

Ecclesiastical Fellowship

In recent years a number of churches and church federations have adopted rules for relationships with one another under the title of Ecclesiastical Fellowship. We want to discover what that is and how it came about. In a previous article we discussed the concept of pluriformity of the Church. We concluded that a pluriform Church can have no uniform confessional basis. This time we will show how Ecclesiastical Fellowship, as it is presently practiced, has led to the acceptance of the concept of pluriformity of the Church. As a consequence relationships have been established that clearly exemplify what Synod Neerlandia has unanimously rejected. See Article 45.4.13, page 48 where it says, "Both the CanRC and the OPC reject the legitimacy of the pluriformity of the Church."

The History

To understand the background for the present day rules for Ecclesiastical Fellowship it is helpful to turn to the Acts of previous Synods of the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC). The Church at Surrey, BC first raised the matter of different types of relationships with other churches at Synod 1980 - Smithville. In the Acts of that Synod, Article 154, page 128, we find that Surrey asks Synod to examine whether seeking of a relationship with the OPC and possibly other churches standing in a different tradition, is really necessary, realistic and advantageous. They also asked Synod to study the feasibility of having other, less comprehensive, relationships with such churches.

As grounds for their request they mention that correspondence [that is what inter-church relations were called back then] is a very close relationship and a very demanding one. They believe it requires a similar historic development, similar confessions and church polity. They pointed to the difficulties in the relationship between the Presbyterian Church in Korea and the sister-churches in Australia and the Netherlands. They also recognized that these difficulties are not aided by the differences in language, cultural, social and geographical factors. But they are convinced of the need to have some sort of contact with faithful churches of our Lord Jesus Christ in other parts of the world.

Synod Smithville decided not to accede to the request of the Church at Surrey after having considered the following:

1. The oneness and unicity of the Catholic Church implies the calling of the Churches, which recognize one another as true Churches, to support one another mutually, to the best of their ability, not in the least in the matter of taking heed of one another's faithfulness to the Word of God.
2. The oneness and unicity of the Catholic Church must find Scriptural expression in the common proclamation of the death of the Lord at the Lord's Supper (one bread, one body).
3. It is not proven that differences mentioned (by the Church at Surrey) are Scriptural impediments to a relationship as regulated in our rules for correspondence and as practiced, for instance, between the sister-churches in Holland and the Korean Presbyterian Church.

4. Rules for permanent interchurch relations must be dictated by Scripture and not by reality, like the differences existing between the Churches; however, these Scriptural rules should be applied realistically, to the best of the Churches' ability.
5. Adoption of different rules expressing different degrees of closeness to various Churches would lead to an undesirable distinction between Churches which are all equally true Churches of the Lord Jesus Christ.

At the next Synod the Committee on Correspondence with Churches Abroad raised the matter of changes to the rules. In connection with efforts to recognize the Korean Presbyterian Churches as true Churches, the CanRC Committee wanted to alter rules 1 and 5 of the existing rules. [See Acts 1983, Article 105, ss.3, page 73.] Synod 1983 denied the request of the Committee. For sake of clarity and brevity it is best to quote only pertinent passages. It is easy to check the Acts if one would like more details and context. Synod said (and remember that this is in context of relationship with the Korean Church), "3. It is not edifying to proceed with Ecclesiastical Fellowship at this time in view of a. the mandate given to the Committee for Contact with the OPC, namely: 'to publish for the benefit of our Churches a detailed evaluation of the confessional and church-political divergencies, showing proof that these divergencies do not form an impediment in recognizing the OPC as a true Church of the Lord Jesus Christ.'" Acts Synod Cloverdale, 1983;"

So far it seems that Synods have been unwilling to change the rules for inter-church relationships. It is also noteworthy that the request for changes to the rules came from the Church at Surrey in 1980. After 1980 those kinds of requests have only come from the Committee in spite of the fact that in Reformed Church polity, matters may only come on the agendas of Synod via the Churches.

In 1986 the matter of a new name for the Committee and changes in rules for inter-church relations became even more focused and all of it came from the Committee itself. Article 177 of Synod 1986 describes the various suggestions and considerations. The new name proposed by the Committee - Committee on Inter-Church Relations - was not adopted, although Synod did decide on a different name - Committee for Relations with Churches Abroad. From this article of the Acts it can also be deduced that the Committee did take some encouragement from the letter from the Church at Surrey in 1980. For the Committee appears to have discussed the matter of changing rules for inter-church relations with the sister-churches. Instead of the answer given by previous Synods, this Synod accepted the concept of changing the rules. In its adopted Recommendations it charges the Committee to continue the discussions about a mutual approach to inter-church relations. The idea of changes in the rules was accepted. What remain to be seen are only the how and what of these changes.

Three years later Synod is convened in Winnipeg. Article 102 (page 71 ff) of the Acts of that Synod tells us what happened next. In Consideration D.3 we read, "the Committee for Churches Abroad notes that at this moment it is not ready to report anything concrete concerning a unified approach and common set of rules for ecclesiastical relations. (See the Committee Report, Appendix.)" When we follow the road to the Appendix we find the relevant note on page 154. At IX.3 we read, "In view of the incomplete discussion on inter-church relations at the Edinburgh meeting of the ICRC, your Committee has proposed that this topic be added to the agenda and that

it be dealt with in a workshop format. We also hope to have separate meetings with the sister churches to discuss the same matter and reach a consensus.”

Once more we should recap. At this point the Committee has taken ownership of the need for new rules for ecclesiastical relationships. The question is no longer whether it is good or necessary to make changes to the present rules, but rather what changes should be made. And the venue has become the ICRC. The Committee can not bring in a report due the fact that the ICRC meetings in Edinburgh did not complete the matter. So now Synod must wait till the next meeting of the ICRC. We shall comfort ourselves with the fact that the Committee still deemed it wise to meet with the sister churches separately in addition to a proposed work shop with all members of the ICRC.

Perhaps an editorial comment that the ICRC is quickly becoming a super Synod after all might be permitted at this juncture. It puts one in mind of the comment by the present day committee for contact with the Free Church of Scotland (FCS). That Committee now sends out reports about the CanRC approach to the FCS based on the discussions at the ICRC. But we digress.

At Synod 1992 the original CanRC rules for correspondence with churches abroad were changed to rules for Ecclesiastical Fellowship. Already in the title one can taste a different flavour. A flavour that smacks of pluriformity!

The Rules

In addition to the change in name of the committee the rules for inter-church relations also changed. Even the essence of what inter-church relations are has changed. In the earlier years the CanRC's had correspondence with church abroad. Today they have fellowship. For a definition of these two words as they apply to inter-church relations we must examine the differences between the rules for the one and the other.

1. The first rule for correspondence reads, “To take mutual heed that the corresponding churches do not deviate from the Reformed Confession in doctrine, liturgy, church government and discipline.”

The same rule for fellowship reads, “The churches shall assist each other in the maintenance, defense and promotion of the Reformed faith, doctrine, church polity, discipline, and liturgy, and be watchful for deviations.”

There are several important differences to note here.

- “To take mutual heed” has been changed to “shall assist”. The Liberated Reformed Churches in the Netherlands had made the point that the original had far too much of the flavour of oversight in it. The delegates from the Free Church of Scotland had agreed.

Yet, that is precisely what communion of saints is, is it not? In our local congregations we watch out for one another in case we go on a wrong path, leading away from our Lord. In our federation we do the same, do we not? Why should that be different between churches abroad? Theoretically, under the new rules, one church federation might only help another when they recognize a difficulty and they need help in solving it.

On the other hand, the original rule would direct one federation to point out deviation and call to repentance precisely when the other federation does not recognize that it is on a wrong path.

Incidentally, how effective is this first rule being applied in the present difficulties in the Free Church of Scotland?

- “Not deviate from” has been changed to “maintenance, defense and promotion”. This change builds on the previous one. To assist in maintenance, defense and promotion implies a working together on a mutual activity. To watch for deviations is to review if one or the other has inadvertently or purposefully gone away from the Biblical truth and the agreed Confessions.
- “Reformed Confession” has been changed to “Reformed faith”. Now in theory one could correctly argue that this says the same with different words. But then the legitimate question could be asked, “Why change?” And, indeed, it is very likely that the writers of the original rules considered the term ‘Reformed Confession’ to refer to the Three Forms of Unity. Since the inclusion of Presbyterian Churches into Ecclesiastical Fellowship was the crux of the changes, it is logical to expect this change. Yet, it is important to note that the unity based on the Three Forms of Unity, has with this change been undone.
- And, “church government” has been changed to “church polity”. Here the same kind of reasoning can be found as with the previous change. Arguments have been made that more than one type of church government can be considered scriptural. So, rather than debate about the difference between autonomy for the local church and presbytery control over local congregations this new wording allows (according to some) the mutually exclusive methods of church government to be practiced in Ecclesiastical Fellowship.

In these changes we see more movement to a pluriform definition of the Church.

2. The second rule for correspondence reads, “To forward to each other the agenda and decisions of the broader Assemblies and to admit each other’s delegates to these Assemblies as advisors”.

The second rule for fellowship reads, “The churches shall inform each other of the decisions taken by their broadest assemblies, if possible by sending each other their Acts or Minutes and otherwise, at least by sending the decisions relevant to the respective churches, (if possible, in translation).

A seventh rule was added to the rules for fellowship that also deals with what was covered in the second rule for correspondence. It reads, “The churches shall receive each other’s delegates at their broadest assemblies and invite them to participate as much as local regulations permit.

- A general comment will suffice here. The change in direction begun in the first rule is set forth here. Whereas in the past it was clear that agendas and decisions would be forwarded there are now escapes built in for not doing so. It is inconceivable that it is not possible for major assemblies to send agendas and decisions to other federations. It is also inconceivable that these can not be translated into other languages. There are surely those who can translate Korean into English. There are also many that can translate from Dutch to English and the other way around.

A rule to do something, followed by an ‘at least’ weakens the rule.

Under this rule for fellowship it would be much more difficult, if not impossible to do what the first rule for correspondence required.

3. The third rule for correspondence reads, “To inform each other concerning changes of, or additions to, the Confession, Church Order and Liturgical Forms, while the corresponding churches pledge to express themselves on the question whether such changes or additions are considered acceptable. Regarding proposals for changes in the Three Forms of Unity, the sister churches abroad shall receive ample opportunity (at least three years) to forward their judgment before binding decisions will be made.

The new rules fellowship address this matter as a sixth rule. It reads, "When major changes or additions are being considered to the confessions, church government or liturgy, the churches shall be informed in order that as much consultation can take place as possible before a final decision is taken.

- Here we must take note of the fact that the singular word "Confession" and reference to the Three Forms of Unity are replaced with the plural "confessions". This opens the door for acceptance on an equal basis of churches that have different confessions. Again the Unity provided by the Three Forms is dismissed. At the same time it becomes clear by the change to the phrase "...before binding decisions will be made" that one churches changes to their confessions does not necessarily have consequences for another church federation, even though they are in Ecclesiastical Fellowship. Here again we taste the pluriformity of the Church.
- 4. The fourth rule for correspondence reads, "To accept each other's attestations and to permit each other's ministers to preach the Word and to administer the sacraments." The equivalent fourth rule for fellowship reads, "The churches shall accept one another's attestations or certificates of good standing, which also means admitting members of the respective churches to the sacraments upon presentation of that attestation or certificate. Rule 5 for fellowship also pertains to this matter as it reads, "The churches shall in principle open their pulpits for each other's ministers in agreement with the rules adopted in the respective churches.
- It is good to see that one of the rules for fellowship maintains the Scripturally based practice of requiring attestations from visitors who wish to participate in the sacraments. It is also good that the authority of the local church is maintained with regard to the pulpit.
- 5. The final rule for correspondence reads, "To give account to each other regarding correspondence with third parties." The corresponding rule for fellowship is no.3 and reads; "The churches shall consult each other when entering into relations with third parties."
- Once more we are confronted by a linguistic change. "To give account" has been supplanted by "consult". Under the original rules federations would consider themselves responsible to explain themselves to the others with whom they had correspondence. Under the new rules they need only ask one another's opinion. They can continue down the road of their own choosing.

A few additional comments must also be made. In the new rules for Ecclesiastical Fellowship, adopted by Synod 1992 at Lincoln, Ontario, there are seven rules instead of five and the last two have been downgraded to a different status. Rule five and six are interrupted by the following paragraph:

"In exercising these relations, the churches shall strive to implement also the following:" It is apparent that the same weight is not given to the two rules that follow. These have to do with potential changes to confessions, church government or liturgy; as well as the invitation of delegates to major assemblies. It is striking that the important matter of change to the confessions, government and liturgy of the church(es) is relegated to the same level of significance as the attendance of delegates at one another's major assemblies.

The Result

Many years ago, and even today, if a congregation of the Free Reformed Churches in Australia was supplanted to the Lower Mainland of the Fraser Valley in British Columbia or into the Niagara Peninsula in Ontario, it would have become a member of the local Classical region there. Yet, if a congregation of The Free Church of Scotland or the Korean Presbyterian Church were to land in the same new location it would not become part of the local classical region of the Canadian Reformed Churches. Divergences in church polity preclude such involvement.

It appears that over the passing of time, by instigation of the Committee for inter-church relations, the Canadian Reformed Churches have moved from correspondence with Churches that have similar confessions and church polity; churches in other countries. They have adopted fellowship with a variety of Churches that were deemed to be true. But this could only be achieved after much manipulation of the rules for such fellowship. The rules had to fit the reality of the differences that existed. Please have another look at Consideration 4 (quoted at the beginning of this article) of Synod Smithville as it answered the initial question of the Church at Surrey.

This result is not only theoretical, but is also a reality in a number of places in Canada. There are Free Church of Scotland and Korean Presbyterian congregations in places where there are also Canadian Reformed Churches. What is being done to alleviate this situation? Will delegates of consistories where this is so, be able to answer in the affirmative when asked if their Church is upholding the decisions of major assemblies?

The same Synod that rejected the legitimacy of pluriformity of the Church also recognized both the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the Reformed Churches in the United States to be true Churches and established Ecclesiastical Fellowship with them.

But these two churches are themselves not able to come to unity. Is this not a blatant example of the idea of a Church pluriformity?

And then there is one more nagging question. What was wrong with the original rules for correspondence? Is it not so that one should clearly show what is wrong with a doctrine or practice before changing it to something else? No one can deny that the present relationship and the rules for it are different than what was in place in the earlier years of the CanRC. Why were things changed? What was wrong with the way things were done? Is this one of those things that the Church returns to during a reformation?

Jesus prayed, in the oft-quoted prayer of John 17, that His people might be one even as the Father and the Son are one, with the Spirit. That is a unity that is beyond human understanding. It is a unity that is antithetical to pluriformity. But the church unity that is being exercised by the Canadian Reformed Churches is a unity of churches and church federations with multiple forms of confessions and government, forced into fellowship with rules changed or altered to suit the prevailing circumstances.

PdB

LORD'S SUPPER AND UNITY (1)

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How hospitable is it to deny admittance to the Lord's Supper to guests from other church federations? In the worship service we experience unity with them in many ways. They sing with us, pray with us, listen with us, confess with us, receive with us and give with us. But they do not eat and drink with us ... Can such a closed Lord's Supper celebration still be defended and explained?

In the Netherlands more and more people have difficulties with the closed nature of the Lord's Supper table. Less and less people understand it. For these reasons we strive for a clear answer as to why there is a closed Lord's Supper table. Another reason for thinking through this matter is that most "Christelijke Gereformeerde" (Free Reformed in North America) churches, while they have the same principles of admission, appear to apply them differently in practice than the Reformed (lib.) do. It would be nice if these different practices would grow towards each other.

In this article I will try to give a short overview of the principles that are at stake with respect to a celebration that is closed; whether or not it is "semi-open" (i.e. under certain conditions guests from other church federations may partake).

Spirit of the times

You cannot avoid the fact that the increasing number of open celebration of Lord's Supper around us has everything to do with the spirit of the times. A century ago it would have been unthinkable that people would easily celebrate Lord's Supper in a church of which they were not members. People were simply much more reluctant to go to church elsewhere than they are today. Even a mixed marriage service would give difficulties.

Nowadays one feels that differences in the "theoretical content of faith" are no longer very important. The Dutch prince Maurice married Marylène in a combined Roman Catholic - "Hervormd" church service. There is something called "ecumenicity of the heart" wherein there is also room for Roman Catholics. The Christian life, in a loving sphere of acceptance, is considered by many Christians as much more important than living in accordance with Scripture and standing up for Biblical doctrine. Whether or not you visit another church and partake in a celebration of the Lord's Supper or even at a mass, that question is answered more by feeling than by sensible reasoning and real thought. "The differences in theology, well whatever, but I feel a sphere of warmth here, and a faith community in which I gladly partake of the celebration. It is rude and offensive if I would stay away despite the invitation. I would thereby hurt my fellow Christians as if they are not good enough."

We breathe in this theme in all sorts of variations as Christians at the beginning of the 21st century. Among those who hear this as music in their ears, the idea of a closed Lord's Supper celebration is experienced as a false note. A closed Lord's Supper can no longer be easily explained.

Holiness of the table of Christ

There have been times - let's say a century ago - when, under the influence of what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, the holiness of the Lord's Supper was more strongly felt than is realized today. It was not easily possible to celebrate Lord's Supper in a place other than your own congregation. By celebrating unlawfully one could bring judgment upon himself and God's wrath would be brought upon the whole congregation. In that time there was in general much more respect for the holiness of the Lord's Supper. This also expressed itself in diffidence to celebrate among one's own congregation members. If I am not mistaken, that awareness of holiness and respect has become much weaker in the Reformed Churches (lib.). In the week prior to the celebration, how many people wrestle with the question whether they can go to the table or not? Doesn't it much more frequently simply happen automatically? Many Reformed people will have to admit that it is only when they walk into the church auditorium that they realize to their fright that the Lord's Supper will be celebrated without having prepared for it. At least if they still get frightened

In addition, you sometimes get the feeling that some people are faithful in coming to the table in order to avoid difficult questions from their ward elder. That hunch is difficult to prove. But it is a fact that people who regularly miss worship services never miss Lord's Supper Sundays. That can result from deep reverence for the table of Christ. But it can also come from very pragmatic motives.

In any case, this internal blurring is in sharp contrast with the great carefulness exhibited to Guests. For then, we, as Reformed people, are quite precise. The question must be asked whether there is a proper balance between the two.

Paul

What can be said about the holiness of the Lord's Supper? This is not the place to engage in a detailed study of that topic. But the fact is that in 1 Corinthians Paul teaches the congregation to keep watch over the admission to the Lord's table. Church discipline and celebration of the Lord's Supper have everything to do with each other. Paul forbids eating with brothers and sisters who live in sin (1 Cor 5:11,12). Undoubtedly with "eating" Paul also means the table of the Lord. Later he refers to abuses that make the Lord's Supper celebration into an unworthy exhibition. There are, for example, those who celebrate Lord's Supper but then just as easily participate in heathen sacrificial meals (1 Cor 10:16-22). Some congregation members are egoistic even in the common meals and do not reckon with their brothers and sisters, thereby showing their contempt for God's congregation. In the bread and wine you come into contact with Christ himself. This calls for a worthy attitude wherein each participant must examine himself. Whoever does not have reverence for Christ and his congregation eats and drinks judgment upon himself (1 Cor 11:17-34). Lord's

Supper celebration is serious business. If a congregation does not take it seriously, they can call God's wrath down upon themselves.

Reformed view

Prof. Dr. W. Van't Spijker writes about the church order of "de Paltz" of 1563. It appears that already in the early Reformation period admittance to the Lord's Supper was done very carefully. "It is a typically Reformed view that the Lord's Supper is not an open meal for everyone. The right to celebrate Lord's Supper was expressly given but it could also be taken away." The sacraments may only be administered to those who have a right to it. Those who may not partake are those who adhere to a blasphemous doctrine or who live in gross sins and do not want to repent. Also the Heidelberg Catechism states in answer 82 that the church may not admit people to the Lord's table who show themselves to be unbelieving and ungodly by their confession and life.(b)

Congregation members and guests

The question is what all this has to say about admitting guests who are a confessing member elsewhere. Out of reverence for the Lord and to protect those guests it is good not to simply let everyone attend. But how far does the responsibility of a consistory extend in this? The responsibility towards guests is of a different nature than the responsibility towards one's own congregation members. The texts cited above from 1 Corinthians, if I understand them correctly, all refer to situations in the congregation. It is about the bad conduct of congregation members. The congregation knows about this but does not react. That is what Paul reproofs the Corinthians for. They permit sinners in the congregation and even celebrate Lord's Supper with them. Therefore also today the consistory and the congregation are responsible for admitting their own congregation members to the Lord's Supper. You know your brothers and sisters and share the responsibility for their actions.

The situation with guests is, of course, different. The responsibility of the congregation and consistory is less far reaching. To mention an example: It sometimes happens that an unknown guest participates in the celebration without being announced. I know of situations where the consistory afterwards confessed their guilt before God and the congregation openly in the worship service for since the table was not fenced properly, the table would have become unholy and the wrath of God would have come upon the congregation. But this self-accusation rests upon a wrong application of 1 Corinthians 11. The situation where an unsuspecting guest goes to the table is quite different than the situation where a congregation openly allows known sinners from their midst to partake of the Lord's Supper.

Therefore it does not seem to me to be correct to directly connect the question of an open or closed table for guests to the application of church discipline, the desecration of the table or the judgment

of God against the congregation. But there is an indirect connection. This is related to the fact that in most church federations church discipline concerning doctrine and life is no longer exercised. A Reformed church cannot simply ignore that fact, since in this way the holiness of the table may be threatened when it is opened to guests.

Unity of the congregation, division among Christians

There is yet another aspect to the Lord's Supper which plays a role in this connection. The Lord's Supper is a meal of the congregation wherein the mutual unity of the congregation in Christ is sealed.

Paul writes concerning the communion with the body of Christ: "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body" (1 Cor 10:17). Eating together in the Bible is an important expression of communion and unity. The celebration of the Lord's Supper is even a high point in the experience of unity.

When a Christian from another church federation is a guest in a Reformed church, when such a person lets it be known that he is someone who uprightly loves the Lord and has made confession of this, then the desire to heartily welcome such a brother to the table is certainly very nice. One wants to do justice to that recognition and give concrete expression to the unity of the faith.

The question is how does one really do justice to this? By celebrating Lord's Supper together and then right afterwards by each going our separate ways, each to his own church federation? No. True justice to this can only be done when one really becomes one ecclesiastically.

First you discover with happiness unity in the faith. But when you want to honour that in a complete way, you hit upon another obstacle that is much more painful, namely, ecclesiastical division. By going to the same table, you deny the seriousness of that obstacle. While Christ is saddened by it, you act as if you can relativize it.

Whoever deeply realizes that celebrating the Lord's Supper is the height of the unity in Christ must recognize that such a celebration of the Lord's Supper with a brother from another church federation is in principle unsound. You suggest complete unity while in fact that unity is not full grown but broken. In your upright and correct longing to do justice to the unity in the faith, you do injustice to the facts of the division of the churches. In principle celebrating Lord's Supper with brothers and sisters from another church federation is in conflict with sound personal ethics. You say "Yes" and "No" at the same time. "Yes, I recognize you as my brother in Christ and want to celebrate that unity with you. No, I go from you and your church and return to my own church."

In short, we should not relativize and cover up the sin of our ecclesiastical division, which provokes heaven. If that sin is painfully felt anywhere, then it is especially at the Lord's Supper table where

you miss many brothers and sisters. If the sin is no longer felt there, then it won't be felt anywhere. And so it remains...

In practice

May then guests never be admitted from churches other than sister churches?

Concerning this, H. Bouwman writes: "The church has always admitted 'guests,' providing that they are 'guests' in truth, that is, members of other Christian churches whose confession agrees with the church and for whom there is a lawful hindrance to celebrating the Lord's Supper in one's own church. Thus formerly it happened that Lutherans who lived in areas where there was no Lutheran church but a Reformed church and also vice versa that Reformed lived in places where there was no Reformed church but a Lutheran church. But the churches have always found it necessary that in such situations the necessary supervision should be done proper justice. In the Netherlands one has always had the opportunity to become a member of one of the Reformed churches. Therefore supervision is all the more necessary in order that it appear sufficient that the one who requests to go to the table is an upright member of the congregation and that he is admitted to the Lord's table. If, on the basis of a reliable witness, this is in order, one cannot have any objections to his admission... In various previous periods, for example, in the churches of the Secession [of 1834] and among the churches of the action [i.e. Doleantie] of 1886, it happened repeatedly that members of other churches, who attended church a lot and also entered into the life of the congregation, and yet did not want to become a member, asked to be able to partake of the Lord's Supper. Such a request was usually granted for a single time. It is good that the consistory does not push away such people as long as it tries to convince them of the abnormality of the situation. There can be mitigating circumstances, family circumstances or financial causes but these should not result in approving of the situation in which one lives in ecclesiastical unfaithfulness." (c)

From this quote it appears that there was a certain flexibility in admitting guests, for example, in the situation of someone from a different church federation who temporarily lives in your district and has no other alternatives for celebrating Lord's Supper. Nowadays you would right away think of foreign guests and refugees. But, in my view, there should always be room for churches and consistories to decide in concrete situations on their own responsibility when guests request admittance. Honesty demands one to add that in the Netherlands each confessing Christian can go to the table in his own congregation. Thus when a consistory does not grant admittance to a particular person because of the ecclesiastical division, the consistory cannot be accused of preventing people from coming to the Lord's table since the consistory does not prevent people from coming in general but only in this specific case.

Conclusions

I'd like to summarize the article in the following conclusions.

1. In many ways it is possible to experience unity with brothers and sisters who are members of different church federations. As guests they are heartily welcome in our services and we experience a (beginning) unity of the faith with them by singing together, praying, listening and confessing, and so on.

2. The celebration of the Lord's Supper by the congregation is the high point in celebrating the unity in Christ. Precisely because this is the high point, ecclesiastical division as a rule prevents celebrating the Lord's Supper with guests from other church federations. The correct longing for the experience of the unity of faith may not close the eyes for the seriousness of the continuing sin of ecclesiastical division. An open table means a premature grasping at a complete union that is not there yet.

3. Choosing for a closed table is not only painful for the guest but also for the congregation who must make known and explain this difficult to understand choice to guests. This pain is not so much caused by a lack of hospitality as by the division of the body of Christ among those who love Christ uprightly. In the context of the contrast between one's personal unity of faith and ecclesiastical division, the closed table chooses not to deny or relativize this contrast but does justice to it and makes one feel it at a crucial moment.

4. It would be good for the churches to make an announcement in the Lord's Supper service wherein it is made clear that the Lord's Supper, as a celebration of the congregation, in principle is only open for members of the congregation. In addition, the consistory has admitted people whom the consistory has first spoken with. If some guests have questions, they should be invited in a friendly manner to speak about them with the minister or someone else after the worship service.

5. The so-called "fencers of the table" are especially meant to keep a watch out for members of the congregation who are not allowed to attend. "Fencers of the table" must not send (unknown) guests back as they make their way to the table. It is better to speak with them after the service and get better acquainted with them.

a) From *De Reformatie* vol. 76, no. 31, 653-657.

b) W. van't Spijker, "Het klassieke avondmaalsformulier" in W. van't Spijker, W. Balke et al., *Bij brood en beker*, Goudriaan 1980. p.366f.

c) H. Bouwman, *Gereformeerd kerkrecht* II, Kampen 1928, 390f.

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Mundi

Facing Canaan Today

By W.L. Bredenhof

The title of my introductory speech speaks about Canaan. The title implies that there is some way in which we face a Canaan today. This ties right into the theme verse for this Youth Conference: "Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go." Those beautiful words of Joshua 1:9 were spoken by Jahweh, our covenant God, as the people of Israel stood on the threshold of Canaan. They were about to go out and do battle. It was an exciting time for God's people. They had a task before them _ they had a land to conquer. They were to destroy the inhabitants of the land completely _ there was no room for mercy. The peoples of Canaan were wicked idolaters who were polluting God's land.

Have you ever considered how bad it really was there in Canaan? When we think about idol worship, what comes into our heads? Nice images of a fat smiling gold statue, sitting cross-legged and welcoming worshippers who bow down as they offer flowers, fruit and maybe some chicken or beef? No, Baal and Ashtoreth worship were gruesome affairs. James Michener, a famous author, once described the Baal worship scene like this:

With an aching pain in his chest Urbaal led his two wives along the twisting street to the temple square, but before he entered that sacred place he took a deep breath, set his shoulders and did his best to quell the panic in his guts. "Let us be brave," he whispered, "for many will be watching."

When the flames leaped from the god's mouth two priests grabbed one of the eight boys - a roly-poly infant of nine months - and raised him high in the air. Muttering incantations they approached the outstretched arms, dashed the child upon them and gave him a dreadful shove downward, so that he scraped along the stony arms and plunged into the fire. As the god accepted him with a belch of fire there was a faint cry, then an anguished scream as the child's mother protested.

The last child was a boy of nearly three and old enough to understand what was happening, so with frightened eyes he drew back from the priests, and when they lifted him to the god he screamed, trying to hold on to the stone fingers and save himself, but the priests pulled away his small clutching hands, and with a violent push sent him tumbling into the flaming mouth.¹

Now isn't that absolutely horrifying? Could parents send their children into the mouth of Baal! But it happened - we even read about it several times in Scripture. That was Canaan then - those were the people upon whom God had placed a bounty, so to speak. But is today any different? I'm sure you would be sickened if I were to give as detailed a description of what happens in countless abortuaries across Canada. Even in Smithers - a small, beautiful northern BC

¹ James A. Michener, *The Source*.

town - even in Smithers unborn babies are murdered on a regular basis. Is this Canada or Canaan? This country is sliding further and further into the sewer. Homosexuality was considered to be a mental illness less than 25 years ago, now so-called homophobia is taking its place. Pornography is everywhere - even child porn finds its defenders out in the public. Divorce rates are apparently down, but so are the numbers of people who are getting married. Many churches across the country are empty on Sundays, while the malls and stores are packed. We have basically become a pagan nation. We sing "God keep our land, glorious and free." But there is very little that's glorious about Canada today. Let's be realistic: Canada has become Canaan.

So we today as young believers, we find ourselves facing this Canaan. We live here and are confronted with it everyday. And what can we do about it? What does God **want** us to do about it? To learn more about what our God would have us do, let's take a closer look at the theme verse for this Conference.

The first thing I want to draw to your attention about this verse is its context. Often we think about the book of Joshua as being a collection of stories about Israel conquering the Promised Land. It's a history book. And many Bibles have a table of contents that place Joshua in a group of "historical books." However, if you ever look at a Hebrew Old Testament, you'll find something remarkable. Joshua belongs there to a group of books called the "former prophets." The book of Joshua is actually prophecy. That doesn't mean that it necessarily is predicting anything, it means that the book stands as something that is meant to teach. These are more than just entertaining stories. These are stories that are meant to teach us something - they are prophecy. That's what Biblical prophecy is all about in the first place.

So what are we supposed to learn from this verse? First of all, look at the situation. Moses is dead and Joshua is standing ready to take his place. Jahweh, the LORD, comes to him and tells him to take over. Joshua is the one who's supposed to lead God's people into the Promised Land. Joshua can undoubtedly see the challenges ahead. There are not only the Canaanites to deal with, there are also the Israelites. They grumbled and complained and made life hard for Moses. Are they going to do the same for Joshua?

You see, Joshua has a very special position in our text. He is being ordained or commissioned as a leader of Israel. So there's no way that we can draw a straight line from Joshua to us. Who among us is a general for the people of Israel? Who can claim to be the successor of Moses? So we have to be careful that we don't take the words of the theme text for ourselves too quickly and easily. We have to think about this a little more. Obviously, there is a lesson in our text, this is prophesy. All Scripture is profitable for teaching, reproof, for correction and for instruction in righteousness.

Let's take our starting point in those words, "Be strong and of good courage." They are beautiful words. This isn't the first time or the last time that these words are used in Scripture. Jahweh speaks these words to Joshua also in verses 6 and 7 of this chapter. Moses uses these words when he is giving his farewell speech to Israel in Deuteronomy 31. He also speaks these words to Joshua, and the remarkable thing is that Jahweh Himself echoes these words in verse 23 of Deuteronomy 31. God takes over these most encouraging words and make them His own. Now these words are also found later in Scripture as well, we read them several times in First and Second Chronicles. In all these instances, there is one thing that stands out, the words of encouragement are directly connected to God's presence. We see it also in our theme text: Jahweh

your God is with you wherever you go. God is always there. That's why Joshua can be strong and of good courage, that's why he doesn't have to be afraid.

The Scriptures are full of passages that point us to God's omnipresence, the fact that God is always present. You need only think of Jeremiah 23:23-24, "Am I a God at hand, says the LORD, and not a God afar off? Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? says the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? says the LORD." God is always there, that's a pretty strong encouragement for us as we face Canaan today. But did you ever stop to think that there was a time and place on earth when God wasn't there? It happened on Golgotha. You see, God's *presence* was necessary for the conquest of the Promised Land. If Jahweh had not been with them, the people of Israel would never have done it. But the unusual thing is that God's *absence* was necessary for the conquest of sin and Satan. God withdrew and forsook His beloved Son. The LORD God was not with Christ on the cross; our Lord Jesus was abandoned and forsaken by God. But through that and because of that, the good news is that we can be confident that He will always be with us. Because He forsook His Son, He will never forsake us. He will always be with us just as He promised Joshua as he took over from Moses.

We are faced with Canaan today. Our LORD God calls us to trust in His presence and so to be strong and of good courage. We are not to fear at what we see before us. But this is all rather inward looking. Doesn't the Lord want us to do more? Indeed, He does. We're not called to take up firearms and wage a physical battle against the Canaan of today. But we are called to spiritual warfare. We are called to wage war on the forces of Satan. How do we do this? Here we can right away think of that famous passage right at the end of Matthew. Do you remember how that passage ends? "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age." The presence of the Lord Jesus was meant for an encouragement to the disciples as they took up their commission as apostles. The presence of the Lord Jesus is also an encouragement for us as we face our own Canaan today. What are we called to do in the face of the decadence and rank paganism around us?

We're called to bring the gospel message of our Lord Jesus. "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." That's what our Lord Jesus said there at the end of Matthew 28. Through the apostles, the Church was commanded to get out and bring the gospel to all peoples. That command remains in place.² As Church we are called to be a light and a witness not only to those far away in distant lands, but also to those around us. And there is such a need today, isn't there? The need is for the gospel, for the good news that life and meaning are in Christ Jesus.

The greatest need in Canada today is for the gospel. That's why the best way to be pro-life is to be pro-eternal life. The best way to put the brakes on marriage and family breakdown is to focus on Christ and His Word. The best way to eradicate pornography is not censorship, but gospel proclamation. The best way to sanctify the Lord's Day is to call people to repentance and faith before the Lord of the Day. The gospel is what is needed. Those who belong to Christ's Church must give a clear testimony to Canaan that the earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof _ also Canada rightly belongs to God, from sea to sea. This is God's dominion and therefore the

² For argumentation to back up the perpetuity of the Great Commission, cf. *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, J.I. Packer, Downers Grove: IVP, 1991 reprint, p.74.

inhabitants of this land should kiss the Son and give Him His due. We need a clear and loving testimony that has as its goal to bring peace and reconciliation with the Creator.

There are various ways in which this testimony can be brought. I hope to give you an idea or two in the next two presentations. But for now, let's all be convinced in our hearts about what the greatest need of today is. Canada needs the precious blood of the Saviour. Those who have been bought with that blood are called to reach out to those who are at enmity with God. That can be difficult. It can be nerve-racking, especially when you're young. I can tell you that from experience. I've had my heart beating so strongly that the table in front of me was moving back and forth. But the message needs to go out and we need to stand. Are we willing and ready to be strong and courageous? Do we indeed trust that Jahweh our God is with us wherever we go?

Slightly revised text of a speech for the Bulkley Valley Youth Conference on May 18-19, 2001.

President's Report on the State of the Church

Presented at the Northern Plains Classis of the Reformed Church in the United States

March 19-20, 2001

Esteemed Brethren:

As I have again read the parochial reports of the pastors I am struck with the emphasis upon the authority of the word of God and the faithful preaching of that word. And so I would merely repeat the following, which I stated in my report last year. "It is with thanksgiving to God that I can report that the word of God is being proclaimed every Lord's Day in all of the pulpits (unless physically impossible). It is also apparent that the word of God is being received. Bible classes are being held. The youth are being catechized. Generally the work of the ministry is faithfully being carried out. This is certainly a sign of God's blessing and covenant faithfulness." I repeat this from last year's report because it reminds us of the faithfulness of God year in and year out.

It is also good to report that at the present time all of the pulpits within the Northern Plains Classis are filled. This is no small matter in this Classis. In August Rev. Steven Richert began his ministry with Salem Reformed Church of Ashley, ND and Hosmer Reformed Church of Hosmer, SD. We are happy to have him be a part of the ministry of our Classis. We are also pleased to have Licentiate Dan Schnabel working as stated supply in the Herreid Reformed Church, Herreid, SD. Mr. Schnabel sustained his licensure exam on Dec. 5, 2000 and began his ministry later that month. Later this year he will be undergoing his ordination exam. We praise God for His provision for the ministry of the word in the persons of Rev. Richert and Licentiate Schnabel. We are also grateful that during the vacancies of the congregations in Ashley, Hosmer, and Herreid the word of God was ministered by other pastors, particularly Rev. Darrell Kingswood and Rev. Herman Van Stedum. Their willingness to provide this extra service is appreciated.

Elder Grae Gannon continues to conduct the services each Lord's Day at the Kassel Reformed Church of Denhof, ND. Kassel Reformed saw an important milestone this past year as they celebrated their centennial. Former pastors Lloyd Gross, Vernon Pollema, and Herman Van Stedum were able to join them on this important day of remembering the many blessings of God.

The reports from Harvest Reformed Church of Minot, ND are also reasons for praising God. As they are adjusting to and benefiting from their new building they report considerable increase in

giving and some growth in membership as well as new opportunities to reach out in the community. God's blessings to Harvest Reformed are evident as we meet here for our Classis meeting.

Significant changes have taken place this past year with respect to Hope Reformed Church of Pierre, SD. The congregation has decided to discontinue requesting financial aid from Classis and Synod. This has necessitated that Rev. Haddock seeks outside employment to provide an income. God has provided such employment. This will require some changes in his ministry but has also led the congregation to renew their commitment to be self-sufficient and to continue their ministry in Pierre. We trust that God will bless this new arrangement.

Our Home Missions congregation in Watertown, SD reports a continued strong commitment to the work of missions. Though they continue to make a good effort at outreach and report a good number of visitors they have not realized any numerical growth. Yet God has blessed them in being able to meet their financial obligations. We wait upon the Lord to bring the increase.

Rev. Maynard Koerner and the consistory of Covenant Reformed have diligently pursued a new opportunity for missions this past year in the Fargo, ND/Moorhead, MN area. We are sorry to report that the worship services in the Fargo area have currently been discontinued. However, there remains a strong commitment to continue to work towards the possibility to eventually establishing an RCUS mission work in this area.

All of the congregations report a strong desire on the part of the members to receive the ministry of the word, including Bible studies and instructions of the youth as well as fellowship. At the same time there is the ongoing concern about those who do not attend, especially bible studies, as well as they should. Several of the pastors have reported on dealing with difficult discipline problems. Many of our congregations have a significant number of elderly that is reflected in the number of funerals that were held. Though there is an ongoing difficulty of many congregations being small rural churches, God has truly been good to the congregations of the Northern Plains Classis.

Retired pastor Norman Jones reports that he has had some difficulties with his health again this past year. We are thankful that God has sustained him and praise God for the marvels of modern medicine. We pray for God's continued blessing upon Rev. Jones and his wife. We are grateful for the work that he is able to do.

We look forward to student for the ministry Tracy Grugget graduating later this year from Westminster Seminary in California. He was able to fill the pulpit at Peace Reformed Church in Garner, IA this past summer. We trust that God will have a place for him to do the work of ministry in the very near future.

A quick study of the Treasurer's report also causes us to praise God for His blessings. All of the congregations met the obligation for Classis Guidelines. There remains a fairly healthy balance. With the number of small congregations and the high number of members on fixed incomes we indeed are thankful.

We live in an age of polls and focus groups. An age in which the important thing to do is that which the people clamor for. Much of modern day evangelicalism has succumbed to this pressure. This is particularly true in the area of worship. In the mission field people are looking for churches that "meet their needs", which usually means churches that tickle their fancies. The pressures to resist this trend and remain faithful to the reformed, biblical principles of worship are

great. Yet we believe that if we remain faithful to God's word He will remain faithful to us. That does not mean that we should be blind traditionalists. That pressure also exists. Doing something the same as it has always been done is not necessarily the most faithful to Scripture. We are a reformed church and we must always be ready to be reforming whether it is in the area of worship or anything else. As we have now finally entered into the new millennium we remain confident and pray that God will lead us in the direction that we should go.

Let us be reminded of the words of the Apostle Paul to Timothy. "Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke and exhort with all long-suffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry"(II Timothy 4:2-5).

Respectfully submitted
Rev. Maynard Koerner

United Reformed Churches

An Unpredictable Ratification Vote Passes, 40 to 24

Synod Escondido voted to enter into ecclesiastical fellowship with the Canadian Reformed Churches with an almost unanimous vote. Now that the voting of the local churches has been completed (although it is possible that one or two ballots mailed before the year end will still arrive), it is clear that the margin of consistorial approval is not nearly as imposing as synod's. Out of the 76 churches that made up the federation at the time of synod, 64 voted before the clock ushered in 2002.

Twenty-four churches dissented with synod for reasons ranging, I surmise, from a lack of acquaintance with the Canadian Reformed Churches, to doctrinal concerns and a fear of being forced and coerced into practices that to them seem unacceptable. These churches registered their negative votes. 12 churches did not vote in time, or at all.

However, 40 consistories voted in favor of continuing the process of church unity and of opening up pulpit and table exchange where possible. Transfer of membership is now possible, not to mention intermarriage and greater local interchurch fellowship between the URC and the CanRC. May the King of the Church prosper this significant step of obedience, taken in keeping with His Word and the Reformed Confessions.

Of significance in the numbers is the fact that some eighty percent of our Canadian churches approved entering into Phase Two with the CanRC. Of 29 churches, 21 voted in favor with five negative ballots being cast. Three churches abstained. Our American consistories were evenly divided in their voting pattern, with 19 on either side of the ledger.

In due time all of the clerks will receive formal notices of the result. The question that readily comes to my mind is: Is the United Reformed federation of churches mature enough to work

together harmoniously even though one third of the consistories voted against synod's decision? That some church members disagree strongly is clear. The same notation can be made concerning the Canadian Reformed membership. There are also some powerful emotions and some differing theological views involved.

I believe that we should ask ourselves: What is the LORD's will in this matter? I have no desire to minimize the issues involved. Yet, I trust that all of our councils and churches establish and pursue a good working relationship with neighbouring Canadian Reformed Churches.

Synod Escondido appointed three working committees to meet with their CanRC counterparts in seeking to focus on the Church Order, an eventual Songbook, and how to handle theological education for aspiring ministers. The task for these brothers is daunting, perhaps especially for the first committee.

Speaking as a member of the URC Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity I believe that close to a decade will be required before an agreeable plan of union is fashioned that will begin the union or merger of these two federations. It is my hope and prayer that our God will grant His much-needed blessing on these labors of church unity.

Richard Stienstra
Minister Emeritus
Dunnville URC