian Reformed idiosyncrasy”. In the same way we also responded to those who expressed the opinion that “in the light of recent discussions in contact with other Reformed and Presbyterian churches... perhaps we even need to be critical of some long-established practices.” (2)

In the seemingly never-ending crusade by various churches, church federations and/or denominations for unity and church union we see an increasing inclination toward trivializing and minimizing what was once confessed, agreed upon and practiced. And this inclination has not bypassed those who lay claim to being Reformed. Rather the impetus “to work towards a single federation of Reformed churches, united in confession and practice” (3) seems to have created a climate in which “unity” is sought by surrendering what we, on the basis of Scripture, confess and practice. Long-established Reformed practices are readily reduced to a matter of personal preference rather than maintained, promoted and defended as a rich Reformed heritage, founded on scriptural principles.

It is therefore imperative that we continue our discussion about our long-established Reformed practices. “We must, on the basis of scripture and confession, clearly explain what we as Reformed people confess and practice; we must once more spell out precisely ‘*why* we do *what* we do.’ In the process of these discussions we can, hopefully, again come to a better understanding and greater appreciation of our Reformed heritage.” (4)

We made a new beginning “at coming to a better understanding” about these practices by publishing the paper “Article 61 and Visitors to the Lord’s Table.” We now continue our discussion with another contribution titled: *Admitting Guests to the Lord’s Supper - OPC versus Canadian Reformed Churches*. (5) This particular paper was written in 1992, and therefore we have to again overlook, for the time being, the troublesome predicament perpetuated and actualized by the questionable decision of Gen. Synod Neerlandia regarding the matter of “sister-church” relationships.

### ***ADMITTING GUESTS TO THE LORD’S SUPPER:***

#### OPC versus Canadian Reformed Churches

#### I. THE QUESTION

One of the important differences between the OPC and the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC) is the way in which these two churches admit guests to the Lord’s Supper. These differences are

often obscured by saying that they are only administrative or matters of degree (the CanRC is more strict than the OPC). In this article, we shall show what these differences are and why they are matters of substance. In doing so, we shall assume the correctness of the views and practices of the CanRC and not attempt to prove them from the Bible.

Although practices may vary within the OPC, the general procedure is the same. Usually visitors who consider themselves Christians and who are members of some evangelical church make a verbal and/or written announcement. A significant variation is the one in which the elders of the church administering the sacrament interview the visitor and then decide whether or not the person may attend.

In the Canadian Reformed Churches, the admission of guests to the Lord's Supper is regulated by Article 61 of the Church Order. This article states: "The consistory shall admit to the Lord's Supper only those who have made public profession of the Reformed faith and lead a godly life. Members of sister-Churches shall be admitted on the ground of a good attestation concerning their doctrine and conduct." This last sentence makes clear how guests are to be admitted to the sacrament in our churches. The attestation referred to is, in most cases, a written document authorized by the consistory of the church from which the visitor comes. This documents attests or certifies that the visitor has made a public profession of the Reformed faith and that their conduct of life does not contradict that profession.

In comparing these two approaches to dealing with guests, it is apparent that there are some similarities. In both cases, the elders play an important role in overseeing the procedure. And in both cases the visitors must be members of a church. Indeed, it might seem as though the only real difference is one of form or means, and not one of substance or principle.

However, although there are some superficial similarities between the two approaches, there are in fact some important differences. And these differences are more than merely administrative; they are principal.

## ***II. THE DIFFERENCES IN THE ROLE OF THE ELDERS***

While it is true that in both churches elders play an important role in admitting guests to the Lord's Supper, there is an important difference. We have outlined two types of procedure in the OPC: the announcement procedure and the interview procedure. These must be discussed separately because the problems with each are different.

### **a) THE ANNOUNCEMENT PROCEDURE**

Let us look first at the announcement procedure. It is true that the elders determine the criteria for the admission of guests (e.g. must be a godly believer and a member of an evangelical church), and that the elders oversee the announcement. However, the visitor is left to decide whether or not he fits the criteria announced.

In contrast to this, the practice of the CanRC requires that the elders not only determine the criteria for the admission of guests, but they also must apply this to individual cases. This explains the reason behind the requirement for an attestation. For in the attestation, the elders actually

responsible for the oversight of the visitor are the ones to certify the profession and life of the person in question. The elders administering the sacrament then may accept this official (official because it comes from the officers-elders) testimony as sufficient for admitting the guest to the table.

The contrast between the two positions can be put in another way. In the OPC, the guest gives a self-attestation regarding his profession of faith and life. In the CanRC, the guest's profession and life is attested by the elders of the church where he resides. In the OPC, the guest gives a self-attestation regarding his membership in an evangelical church. In the CanRC, the officers of the church to which he belongs certify the guest's membership in the church.

The OPC announcement procedure reveals an inconsistency regarding the role of the elders in supervising the Lord's Table. On one hand, covenant children are not allowed to come to the sacrament until they have professed their faith before the elders who determine the acceptability of that profession. But on the other hand, visitors are allowed to come without the involvement of either the elders administering the sacrament or the elders before whom the guest may have made a profession.

Thus, the announcement method of the OPC is wrong not only because it is inconsistent, but more importantly, it bypasses the Christ-given role and authority of the elders.

#### b) THE INTERVIEW PROCEDURE

Now we shall examine the elder-interview method used in some OPC churches. With this procedure, the elders interview guests. The purpose of this interview is to determine whether or not the visitor makes a "credible profession of faith in Christ." Here we can see an effort at overcoming the deficiency of the announcement method. For now the elders are involved not only in establishing the criteria (credible profession) but also in judging the application of the criteria.

However, while this procedure may overcome the problem of the profession, it fails because it is not possible in such an interview to determine whether or not the visitor's life complements his confession. Ultimately, the elders must rely on the self-attestation of the visitor regarding the godliness of his walk.

In contrast to this, in the CanRC, the attestation covers both the profession and the life of the visitor. While it might be possible for the administering elders to judge the profession of the visitor, only the visitor's own elders are in a position to have observed the life of the person over time in order to judge their godliness.

If the same result could be obtained by the interview method as with the attestation method, we could fairly say that the difference was only procedural. But since the result is not the same, the difference is principal. And this difference of substance comes about because in the OPC the elders do not fulfill consistently their role in admitting visitors to the table.

### III. DIFFERENCES IN CRITERIA

From what has been said above, it can be seen that there are several criteria for the admission of guests to the Lord's Table. Again, there appears to be a superficial similarity between the OPC and

CanRC on this matter. Let us focus on two criteria: the profession of faith and the membership in another church.

a) **PROFESSION OF FAITH**

First, we will deal with the question of the profession of faith. At first glance, it would appear that both churches require the same thing. But there is an important difference between them. On one hand, the OPC's requirement of a "credible confession" is defined in terms of a summary of the Westminster Standards. Typically, this summary is identical to the questions asked for membership. And this summary does not bind the person to agreement with the Westminster Standards. Thus, a visitor is not required to confess everything held by the church officers and, therefore, by the church itself. Indeed, it is possible for the visitor to believe things that are contrary to the Westminster Standards and still be admitted to the Lord's Table.

On the other hand, the CanRC requires that visitors have made "public profession of the Reformed faith" (Art. 61, C.O.). The Reformed faith is identical to the Three Forms of Unity, the confessional standards of the CanRC. In our churches, members, and visitors, are required to make a confession that is not in conflict with our standards. There is no difference between what the officers must believe/confess and what the visitor must believe/confess. This view of what must be believed is sometimes called "confessional membership".

Here also, the difference between the OPC and the CanRC is not merely administrative, nor is it simply a matter of degree. Rather the two different standards for this criterion represent different principles or views of the nature of the church. The OPC allows for a two-level system of membership in their churches. The officers must hold to the confessions, but not the members. The CanRC hold to the view that the church is composed of those who confess the Reformed faith as that has been taught to the church by Christ through the Scriptures and confessed in the Three Forms of Unity. The same standard is applied to, and required of, officers and other members.

Thus, when it comes to deciding what visitors must believe before being admitted to the supper, there is an important principial difference. Not only does the OPC allow the visitor, with the announcement method, to decide about his own confession, but also the standard for that decision is not the same as in the CanRC.

b) **THE CHURCH**

Second, we must look at the question of which church the visitor must belong to before being admitted. Again, there is a point of similarity between the two churches in that both require that the visitor be a member of another Christian church. However, the standard for this criterion differs significantly between the OPC and the CanRC.

Typically, the OPC requires that the visitor be a member in good standing of another evangelical church. Sometimes such churches are described, for example, in a written announcement. But never are these churches identified by name. Again here, with the announcement method, the visitor must decide if their membership in a church fits the criteria given. The result is that visitors from a variety of churches or denominations may come to the Lord's Table. It might happen that with the interview method, the elders would decide that the visitor's church is not evangelical and ask the person not to attend.

In the CanRC, only visitors who are members of sister-churches are allowed to attend the Lord's Supper. There are two types of sister-churches. The first type are those congregations in the same federation of churches. Thus, visitors from one CanRC may be admitted, with proper attestation, to the Lord's Supper of any other CanRC. The second type are those churches in foreign federations with whom the CanRC have established an official relationship. At present (in 1992, RD) there are three such sister-church federations.

The difference between the OPC and the CanRC on this issue of which churches are acceptable is closely related to the former issue of what kind of profession of faith is acceptable. For the OPC, a summarized profession of faith correlates with the idea of accepting other evangelical churches. Just as they accept visitors who believe only a summary of the Westminster Standards, so they accept other churches which do not hold to the Westminster Standards but which appear to hold to a summarized version of Christianity.

In contrast, the CanRC only accept visitors who agree with what we confess in the confessions, and they only accept as sister-churches those that hold to those same confessions.

The OPC view of which churches are acceptable is sometimes called "pluriformity." This view of the church teaches that true Christianity manifests itself in a great variety of denominations. These various denominations may be more or less pure, but so long as they are evangelical, or appear to hold to a summarized version of Christianity, they are acceptable. The CanRC hold to a different principle about the church. Rather uniformity of confession determines which churches are true. And only visitors from such churches may be admitted to the Lord's Supper.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Outlining the differences between the OPC and CanRC regarding the proper admission of guests to the Lord's Supper shows that these differences are more than just administrative, or matters of degree. It isn't simply that the OPC is less strict and the CanRC is stricter. Rather, different principles or views underlie the separate approaches taken by our two churches.

The differences can be summarized under three headings. The first is a difference in principle over the proper role of the elders in supervising admittance to the table. Is it the inconsistent involvement of the OPC or the consistent involvement of the CanRC? The second is a difference in principle over the content of what must be believed by the visitor in order to be admitted. Is it summary-confession of the OPC or confessional membership of the CanRC? And third, there is a difference in principle over the nature of the church that determines which church membership is acceptable. Is it the pluriformity of the OPC or the uniformity of the CanRC?

Only when these issues are clearly understood can they be addressed and resolved. So long as the differences are only perceived as differences in form or degree the issues are obscured and true unity will never be achieved.

RD

- 1) Getting Rid of Idiosyncrasies - Ironing-out the Differences, Reformed Polemics, Oct 24/01.
- 2) *Visitors at the Lord's Table*, Clarion, Year-end, 1996.

- 3) Is a Church Federation Required, Clarion, Year-end 1996.
- 4) Long-Established Reformed Practices - Explaining What We Confess and Practice, Reformed Polemics, Oct /01, 2002.
- 5) Admitting Guests to the Lord's Supper - OPC versus Canadian/American Reformed Churches, Oct. 1992.

## **Pluriformity of the Church**

One of the interesting aspects of the decision of the recent 2001 Synod of the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC) is the unanimously accepted position by both the Canadian Reformed as well as the Orthodox Presbyterian Churches (OPC) regarding the illegitimacy of pluriformity of the Church. The details of this consideration can be found on page 48 of the Acts of Synod Neerlandia. Look for section 4.13, one of the Considerations under article 45. There we read,

“Acknowledging each other as true churches implies unity of faith (see Heidelberg Catechism Q/A 21 & 22). This does not necessarily imply complete agreement on every point of doctrine or practice. The existing differences do warrant continued discussion to grow in the unity of faith (Eph.4: 3-6, 13). Both the CanRC and the OPC reject the legitimacy of the pluriformity of the church (see *Biblical Principles of the Unity of the Church* @ [www.opc.org/relations/unity.html](http://www.opc.org/relations/unity.html))”

Considering the variety of practices regarding pulpit supply and fencing of the Lord's Supper found in the OPC and supported in a variety of cases in the Canadian Reformed Churches it is prudent to look a little more closely at this matter.

In doing so we have decided to follow the lead of that same Synod and went for a look on the Internet to find the aforementioned document on the OPC web page. For easy reference we have published it in full elsewhere in our magazine. From time to time we are sure to make reference to it and we can not assume that all of our readers have Internet access.

From the aforementioned decision of Synod Neerlandia and from several portions of the OPC's Biblical Principles of the Unity of the Church (BPUC) we can conclude that acceptance of the idea of pluriformity of the Church is rejected in both federations. Yet, when we read some of the other statements in the OPC document, or compare them to some of the practices of the OPC we wonder about the reliability of those statements. At the same time when we put our ear to the ground in the Canadian Reformed Churches, as Ron Dykstra has been doing in his series on 'Idiosyncrasies', we come to the same question. It is even so that we might come to the conclusion that one of the underlying, fundamental issues in the whole church unity discussion might very well be the definition of what the Church is.

The matter of who should be admitted to the Lord's Supper table, how they should be admitted and why they should be admitted relates fundamentally to the question of what the Church is. Are there really a variety of forms of the Church (pluriform)? Is it wrong to restrict the Church to physical addresses (invisible)? If the Church can be found in a variety of forms (Roman, Baptist, Lutheran, Christian Reformed, etc.) then true believers from there should be allowed at the Lord's Supper. If the Church is invisible and consists of all true believers no matter where they worship (same list) then all true believers should be allowed at the Lord's Supper.

In the same way the definition of the Church also plays a pivotal role in unity discussions. If it is true that the Church is visible in a variety of forms then it is understandable that in some places the Church has the Westminster Standards and in other places the Three Forms of Unity. Then there is no reason for concern when in some Churches the Reformed form of government is adhered to and in another place the Presbyterian form of government is maintained. If it is true that the Church is invisible then Confessions as basis for unity, such as the Three Forms of Unity, have no purpose or function. Then church government is superfluous, as there is only a society that holds more or less members of the true (invisible) church.

But, supposedly, neither the CanRC nor the OPC accepts the invisible or the pluriform definition of the Church. Yet, it appears that they practice them in reality. The CanRC has Three Forms of *Unity* (TFU), but marries federations that have different Confessions. In the TFU the CanRC confess that "The true Church is to be recognized by the following marks: It practices the pure preaching of the gospel." Yet it declares itself one with churches that have a different confession and that contain at least thirteen areas of difference, which are recognized and identified for further discussion. At the same time the OPC concludes its section III of the BPUC with the following words. "In a word, we are pointed to the necessity of unity in government, a unity that is violated when churches of Christ adhering to the faith in its purity and integrity are not thus united." But the OPC practices and defends a completely different form of government than the federations it has entered into Ecclesiastical Fellowship with.

It appears that both the CanRC and OPC have the right understanding of how things should be, but they practice otherwise. The admittance of guests at the Lord's Supper table even though such people do not belong to Churches in Ecclesiastical Fellowship goes against the statement that pluriformity of the Church is illegitimate. The willingness of the OPC to allow Baptist ministers on their pulpits does not fit with the BPUC. The CanRC by having established Ecclesiastical Fellowship with the OPC, the RCUS and going to phase II with the URCNA without first confirming complete unity in confession and practice between the three of them is practicing pluriformity while saying something completely opposite in their Synodical decision.

Both the BPUC and the Article 29 of the Belgic Confession indicate the necessity to submit to the Word of God when confronted with doctrinal differences in discussions about the faith. "The false church assigns more authority to itself and its ordinances than to the Word of God." Both the CanRC and the OPC must examine their practices in light of their undertakings in coming to Ecclesiastical Fellowship with one another.

PdB

[NB: In future articles we hope to address two other issues raised by the BPUC: 'What is Ecclesiastical Fellowship?' and 'What About the More or Less Pure Church?']

### ***Biblical Principles of the Unity of the Church***

#### **I. The Nature of the Church**

A. The church is the covenant people of God—the body of people to whom God has made the promise to be their God and they to be his people and he to dwell with them. The church is the covenant people of God in all ages and among all nations.

B. All those who believe the promise of God and their children and have had the promise sealed to them in baptism are to be recognized and treated as God's people, as members of the organized church.

C. The church belongs to her covenant head Jesus Christ and "there is no other head of the church but the Lord Jesus Christ" (*Confession of Faith XXV.6*).

D. The work of the church, in fellowship with and in obedience to Christ, is divine worship, mutual edification, and gospel witness (*Form of Government II.4.*), under the teaching and rule of elders.

E. The Lord governs his church also through the application of his Word to the people by the Spirit as the Word is expounded and applied by the officers of the church (Eph. 4:11-16).

## II. The Unity of the Church

A. The church finds its unifying principle in the covenant promise "my dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people" (Ezek. 37:27, Lev. 26:12). This finds fulfillment in Jesus as Emmanuel ("God with us," Matt. 1:23, Jn. 1:14), who came as the mediator of the covenant of grace to redeem and purchase this people for his dwelling by his blood. The ultimate consummation of the promise is the new Jerusalem, the Bride of Christ (Rev. 21:3).

B. The church must recognize, appreciate, and confess this fundamental unity of the covenant people of God, the body of Christ; which is a God-given creation and not a human achievement.

C. The church, the visible organization, is described in the Bible as one church. God has given only one covenant of love (Deut. 7:6-12) and has only one people of the covenant.

D. In the New Testament this teaching of the unity of the people of God is sustained (see Eph. 2:11-22 and 4:1-16). Yet the situation is different. No longer are the people of God circumscribed by ethnic, political, or geographical boundaries. All nations are to be discipled.

E. This unity includes those people of God in past ages and also looks to the future and includes the people of God who will believe on his name (Jn. 17:20-21).

F. The gospel proclaimed by the apostles as the foundation of the church resulted in establishing churches as covenant communities in various locations, churches which were ruled by elders. These churches and these elders were not independent, but were one body united by Christ their head, by the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, and by the covenant promise of God. The elders at Antioch and Jerusalem resolve a problem, under God, and their decision is binding on the churches (Acts 15, 16:4).

G. The unity of the church is attained unto by growing in spiritual maturity (Eph. 4:13). Unity and maturity are the result of mutual, loving admonition and joint submission to Scripture. Such maturity is manifested by speaking and acting the truth in love (Eph. 4:15).

H. Each member is essential to the body, and the growth of the body depends on the active participation of each part (Eph. 4:13, 16). The work of the officers of the church is to prepare the members for, and assist them in this work (Eph. 4:11-12).

### **III. Ecclesiastical Union**

In ecclesiastical union two denominations join in submitting to one common form of government. Since ecclesiastical jurisdiction includes the maintenance of spiritual discipline, unity in polity requires agreement in the standards of faith and worship which such discipline maintains. Hence unification in polity, when properly sought and achieved, involves also unity in faith, discipline, and worship.

As we take account of the diversity that exists between denominations arising from differences of ethnic identity, cultural background, and historical circumstance the most conclusive evidence derived from Scripture is required to support the position that the obliteration of denominational separateness is an obligation resting upon these Churches of Christ. The differences that exist often manifest the diversity which the church of Christ ought to exemplify and make for the enrichment of the church's total witness. If ecclesiastical union impairs this diversity, then it may be achieved at too great an expense and tends to an impoverishment inconsistent with the witness to Christ which the church must bear.

Though the diversity which manifests itself in differentiating historical development might appear to make ecclesiastical union inadvisable or even perilous in certain cases, yet the biblical evidence in support of union is so plain that any argument to the contrary, however plausible, must be false.

#### **A. The Ethnic Universalism of the Gospel**

In Christ there is now no longer Jew or Gentile, barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free (cf. Gal 3:28; Col. 3:11). The New Testament does not suppose that the differences natural to individuals nor those arising from ethnic identity, cultural background, and historical circumstance are to be obliterated by the gospel. But it does mean that the unity of Christ transcends all diversity arising from language, race, culture, history. What is more, this unity embraces and utilizes all the diversity that is proper and this is created by God's providence. If we should maintain that the diversity is in any way incompatible with the unity of which the church is the expression, then we should be denying THAT unity which the ethnic universalism of the gospel implies. Implicit in the universalism of the gospel is the same kind of universalism in that which the gospel designs, the building up of Christ's church.

#### **B. The Universalism of the Apostolic Church**

The church of the apostolic days embraces all nations, and kindreds, and peoples, and tongues. There is no evidence in the New Testament for the diversification of distinct denominations and anything tending to such diversification was condemned (cf. 1 Cor. 1:10-13). The emphasis falls upon the oneness of faith (cf. Eph. 4:5) and the oneness of the fellowship of the saints (cf. Eph. 4:2-4; 11-16; Phil. 2:2, 3; 4:2).

#### **C. Jesus' Prayer for Unity (Jn. 17:20, 21)**

It is a travesty of this text, as of all others bearing upon the unity of the church, to think of the unity for which Christ prayed apart from the unity in the bond of truth. Verse 21 must not be dissociated from verse 20. To divorce the unity for which Christ prayed from all that is involved in believing upon him through the apostolic witness is to sunder what Christ placed together. Furthermore, the pattern Jesus provides in this prayer—"as thou, Father, art in me and I in thee"—makes mockery of the application of the text when unity is divorced from the characterization which finds its analogy in trinitarian unity and harmony.

But while these and other distortions of this text are to be shunned, the prayer of Jesus does bear upon our question in two respects.

1. The fragmentation and consequent lack of fellowship, harmony, and cooperation which appear on the ecclesiastical scene are a patent contradiction of unity exemplified in that to which Jesus referred when he said, "as thou, father, art in me and I in thee."
2. The purpose stated in Jesus' prayer—"that the world may believe that thou hast sent me"—implies a manifestation observable by the world. Jesus prays for a visible unity that will bear witness to the world. The mysterious unity of believers with one another must come to visible expression so as to be instrumental in bringing conviction to the world.

#### **D. The Unity of the Body of Christ**

The church is the body of Christ and there is no schism in the body (cf. 1 Cor. 12:25). As in the human body, there is diversity in unity and unity in diversity (cf. 1 Cor. 12). The point to be stressed, however, is the unity. If there is unity it follows that this unity must express itself in all the functions which belong to the church. Since government in the church is an institution of Christ (cf. Rom. 12:8; 1 Cor. 12:28; 1 Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:7, 1 Pet 5:1, 2), this unity must be expressed in government. The necessary inference to be drawn is that the government should manifest the unity and be as embracive in respect of its functioning as the unity of which it is an expression. A concrete illustration of this principle is the decree of the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:28, 29; 16:4).

#### **E. The Kingdom of Christ, etc.**

1. Christ is the head of the church. So ultimately there is the most concentrated unity of government in the church of Christ. He alone is King. Any infringement upon this sovereignty belonging to Christ is a violation of what is basic and central in the government of the church. It follows that all government in the church must adhere to the pattern of a cone which has its apex in Christ.
2. Christ also instituted the apostolate with authority delegated from him (Matt. 16:18, 19; cf. Jn 20:21, 23; Eph. 2:19-22). This apostolic authority is exercised now only through the inscripturated Word. But in the sphere of delegated authority the apostolate is supreme and will continue to be so to the end of time. This is the way the Holy Spirit, as the vicar of Christ, abiding in and with the church, exercises his function in accordance with Christ's promise. He seals the apostolic witness by his own testimony and illumines the people of God in the interpretation and application of the same.
3. Subordinately, however, in terms of Matt. 16:19, the hegemony of the apostolate is undeniable and it exemplifies the descending hierarchy which Christ has established.

4. There is also in the New Testament institution the delegated authority of the presbyterate, always subject to the apostolic institution, to the Holy Spirit who inspired the apostles (Jn. 16:13; 20:22), and ultimately to Christ as King and Head of the church, but nevertheless supreme in this sphere of government.

5. Since all office in the church of Christ can be filled only by the gifts of the Spirit, this structural subordination of the government of the church to the rule of Christ functions in living reality as a fellowship of the one Spirit. Everyone who has the Spirit of Christ is thereby called as a good steward of the manifold grace of God to minister his spiritual gifts to all the saints, so far as he is given opportunity. In particular, those whose gifts are for rule in the church must exercise such gifts in the communion of Christ and his church.

When these principles of gradation and communion are appreciated, and when coordinated with other considerations already established, especially that of the unity of the body of Christ, we appear to be provided with a pattern that points to the necessity of making the presbyterate as inclusive as is consistent with loyalty to Christ and the faith of the gospel. In a word, we are pointed to the necessity of unity in government, a unity that is violated when churches of Christ adhering to the faith in its purity and integrity are not thus united.

#### **IV. Toward Perfecting Biblical Unity**

A. The unity of the church is in Christ and it is both a given reality and also a requirement. The unity of the faith is both gift and mandate.

B. The church is compelled to give expression to this reality and requirement, this gift and mandate, by actively seeking the promised goal, namely, that of being one body which serves the Lord in perfect peace, purity, and unity.

C. The ultimate goal of the unity of the church is nothing less than one world-wide presbyterian/reformed church.

D. The unity of the church is unity in Christ, unity in the gospel of Christ, “unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God” (Eph. 4:13). This Christ, this gospel, this faith and knowledge, the church must confess. It is summarized for us in our Confession of Faith.

E. The present division into separate denominations is because of unfaithfulness to God as expressed in beliefs, teaching, and living, on the part of both individuals in the church and the churches that are contrary to the Word of God.

F. We find ourselves in this sinful situation as we undertake to pursue the mandate to unity. There exists between us and all other churches a sinful disunity that demands reconciliation in a biblical way. This sin must be faced and removed so that true and full unity and fellowship of the church may be reached.

G. In seeking actively the unity of the church, we must recognize several levels of separateness (i.e., degrees of purity) among the churches. There are presbyterian and Reformed churches that are more or less faithful. There are non-Reformed churches that are more or less faithful. There are also churches that have apostatized, and no longer have the right to be called church.

H. In seeking unity with faithful presbyterian and Reformed churches:

1. There should be mutual agreement on what the gospel is. The churches must confess in their official documents of faith and life the same gospel.
2. There should be a relationship of ecclesiastical fellowship established in which official interchange may take place including the exchange of delegates at the meetings of the ruling bodies of the church.
3. There will be fellowship and cooperation in organizations, both domestic and international, which give expression to oneness of faith and life.
4. There then may take place the actual steps toward uniting.

These include:

- a. The recognition of each other as true churches of Christ, more or less pure (*Confession of Faith* XXV.4), in which the marks of the church are found.
- b. Reconciliation between the bodies (the sin that is involved in the separate existence must be faced and resolved: this may be only the sin of separate existence; or a sin which has historical roots; or doctrinal error; or error in the life of the church).
- c. Self-examination on the part of each church.

Agreement that the confession of the united church must be apparent in the life of the church.

- d. The offering of each church to the other for examination; willingness to give, receive and respond to reproof (2 Tim 3:16-17); speaking and acting the truth in love (Eph. 4:15).
  - e. Agreement on the same ecclesiology and government of the church.
  - f. Maintaining the peace, purity, and unity of the churches.
5. There would then be the actual uniting into one organization.

I. There is also responsibility to call all churches, including our own, to faithfulness in order to seek the unity of the whole church.

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**The foregoing was printed in its entirety because it will be referred to in future articles. At the same time it may very well be of interest to our readers. The Editors**

## ON TIME IN GENESIS

*By Dr. John Byl*

What are we to make of the creation days of Genesis 1? The Reformed Church in the U.S. (RCUS) has affirmed that they should be taken as “six normal chronological days of light and darkness”. This has been the view of most Christians throughout history. However, Prof. H.M. Ohmann [1], professor emeritus of Old Testament at the Theological University in Kampen, objects to the RCUS statement. Since the interpretation of the creation days has become a contentious issue in a number of Reformed and Presbyterian churches, it is worthwhile to examine Prof. Ohmann’s concerns regarding the traditional reading of Genesis 1.

### Old Testament Time

Prof. Ohmann’s main criticism has to do with our notion of time. He asserts that our modern conception of time is quite different from that of the Old Testament. Moses, he claims, did not have a watch and could not look at a clock. Hence we should not measure what God did in the beginning in terms of our modern clocks. In the Old Testament the important thing is what is *done* on a day, not its time span.

Is this really the case? Does our notion of time really differ that much from that of Moses? We note first that the Sun we see is the same Sun that Moses saw. Also, our day is defined as one solar period of light and dark, just as Moses defined the day in Genesis 1. Even our hour is defined as one 24<sup>th</sup> of a day, the same as the biblical hour. The solar day is still the basic unit of our time, as it was for Moses. Thus I conclude that our common conception of time is essentially identical to that of Moses.

Moreover, Moses *did* have a clock. He could tell time simply from the position in the sky of the Sun (during the day) and the stars (during the night). Thus, for example, Moses refers to “noon” (Gen. 43:16, 25) and, elsewhere, writes, “it is yet high day, neither is it time that the cattle should be gathered” (Gen.29: 7). These clearly indicate usage of solar position to determine time. Also, Moses refers to a “day’s journey” (Num.11: 31), a distance which obviously depends on the time span of a day. Consider further the usage of days in biblical chronology (e.g., “In the 600<sup>th</sup> year of Noah’s life, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> month, the 17<sup>th</sup> day of the month...” (Gen.7: 11).

Indeed, one of the main original functions of the Sun was precisely to provide a measurement of time (Gen.1: 14). The Sun was created, on the 4<sup>th</sup> day, “to rule over the day”. Thus the last 3 creation days, at any rate, were clearly solar days, as measured by the same basic clock, the Sun still used today.

### Our Time or God’s Time?

Prof. Ohmann raises a further objection, which makes the previous ones irrelevant. He argues, “If there were “time” in Genesis 1, it was *His Time*”, not time as *we* experience it. Prof. Ohmann bases this on the fact that man did not appear until day 6. However, Genesis 1 makes no reference at all to

any special divine time. On the contrary, time in Genesis 1 is measured by *physical* changes. The interchange of light and darkness - day and night - is clearly connected to the *earth*. Moreover, as we already noted, on the 4<sup>th</sup> day the Sun is specifically created to rule the day and “to give light upon the earth” (Gen.1: 17), so that days 4,5, and 6 are surely solar days. In short, time in Genesis 1 is clearly earth-time, as we still experience it.

Prof. Ohmann argues that taking the creation days literally entails that you come up with questions like: “What did God do during those nights of Creation?” Or, “at what time did he create the sharks on day 5?” And so on. Clearly, we can’t answer such questions. But why should that be a problem? The fact that the Bible does not describe all events in exhaustive detail gives us no grounds for doubting the historicity of that which God has revealed. Else one might question the historicity of Adam (or Christ) because we can’t answer the question: “how tall was he?”

#### Accommodation

This brings us to Prof. Ohmann’s final, deepest point: “The report in Genesis 1 is His revelation, the result of His accommodation. It speaks of days and evenings...so that the Israelites then and we today might grasp it”. In other words, if I understand correctly, Prof. Ohmann says God did not really create in time as we know it. Rather, God only presents creation as occurring in such time so that we might grasp it.

The theory of accommodation is not new; it can be traced back at least to Augustine (354-430 AD). Even John Calvin, regrettably, dabbled with it [2]. The general idea is that God accommodates His Word, particularly Genesis, to our limited human understanding. Hence, for teaching purposes, God tells us things in His Word that are, strictly speaking, false.

This notion raises some serious questions. First, we ask how Prof. Ohmann knows that God did not create in six real days? He has not backed up this claim with any compelling biblical grounds. Indeed, elsewhere the Bible consistently refers to the days as normal days (Ex. 20:11; 31:17). How, then, can Prof. Ohmann be so sure this can’t be true? I can conclude only that his real objections must stem from extra-biblical considerations.

Further, if God had not intended the creation days to be taken at face value, why did God not simply say so? That would have avoided much confusion over the centuries. Why didn’t God simply add the rider: “this is for teaching purposes only”? Why did God not present the material of Genesis as a series of visions, rather than days? Surely the all-powerful, all-knowing God, who created the universe, who created language and logic, who created man in his own image, surely our awesome God is able to convey to us how He created the world. Are we to really believe that God had to wait for human theologians to proclaim to us what God really meant to say, but couldn’t?

Moreover, if Prof. Ohmann is correct that we can grasp creation only in terms of our time, how can he even suggest that creation was otherwise? His very polemic against literal days presumes that other possibilities are *not* inconceivable to man. Thus he refutes his own explanation as to why God needed to resort to accommodation in the first place.

The Bible always presents God as a God of truth, who never lies (Titus 1:2). On the other hand, God does permit Satan to deceive those who refuse to love the truth (II Thes.2: 9-12). We are warned not to be led astray by “philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition” (Col.2: 8) nor by the “contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge” (I Tim.6: 20). We are to accept the truth of God’s Word and to test the spirits against this word. Hence the theory of accommodation, to the extent that it accommodates our reading of Scripture to human speculation, must be rejected as unbiblical.

### ***Sticking to the Word***

Finally, we ask, what does Prof. Ohmann believe is the intended message of Genesis 1? This he leaves frustratingly vague. He views Genesis 1 as neither poetry nor prophecy, but neither as history. He claims to be no evolutionist yet he insists that “God took his time” for creating. He grants that Genesis 1 speaks of “days and evenings” but then he reduces this to mere accommodation. Otherwise, he contends, we end up with man-made problems such as, for example, plants being created before the Sun. This implies that Prof. Ohmann does not accept the order of the creation events as related in Genesis 1. But if Genesis 1 tells us nothing at all about either the duration or the order of the creation events, *what* does Prof. Ohmann believe Genesis 1 teaches? Only that God made everything?

Prof. Ohmann stresses that we should not go beyond what God has revealed in His Word; we should not put God into a man-made straitjacket. These are wise words, with which I heartily concur. Indeed, we must be very careful not to add to Scripture. Prof. Ohmann refers to the inscrutability of God’s ways, quoting from Deuteronomy 29:29: “The secret things belong to the Lord our God; but the things that are revealed belong to us and our children forever”. He stresses the first part of this text. However, the creation days belong to those things that God *has* revealed to us. *Subtracting* from God’s Word is as serious sin as *adding* to it (see Rev 22:18-19).

Let us then be diligent not to err in either direction but to stick fully to what God has revealed to us.

1. H.M. Ohmann, “Days of Creation”, Lux Mundi Vo.19 (No.4, Dec. 2000): 5-9.
2. See John Byl, “On Accommodation”, The Outlook 33 (No.4, April1983): 2-4.

### **Only One God - And only one comfort**

After the smoke blew away and the dust of the buildings that were hit in New York and Washington settled, the world continued to look on the heaps of rubbish in which were buried the ashes and remains of thousands of people. Many turned to God for comfort. The Anglicans lit candles for the dead, the Roman Catholics had their masses, the Protestants had their prayers and even some of the Moslems had their mourners. It appeared as if sorrow for the dead crossed all religious boundaries and men of all faiths turned to the one God for comfort. One day the president

of the United States read from the Bible and prayed to the God of heaven and earth and the next day he was quoting the Koran as if it were another approach to the same God.

In religious studies at various universities there has been an increasing effort to make all religions of the world appear to be various varieties of the same thing – faith in some kind of Supernatural Being who is given a different name by different cultures. To be politically correct He is left nameless by these philosophers and referred to as ‘the Other’. Many question these philosophies themselves and many of these faiths voice their objections. It has often been suggested: let us forget about all these intellectual debates to which no solutions are ever found and simply join hands together in practice and call upon the Other in the fraternity of all mankind. Even though some fundamental Moslems may have been led to commit these terrible crimes the fundamentals of all religions call men to love one another and live together in a morally acceptable way. What are we to think of it all?

### ***Is there only One God?***

Initially you may wonder whether especially we who believe, need question whether this is only one God. Of course there is no other god. The heathens who worshipped many gods in the past had worshipped the gods of their own imagination. When the Apostle Paul as a faithful servant of the Lord writes to the Corinthian congregation about joining in the heathen sacrificial feasts and eating from it, he agrees that there really is no other god, but what does he say? He says, in his first letter to this congregation, chapter 10:18-20 *Observe Israel after the flesh: Are not those who eat of the sacrifices partakers of the altar? What am I saying then? That an idol is anything, or what is offered to idols is anything? Rather, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to have fellowship with demons.* The Apostle Paul agrees that an idol is nothing and that what the heathen worship is really no god – but at the same time he recognizes that the heathen have made these gods in their rebellion against the only true God and recognized them as devilish instruments.

What the Apostle Paul writes in the first letter to the Corinthians agrees with what he had written earlier to the Roman congregation about the origin of these heathen gods. He speaks about the Gentiles who know God because His invisible attributes are clearly seen since the creation of the world. And he adds: chapter 1:22-23, *Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.* Thus they exchanged the knowledge of God into images and worship them. The Apostle Paul speaks here in a historic way. Adam and Eve and their children knew of the Lord God. Through the generations they exchanged this knowledge concerning the true God for something else. They may still use the right designation, *God* but they no longer speak about *the God* who is the one and only Creator of heaven and earth.

The Moslems claim to worship the same God as the Christians. It is often pointed out that the name *Allah* is only the Arab word for *God* and linguistically related to the Hebrew *Alohim*. No one can deny the linguistic relations between these two words and should one read the Koran, it will soon be realized that it speaks of the God of Abram and Ishmael. But, like those who after Adam and Noah exchanged the truth of God for a lie, so did Mohammed. He denies the continuation of the covenant that the Lord established with Isaac and Jacob. Even though he speaks about the birth of

Jesus from Mary, he denies that He is the eternal Son of God along with the Father and the Holy Spirit. The writings of Mohammed in the Koran are a turning away from the truth of the true God to a lie. One might say that it is the beginning of what the Apostle Paul said the heathens do with the knowledge of the one and only true God. The Moslems may claim that the god they worship as Allah is the same God that the Christians worship, but in fact he is not – their Allah is in fact not the Lord God who has revealed Himself in His Word.

Scripture is clear enough in that there is really only one true God, but it also recognizes that man makes gods of his own imagination. Thus in the history of Elijah and King Ahab we are told of Baal. The Prophet Isaiah names the heathen gods Nebo and Bell. They are threats to the Lord's people in that they are instruments by which the devil seeks to draw us away from the only true God. The first commandment *You shall have no other gods before Me* is necessary. It is necessary not because there really are other gods but because men make their own gods and Satan uses them to draw men away from the only true God. It is important that in upholding the meaning of this commandment in our confession (Lord's Day 34 QA 95) we insist that *idolatry includes to put our trust, instead of, or in addition to, the only true God who has revealed Himself in His Word*. Thus we can already see that men who deny that the Lord is the God who created heaven and earth in six days and rested on the seventh, and who deny that we are to put our trust alone in Christ for salvation, and so forth, are beginning to form their own gods – the gods of their own imagination. Especially in the context of modern ecumenicity men like to think that all worship the one and same God in different languages and in different cultural contexts but as soon as one turns away from the God who revealed Himself in His word he already commits idolatry. Therefore, so long as the Roman Catholic prays to Mary and the liberal theologian denies creation and the Moslem rejects Christ Jesus as the only begotten Son of God we in fact do not worship the same God. The apparent unity in time of sorrow is very deceptive and with sadness we must say that if President Bush quotes the Bible and the Koran one day after another as if both are two ways to the same God of salvation he has broken the first commandment.

### ***Only one comfort***

Because there is only one true God, there is only one comfort. This is very clearly confessed in the first Lord's Day of the Heidelberg Catechism. In the letter to the Ephesians the Lord through the Apostle Paul puts it all together in such a clear and direct way. He says, chapter 4:4-6 *There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all*. In the first letter to Timothy he also speaks of the unity in the context of having only one Mediator. He says, chapter 2:5: *For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus*. Thus, as the Lord Jesus while on earth had also insisted, there is only one way to salvation and eternal life; namely, through Him, Christ Jesus.

Over the ages many have been offended by how the Lord speaks in this exclusive way. However, we can only speak in this way for this is the way the Lord Himself speaks. How can one say so boldly that Mohammed who claimed to have a direct revelation from heaven is a false prophet and how can one say it with the same boldness of Joseph Smith who wrote the Book of the Mormons?

We can say it because the Lord Himself warns us, Galatians 1:8-9: *But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.* Notice well that the Apostle Paul speaks here in the plural of the gospel *we* have preached to you for both Mohammed and Joseph Smith claimed to receive special revelation on their own – there are no witnesses. Christ Jesus, however, had sent all twelve apostles as a witness to His resurrection. Only the testimony of at least two can stand. For us today that means anything that is not in agreement with the salvation the Lord declared in His Word can not be received. The deviations from the truth of God's word may have formed into the traditions of men, but the truth is that there is and remains only one Christ and one God and one comfort.

Rev. P. K. A. deBoer

#### Church News

From the Press Release of Classis South held in Rockingham West Australia, Oct.26, 2001

Classis decides as follows:

Classis advises that the brotherhood in Bunbury be instituted as a church according to Article 38 of the Church Order.

Classis accepts that Bunbury becomes a needy church. According to the guidelines classis will help support Bunbury (when it calls a minister) for a maximum of 50% of the costs for the ministry.

Classis appoints Rev. W. VanderJagt as counselor for Bunbury.