

## **An Ecclesiastical Taboo**

In family and corporate life there are issues and situations that are avoided in public discussion because they can cause undesirable consequences for those involved in bringing them forward or because they are an embarrassment for those involved. The same is true for some things in church life. Unhappily, the failure to address such issues usually leads to private complaining, gossip and dissatisfaction. In the end, if no corrective action is taken dire consequences can develop.

A recent issue of *Clarion*, Vol.52, No.7, shows the signs of one such issue beginning to boil over. The subject is that of the place and position of ministers in the Canadian Reformed Churches. Surely it is dangerous to discuss this most public office in the churches as caricatures might be brought forward, generalizations may be made, and individuals might feel spoken to or about. People, also those in public offices, are often sensitive to criticism about their person and/or position, and may take offense even if none is intended. Yet, it appears that, for the sake of the churches, it is beneficial to review the situation and contemplate recent developments.

An objective overview of the present situation must take note of several developments. In recent years a relatively large number of ministers have been suspended, deposed or removed from their position. At present there remain situations in which the relationship between minister and congregation are not healthy. At the same time ministers require spring breaks, fall breaks, holidays and sabbaticals. Some consider themselves overworked; still others are frustrated and disenchanting. Those who approach the age of retirement seem eager to leave their calling as soon as the chronological clock chimes the socially agreed upon time. The desire to enter the ministry also appears to have diminished. The Liberated Reformed Churches in the Netherlands reports a negligible number of students in their Theological University. The Theological College in Hamilton of the Canadian Reformed Churches has few students preparing for the ministry. To be clear these comments are not meant as critical remarks but rather as observations which might aid us in understanding the problem and in finding possible solutions.

What could cause such developments in a vocation that by its very definition ought to be a happy and sought after calling? In order to answer this question it might be good to review what the vocation is. The churches have agreed, in article 16 of the Church Order, that the office of ministers of the word can be described as follows:

The specific duties of the office of minister of the Word are thoroughly and sincerely to proclaim to the congregation the Word of the Lord, administer the sacraments and publicly call upon the Name of God in behalf of the whole congregation; also to instruct the children of the Church in the doctrine of salvation, visit the members of the congregation in their homes and comfort the sick with the Word of God; and further, together with the elders, to keep the Church of God in good order, exercise discipline, and govern the Church in such a manner as the Lord has ordained.

This is an article about ministers, but it is an article agreed to by all the churches. That means that ministers, consistories and all members must consider this office and the man who fills it in light of this agreement. All must expect the minister to follow this job description. The minister must regularly review his activities to see if he is doing his job in the agreed manner. At the same time the consistory must hold the minister to performing these tasks according to the agreed article of the Church Order. And the congregation may expect the minister to perform the tasks mentioned in this agreement and the Consistory to ensure that it happens.

A noteworthy aspect of this article is that the main task of a minister is to proclaim the Word of God. This means that a minister must preach that which has been revealed of old. He does not need to, nor is he

permitted to put forward all kinds of new truths, nor may he deviate from the “once for all revealed truth”. But ministers must repeatedly proclaim that which the Holy Spirit has revealed to the writers of Holy Writ. They must uncover deviations and warn against them. They must administer the sacraments and lead in public prayer. In addition the Church Order article about ministers specifically notes that the ministers are to teach the children of the congregation about the doctrines of salvation, to visit the members of the congregation in their homes and to comfort the sick with the Word of God.

Finally, the agreed upon article about ministers speaks about the fact that the ministers are to be involved in keeping the Church of God in good order, exercise discipline and govern the Church. These last responsibilities of the minister are to be shared, to be shared with the elders. The sharing of these responsibilities with elders has been done in a setting of an ecclesiastical assembly called a ‘consistory’. Here the elders and the minister deal with those matters mentioned in the last sentence of the article of the Church Order dealing with the responsibilities of the minister.

In such a consistory are typically found one minister and anywhere from 5 – 15 elders depending on the size of the congregation. That would mean that the minister would make up from 6% - 20% of the consistory. It would seem logical then, that the ministers involve themselves in a proportionate amount of time dealing with those responsibilities mentioned in this last sentence. However, a reality check might reveal a considerably different scenario.

There are, for example, a number of congregations where a minister might be involved in only 50% of the catechism instruction while the elders are not at all involved in federative matters. Some ministers spend more time on federative committees than on visiting the members of the congregation. Many ministers do not join the elders in visiting the membership once per year but attend all Classical meetings. It would not be a stretch to suggest that many ministers have more discussions about church matters [local as well as federative] with their colleagues than with their elders.

Perhaps it is time for the ministers to review their job description and for the consistories to hold them to the agreed tasks. The vocation of a minister is a privileged one and a joyous one. Surely, even when following the letter of the article, trouble will raise its ugly head from time to time, but the joy of proclaiming the Word of God, administering it via the sacraments, leading the congregation in public prayer to God, teaching the doctrines of salvation to the younger members are wonderful tasks that will fill the heart of a God-fearing man with joy and wonderment.

Then the sharing of those other tasks with the elders will not take up so much of the time of the minister, nor will it become a large burden or focus. At the same time it does not need to be a cause for trouble. For that responsibility will lie with the consistory. In this regard the elders must also take up their task and not abdicate it, giving the ministers the feeling that they must substitute. Let the minister feel that all the other things are being looked after so that he can concentrate on his main duties. Sure, he can be involved with church government, both locally and federatively, but it is not his primary task. The government of the church especially locally, but also federatively is the primary task of elders and only a secondary task for ministers.

## EXPLAINING WHAT WE CONFESS AND PRACTIC

### *Common Clichés and Popular Fallacies* <sup>(5)</sup>

We have been busy with our review of the common clichés and popular fallacies that we frequently encounter when we talk about the matter of admittance to the Lord's table. The particular cliché we are busy with is the pernicious platitude "it is the Lord's table". In that context, quoting from an article written by Dr. K. Runia, (1) we discussed "*close*" and "*closed* communion". We observed that the term "close communion" is sometimes confused with and/or used interchangeable with the term "closed communion". We mentioned that we would not find the term "closed communion" in the article we had quoted. Runia uses the term "close communion" in his refutation of the "it is the Lord's table" argument. However, "*closed* communion" is the term used to describe the form of communion practiced in the Canadian Reformed Churches (plural) and their "sister-Churches". *Closed* communion as practiced in the CanRC is a long-established Reformed practice.

Our last editorial ended with some *interim* conclusions, which implies that we still have a number of matters to deal with before we can wrap up our discussion on the "it is the Lord's table" argument. We mentioned some of them the last time. Matters that are still on our agenda are "open" and "restricted communion", and "the important relationship between understanding the doctrine of the church and the question concerning who may participate in the celebration of the Lord's Supper". We will, however, first take a closer look at "*open*" communion.

### **OPEN COMMUNION**

In a previous editorial we already dealt with *close* or *closed* communion, and we observed that in both of these forms of communion access to the Lord's table is in some way limited or restricted, albeit for differing reasons. We mentioned that both of these forms of communion stand in contrast and/or opposition to "open" communion, and therefore there is no allowance made for admittance of "all those who *want* to participate", "*all* members of evangelical churches" or "*all* who are the Lord's' etc.". However, in "open" communion "all those who wish to participate, are admitted to the table without any investigation of their faith and life." (2)

Quoting Dr. K. Runia we learn that "this 'open communion' is defended as being fully in accordance with the Word of God. For example, the 17<sup>th</sup> General Council of the Alliance of Reformed Churches issued the statement: 'We invite and gladly welcome members of all Churches (which according to the Bible, confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour) to the table of our common Lord. The Church has received the sacrament of the Holy Communion from Christ and He communicates himself in it to the believer. The Table of the Lord is His, not ours. We believe that we dare not refuse the sacrament to any baptized person who loves and confesses Jesus Christ as Saviour.'"

Dr. Runia writes: "It cannot be denied that (at least at first glance) there is much in this statement that appeals to all of us. Is it not true that Christ is the Lord and Master of His own table? Is it not true that all true believers are entitled to take part in this meal of remembrance? Are we as Reformed Churches not too rigid, when we refuse the Lord's table to *other* true believers and so refuse to have full communion with them? Would it not be much better, if we also accepted this view?" Dr. Runia observes that "to find the answer to these questions we can only do one thing; let us listen to what the BIBLE says. For God's Word alone is decisive. The main thing is not whether something appeals to us, but whether the arguments mentioned are valid and in agreement with God's own Word."

### THREE MAIN ARGUMENTS

There are, according to Dr. Runia, three main arguments in use by those who support and propagate open communion. The **first argument** is the common cliché "it is the Lord's table".

Dr. Runia describes this well-known argument as follows: "The Table of the Lord is His, not ours. He gave it to all those who are His, and we are not allowed to make any separation. When one of His sheep is attending the service, we have no right to refuse him. Then we would deny him something Christ *does* want to give him. In a letter of the Executive of the United Church of Christ in the U.S.A. we read: 'It is the Lord's table, not ours. We are not the hosts, but He is, and it is He who has invited us. Since he, our Lord, has invited us to sup with Him, we cannot presume to bar from his table for any reason those, who like ourselves, have accepted his invitation to attend.' In a supplemental statement the co-directors of the Council say: 'It is a serious offence against Christian fellowship, when a local Church refuses communion to someone who is not a member of the congregation or the denomination to which it belongs'.

The **second argument** is that participation in the Lord's supper is always a matter of a *personal* decision. Of course the minister has to warn that we may only come to the table in repentance and faith, but for the rest it is a matter of one's own conscience. Does not Paul say the same? To the Corinthians he writes; 'let a man prove himself' (1 Cor. 11:28). Each one has to prove (examine, RD) 'himself', but... not the other."

And finally, the **third argument**: "In actual practice the sinner, who has been warned, will not go to the Lord's table. Either he does not want to do it, because he is not interested at all, or he does not dare to go because he knows that he is unworthy and therefore will eat and drink judgement unto himself".

Dr. Runia notes that the first thing that strikes one in examining these three main arguments is that no specific texts are mentioned (apart from 1 Cor. 11:28). He writes: "This is no wonder, for the Bible does not deal with this whole problem. The Bible cannot deal with it, because this problem arose in the course of the history of the Church... The fact, however, that there are no special decisive texts in the Bible does not make the problem insoluble. We only have to follow a different line. I mean this: we have to listen carefully to the *total* message of the Bible and test the various views by this *total* message. What is then the result?"

### **THREE SPECIFIC RESPONSES**

Dr. Runia begins his "total message of the Bible" response to the previously mentioned arguments by first addressing the **third or last argument**, and we quote:

"Is it true that an unrepentant sinner will stay away from the Lord's table of his own free will? I am afraid that this argument results from an underestimation of sin. It does not sufficiently take into consideration that there can also be a hardening of the heart of the sinner. Every minister can easily demonstrate from his experiences that too often sinners go to the table, while they themselves know that they ought not to go. I remember a case in one of my congregations. A man had committed a serious crime. Only after two years he came to me, his minister, to confess his crime. But this same man, though he knew that he was guilty, had during these two years always attended Church and participated in the Lord's Supper! Take further the situation in Corinth. There they even went to the table while some of them were drunk! (1 Cor 11:21).

From these both examples it is quite clear that to say: we need *not* be afraid that un-repenting sinner will go to the table, does not hold water. Someone who really knows something of the power of sin will not dare to say this.

But what then about the **second argument**, that the Lord's Supper is first of all a *personal* matter, a matter between the communicant member and his God? As such this is true of course. To partake in the Lord's Supper is a personal decision and responsibility. Hence the personal call of Paul: 'Let a man prove himself'. The believer himself indeed has the first responsibility.

But...does this imply that therefore there is no task for the congregation, and in particular for the session? (consistory, RD). Can the session wash its hands here and say with Pilate: We have nothing to do with this, it's up to you and to you alone?

If this were true, then the Lord's Supper would be THE great exception! For throughout the whole of the New Testament we hear the call to the office bearers to look after the flock. This actually is their main task, and this holds true of the ENTIRE life of the church. Would they then regarding the Lord's Supper *not* have a task? Would this actually not mean the *end* of all discipline?

Perhaps the answer is: But they do have a task with regard to the members of the congregation. If there are those among the members who lead an ungodly life, they certainly will have to be admonished and, if need be, barred from the sacraments. If this is so (and it is so according to the clear teaching of the Bible!) and yet one still wants to advocate 'open communion' then the result would be that some members would be barred, while non-members would have all the freedom they liked. In our opinion this is an untenable situation.

According to the Bible the office bearers, in particular the elders, do have a great responsibility. They are responsible first of all before God. But they are also responsible to the congregation. And from this responsibility the Lord's table is not excluded. On the contrary, it becomes effective in particular with regard to the Lord's table.

Finally there is yet the **first argument**. Has the Lord's Supper not been given by Christ to the Church as a whole? Is it not true that it is HIS and that it NEVER becomes OURS? Did He not intend it for all believers?

Again I will start with admitting that this in general is fully true. We too do believe in one, holy, catholic Church, the congregation of all believers, the body of Christ. And we also believe that the Lord Jesus has entrusted his sacraments, both baptism and the Lord's Supper, to his church. But... where is this one, holy catholic Church? Where do you find her? Where is her address? Is the Church AS A WHOLE not invisible to us? (3)

And yet I do know her, I do know her, namely in her manifestation in the LOCAL CHURCH. That is THE ADDRESS of Christ's Church: the *local* congregation. Please note, that I do not say our local Reformed Church is the *only* address. We are speaking generally. We have to acknowledge the fact, that there are more Churches than ours.

The address of Christ's Church is the *local* congregation. To make it more concrete: my own *local* church is the address where I find the Church of Christ. It is in the local church that I also find the sacraments, both baptism and the Lord's Supper and this Supper is given there to those who belong to this local Church, who are professing members of this Church, AND further to them, who are admitted as guests by this local church itself.

Do we not do the same in the case of BAPTISM? We do not baptize each child, that is presented do we? Holy baptism is for the children of believers only, is it not? Well, then the parents must be *known* as believers! Likewise the Lord's Supper is for BELIEVERS ONLY. Christ has ordained it for those who profess Him as their personal Saviour. But then again the session must *know* those who come to the table and must *know* that they are believers.

Of course, even then it is possible that unbelievers are among the believers, but hypocrites cannot be discerned by any session. We have to leave them to the personal judgement of the Lord. The session can only do the part allotted to it. It may only admit those whom it *knows* as believers. And from this it necessarily follows that it may *not* admit those whom it does not know at all!

This does not mean that the session therefore says: you are *not* believers. By no means! No judgement is made. The session only says: we do not *know* whether you are believers or not and therefore we are *not* allowed to admit you. THE great fundamental principle is: THE LORD'S SUPPER IS FOR THE BELIEVERS ONLY. And it is the task of the elders to see to it that this rule is followed. The church cannot

and may not shift the responsibility on to the communicant members themselves, but she has to guard that ‘the covenant of God is not profaned and His wrath kindled against the whole congregation’ (Lord’s Day 30).”

***SOME INTERIM CONCLUSIONS***

On the grounds as outlined in Dr. Runia’s response to the arguments of the “open communion” advocates, it is clear that “open communion” has to be rejected as contrary to the Scriptures. The common cliché, “it is the Lords table”, simply does not make the grade when it is used to rationalize the practice of “open” communion or, for that matter, “restricted communion in a narrow sense”. (more about that next time, RD) It is therefore difficult to understand how it is possible that ministers from Reformed churches, also from the CanRC, make use of some of these very same mundane, misleading and spurious arguments to give support to the practice of admitting members from a variety of “other” federations and/or denominations as guests or visitors to the Lord’s table. (4)

In conclusion, one final quote from Dr. Runia’s article: “The idea of ‘open communion’ is also fatal to a proper understanding of the doctrine of the church. It blurs out all lines of demarcation. It gives the impression: It does not matter to which church you belong. It is not even necessary to belong to any Church at all. You can still partake of the Lord’s supper...” This astute observation leads us to the planned discussion regarding the important relationship between understanding the doctrine of the church and the crucial question concerning who may participate in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper”. (to be continued)

Ron Dykstra

1) 2) *Is “Open Communion” Right*, Dr. Klaas Runia, Trowel and Sword, October 1982. First appeared in Trowel and Sword in 1959. The extensive quotation from this article has been minimally edited. Some emphasis using italics added.

3) More about the use of the word “invisible” in a future editorial. In this issue of Reformed Polemics see “The Pluriformity of the Church” by Rev. J.Ludwig.

4) see: *Visitors at the Lord’s Table*, Clarion, Year-end 1996, and *Access to the Table*, Clarion, Year-end 1998. Also, *Readers Respond*, Christian Renewal, Jan 24/94, Feb 21/94, March 21/94.

## “The Pluriformity of the Church”

### Dr. Abraham Kuyper

One of the most ardent advocates of the pluriformity of the church was Dr. Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920). What this Dutch theologian and statesman taught and promoted is more commonly known in North America as denominationalism. Kuyper explained that the one, holy, catholic Church of Christ exists in pluri (many) forms despite manifest differences in doctrine and practice. He used the analogy of a flower with many petals. Each of the petals represents a different church or federation of churches. To illustrate that with examples from this continent, one petal would represent the Free Reformed Churches, another the Canadian/American Reformed Churches, the Protestant Reformed Churches, the Netherlands Reformed Congregations, the Reformed Church of America, the Reformed Church of the United States, L'Eglise Reformee du Quebec, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, and so on. Collectively all these churches form or constitute the catholic Church, the assembly of the redeemed. Kuyper's teaching about the pluriformity of the church arose out of what he observed on the ecclesiastical front in his day. Instead of one National or State Church per country, there was a proliferation of churches, distinct and independent from one another. This appealed to Kuyper since, among other reasons, it enabled him to garner votes from a much broader membership basis for the Anti-Revolutionary Party, a political party of which he became the leader. Kuyper's teaching about the pluriformity of the church was not only moulded by the situation of his time, it was also an extension of the many distinctions that he so fondly and frequently made about the church. He distinguished, for example, between the church as institute and organism, the church as militant and triumphant, the church as visible and invisible, the well-being and the essence of the church.

### *Visible-Invisible*

Not all these distinctions originated with Kuyper. Some of them date back to the Reformation and perhaps even earlier. Limiting ourselves to the visible-invisible distinction, we read in Book IV.1.7 of Calvin's *Institutes*, "...the word 'Church' is used in the sacred Scriptures in two senses. Sometimes...it comprehends all the elect who have lived from the beginning of the world. But the word 'Church' is frequently used to designate the whole multitude, dispersed all over the world, who profess to worship one God and Jesus Christ....As it is necessary, therefore, to believe that Church, which is *invisible* to us, and known to God alone, so this church which is *visible* to men, we are commanded to honour, and to maintain communion with it."<sup>1</sup> Calvin's influence is apparent in the Westminster Confession (1647): "The catholic or universal church, which is *invisible*, consists of the whole number of the elect....The *visible* church which is also catholic or universal under the gospel...consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion...."<sup>2</sup> In both *The Institutes* and *The Westminster Confession* the terms visible and invisible are not used to describe two different churches but one and the same church. The visible, instituted church with her offices, sacraments, preaching

---

<sup>1</sup>J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Translated by John Allen. Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education.

<sup>2</sup>*The Westminster Standards*. Philadelphia: Great Commission Publications.

and discipline has certain invisible aspects. One of those aspects is that we do not know who all the members of God's church are. Only God knows as Calvin explained, "But because a small and contemptible number is concealed among a vast multitude, and a few grains of wheat are covered with a heap of chaff, we must leave to God alone the knowledge of his Church whose foundation is his secret election" (IV.1.ii). Calvin found the Scriptural support for this in the words of Paul from 2 Timothy 2:19, "The Lord knows those who are His." In *The Institutes* and *The Westminster Confession*, then, the invisible church is nothing other than the visible church *as seen by God*.

Over time, however, the terms visible and invisible came to be applied to two different churches. The invisible church was regarded as a great over-arching structure under which all the elect were included. Membership in the invisible church was deemed crucial which, in turn, resulted in less care and concern about what visible church you attended. You find such reasoning, for example, in John Owen's *A Discourse Concerning Evangelical Love, Church Peace and Unity* (1672). He identifies "the catholic church which we profess and believe" with the "mystical" and "absolutely invisible church." Outside of the invisible church there is no salvation. According to him, someone could even separate from a true church and still be saved because the unity of the Spirit is ultimately found in the invisible church.<sup>3</sup>

Although Kuyper did not view the *ecclesia visibilis* as an entity separate from the *ecclesia invisibilis*, he did maintain the distinction. In his *Dictaten Dogmatiek* he argued that just as man is body and soul, and the substance of man lies in his soul not his body, so the church has, as it were a soul and body. The body, the outward visible form of the church, serves as a vehicle for the soul, the invisible spiritual substance which he further defined as election, regeneration, faith and sanctification.<sup>4</sup> What Kuyper did was take a Greek dichotomy with respect to the nature of man and apply it to the church. Now is not the occasion to examine the dualistic view of man's soul as substance (essentie) and his body as vehicle (voertuig), but it is not difficult to see how such reasoning provided some impetus and justification for his theory of the pluriformity of the church. If election and faith belong to the essence (wezen) of the church, and if that is stressed at the expense of the institutionalized form of the church, then it is only a small step to argue that the Church may be represented to a greater or lesser degree in all kinds of different churches as long as they contain people who believe in Christ.

### **Dr. K. Schilder**

Dr. K. Schilder (1890-1952) exerted much energy in refuting the error in Kuyper's theory of pluriformity. Since it was, to a large extent, based on a misunderstanding of the distinction between invisible and visible church, Schilder attempted to show that the distinction itself was untenable and ought to be rejected. In his "Theses Concerning the Church" (1935)<sup>5</sup> he asserted that the concept "invisible" is determined by "visible." Since *the* church is not yet visible that is, at the point where we can see all the elect gathered into its fold, there is no reason to speak about an invisible church either. We can only see parts of the church and its affairs as they are conducted here on earth. Instead, we need to take our starting point in the present work of

---

<sup>3</sup>J.Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, Vol XV, 78-83.

<sup>4</sup>See his *Dictaten Dogmatiek* Vol. IV, "Locus De Ecclesia", 56-57.

<sup>5</sup>Translated by Dr. J.Faber in *The Canadian Reformed Magazine* Vol..XXI, no.17 (Aug.19, 1972), 1-3.

Christ who is still gathering His church out of the whole human race. Whether you accept Schilder's rationale for discarding the entire distinction or not, at the very least it must be acknowledged that the distinction visible-invisible church is weak, not found in Scripture, and tends to detract from and undermine what Scripture calls the temple of the Holy Spirit, the body of Christ, and the household of God. The distinction, not as Calvin explained it but as it developed subsequently, had "as result that whole groups of sectarian origin and practice were still seen as 'true churches,' for the simple reason that they did, after all, expect from their members that which is 'invisible' (faith)."<sup>6</sup>

This same observation was made by the Committee for Contact with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) in its "Evaluation of Divergencies" to General Synod 1986: "Our Deputies have rightly warned against a *polarization* of the visible and invisible Church. It results in a low esteem for what is called the visible Church, a weakening of Church-consciousness, a lack of understanding of the seriousness of the calling to separate from the false Church, and the rise of the 'theologoumenon' of the pluriformity of the Church which is neither taught by the Scriptures nor by the Reformed Confessions and which proved to be an undermining factor in the fight against the sins of the Church and for the Reformation of the Church."<sup>7</sup> A clear warning of the consequences of practising pluriformity!

### ***We believe***

Unlike Kuyper who let his teaching on the church be influenced to a certain degree by what he saw, Schilder emphasized that everything about the church must be derived from Holy Scripture, "That there is a church, one cannot see but *only believe*. Every attempt to determine the 'essence' of the church (supposing that it is possible to speak of such an essence) on the basis of what one observes here in this world, or on the basis of axioms other than those which Scripture has *revealed*, is therefore a work of unbelief..." (Thesis 1) Here Schilder is following the creeds (Apostles' and Nicene) and confession (Belgic Confession, Article 27-29) which introduces the Scriptural summary about the church with the words "I/We believe." In other words, we do not let our doctrine of the church be formulated by the circumstances in which we live. The vast number of churches around us - Lutheran, Reformed, Presbyterian, Baptist - is not determinative, but the doctrine of the Word of God as summarized in the confessions.

### **More or less pure churches**

The theory of the pluriformity of the church proceeds from the premise that various Reformed churches, differing in either doctrine or polity, must be regarded as more or less pure. The proponents of this theory are not referring to churches within a single federation. If that were the case, we could readily agree with them. Within the Canadian/American Reformed Churches, for example, there could very well be some churches less pure than others "according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them" - to quote Article 25 of the Westminster Confession. That reality is revealed to us in the opening chapters of Revelation about the seven churches of Asia Minor. They were not all the same in their love for the Lord, their faith in Christ, their

---

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, Thesis XVI.

<sup>7</sup>*Acts of General Synod Burlington, ON 1986. Appendix II B, 144.*

obedience to His Word. To the church at Ephesus the ascended Christ gave this message, “Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love....Repent and do the things you did at first.” That is quite different from what Christ had John write to the church at Philadelphia: “I know you have little strength, yet you have kept my word, and have not denied my name.”

The advocates of pluriformity, however, are referring to churches that have conflicting doctrines. Let me illustrate that with an example. In unity talks with council members of United Reformed Churches (URCs) it has become evident that this Kuypertian mind-set is still quite prevalent. Some refuse to acknowledge that the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) from which they seceded is a false church according to Article 29 of the Belgic Confession. It is not as if they are unaware of the deformation in that church. On the contrary, they accurately and confidently explain the errors and abuses of the CRC: the ordination of women, a denial of the historicity of Genesis 1-11, unbiblical distinctions with respect to the sin of homosexuality, liturgical deformation resulting in altar calls, drama and dance as part of the worship service. In all these and more, they correctly point out that the CRC ascribed more authority to itself than to the Word of God. Is that not clearly a mark of the “false church?”

Yet not all URC members are prepared to use that confessional term. For some it comes across as arrogant and self-righteous and for that reason to be shunned. What sense does it make to label the church from which you seceded false? Will that not lead to even further alienation and hard feelings? For most, though, the hesitancy or refusal to use the language of Article 29 is due, I think, to the influence of the pluriformity of the church. The CRC, in their estimation, is not false but less pure or less faithful than the United Reformed Churches. By implication, however, if the CRC is *less* pure, it is not *impure*. If it is *less* faithful, it is not *unfaithful*, and that being the case no one had the right to withdraw from the CRC. The concept of the pluriformity of the church robs faithful members of the *legitimacy* of any true reformation and return to the Word of God, the confessions and church order, or as Article 28 puts it, “...it is the duty of all believers according to the Word of God, to separate from those who do not belong to the church....” At the same time it accords certain legitimacy to the sin of disunity. It empties Article 28 of the requirement that “all and everyone are obliged to join it [this holy assembly and congregation] and unite with it, maintaining the unity of the church.” For now there is another group of Reformed churches (URCs) existing alongside the mother church (CRC), a group that is merely *more* pure.

In the pluriformity scheme of things it would be difficult, if not impossible, to admonish a member who wanted his membership transferred back to the CRC or to discipline a URC member who for familial reasons worshipped every other Sunday in the CRC, a church that very blatantly “assigns more authority to itself and its ordinances than to the Word of God” and that “does not want to submit itself to the yoke of Christ.” Such a member, according to Article 28, would be acting “contrary to the ordinance of God.” Pluriformity paralyzes the church so that she cannot faithfully exercise discipline for the correcting and punishing of sins, in this context, sin against the fourth commandment which Lord’s day 38 explains as “diligently attending *the church of God* to hear God’s Word, to use the sacraments....” Instead of using the vague and subjective terminology “more or less pure churches” we need to understand and apply, to ourselves first and then to others, the confessional terminology “true or false church.”

### ***A true church in a false federation?***

The counter-argument has been raised, “But what if that particular CRC is a faithful one? Perhaps it is one that still maintains the pure preaching of the gospel, the pure administration of the sacraments and the

loving exercise of church discipline? Certainly, an exception must be made for a true church within a false federation?" That argumentation is not new. It surfaced in the Netherlands between members of the Secession churches (1834) and the Doleantie churches (1886). There were concerned members of the Hervormde Kerk who argued that synods could be classified as a non-essential element of the church. It was wrong and deplorable if a synod became hierarchical and made extra-Scriptural pronouncements binding upon the members, but as long as a local congregation could still retain the essential elements of the church - preaching sacraments, discipline - it could in good conscience continue within that federation.. Those from the Secessionist churches, however, had an eye for the unity amongst local churches. Belonging to a federation brings with it responsibilities toward the other churches. The principle of the communion of saints within a local congregation (cf. LD 21, Q&A 55), also applies to a group of churches that have voluntarily bound themselves together in a federation with a mutually agreed upon church order. The gifts and talents God has given us must also be used for the advantage and salvation of brothers and sisters in churches who together with us are represented at the same classes, regional synods, and General Synods. If a sister church is accepting and implementing a false teaching promulgated by synod, then we are duty-bound to help that church remain on the path of truth and hold fast the faith once delivered to the saints. We are touching here on the issue of corporate or communal responsibility. No church within a federation can say, "We don't agree with what synod is doing, but at least here in our small corner we are striving to regulate things according to the Word of God." Because we are part of the federation we are accountable for what is being decided by the broader assemblies. It is impossible to be "on your own." There is always interaction with other churches. For example, a member of church A might request her attestation to church B because in that church they have accepted a synodical decision that women may be ordained to the office of elder. The consistory of Church A will have to, albeit reluctantly, grant the woman a clean attestation, but in so doing they allow her to deviate from what God reveals about the offices of the church in His Word. Besides that, Paul warns that a "little yeast works through the whole batch of dough" (1 Cor. 5:6). Elsewhere he writes that false teaching will "spread like gangrene" (2 Tim.2:17), and everyone knows that if gangrene is not treated or cut out, it eventually spreads through the whole body and is fatal. If sins, be it in doctrine or conduct, are not dealt with the whole congregation eventually becomes infected. The same applies to a federation of churches. No one may hide their obligation behind the statement, "Yes, but we're a true congregation in a false federation." If the federation steadfastly refuses to heed the call to repent, then God Himself declares, "Come out of her, my people, so that you do not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues..." (Rev.18:4)

### ***One Body***

Someone who holds to the theory of pluriformity might genuinely complain that the church of Christ has splintered into so many "denominations," but his hands are tied. His understanding of the church prevents him from seriously maintaining and seeking the unity of Christ's church. We confess with the words of the Nicene Creed, "We believe ONE...church." And that oneness is written all over the pages of Holy Writ. Paul writes, "There is one body and one Spirit - just as you were called to one hope, when you were called - one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph.4:3,4) There are many others places in which the church is described as "one body." We are all "baptized by one Spirit into one body" (1 Cor.12:13). That's why Paul exhorts in another place, "...agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you" (1 Cor.1:10). Since Christ is not divided his body also may not be divided.

### *Proper Pluriformity*

Dr. K. Schilder taught that we should not use the term “pluriformity” to describe churches that have contradictory doctrines. That situation reveals a “plurality” of churches. Baptist churches, for example, in their rejection of infant baptism, together with the Arminian underpinnings of that rejection, are not a true church since one of the marks of a true church is that it “maintains the pure administration of the sacraments a Christ has instituted them.” This, of course, entails no judgment upon the members of a Baptist church as to their eternal condemnation or salvation. God knows those who are His...also those within a Baptist church. We have no business and no ability, for that matter, to act as if we can view the church from God’s vantage point. “The secret things belong to the Lord, our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law” (Dt.29: 29). As individual and communal temples of the Holy Spirit we must live by the Word of the Spirit. And we believe that the whole manner of worship which God requires of us is written in it at length, also the worship that we render to Him as the Bride of His beloved Son.

If we are going to use the word “pluriform” we should use it to describe churches that govern themselves “according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it” (Art.29), churches that are “joined and united with heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith” (Art.27). Pluriformity, then, manifests itself in minor points of church order and ecclesiastical practice: one church in the federation of Can/Am Reformed Churches has the collection in the middle of the service while another has it towards the end; one meets at 9:30am and 2:30pm while another hold services at 11:00 am and 6:00pm; one quotes the summary of the law from Matthew 22 after the reading of the ten commandments while another quotes from James 2. Those are all evidences of a healthy pluriformity. But if one of those churches decides to replace the collection with liturgical dance, meet once instead of twice per Sunday, substitute a text about God’s love for the reading of the law, then it is has become a church that lives in conflict with the Word of God and the Church Order. Out of love for that congregation, the federation will rebuke, admonish and exhort her, applying on a federational level the apostolic word, “My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth, and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins” (James 5:19, 20).

Rev. J. Ludwig  
Grand Rapids, Mich.

## Evangelism as Reform

By W.L. Bredenhof

One of the pioneer ministers in the Canadian Reformed churches is reputed to have said at some point that caution should be taken when there is excessive excitement over evangelism and outreach, for usually this means the church is declining in faithfulness. I'm not sure what led this minister (long since departed to be with the Lord) to say that, but I confess some ambivalence about the statement.

On the one hand, it often seems to be true. When we see young people excited about evangelism, usually their zeal for Reformed faith and practice does not match their zeal for "saving souls." On the other hand, we do see some who are zealous for both. So, there is not a necessary and direct correlation between evangelistic zeal and deformation in the church. However, oftentimes there is and it is that connection that I would like to explore briefly in this article.

It is no secret that a good number of people in the Canadian Reformed churches are unhappy with the manner in which we worship. Most of these are young people, though some are young at heart. Most of the time, the criticisms are not expressed in print, for many of these people do not read *Clarion* or *Reformed Polemics* (hence, this article too will likely not reach them). Occasionally, should a positive article about our Book of Praise appear, there will be a murmur or two to the editor about the quality of the Genevan tunes. These murmurs seem to be indicative of a louder din playing below the surface. Those who are dissatisfied with the current worship practices of the Canadian Reformed churches are not apt to express their dissatisfaction by means of the printed word. But, on the other hand, they are eager to bring about change. In their minds, there is a need for "Reformation" in the Canadian Reformed churches. Several years ago, Isaac Smit was one of these voices "Praying for Rain" (the title of his 1998 book) and he still has his sympathizers.

### *Reformation – but how?*

But how can the much needed "Reformation" be brought about when ecclesiastical power is in the hands of the office bearers who are less likely to be "Reform"-minded? That's where evangelism seems to come into the picture. To some it may appear as the best way to introduce a good number of so-called reformatory influences into the Canadian Reformed churches. At this point we have to be careful, because this way of thinking and working may not always be well-thought out. The "reformatory" use of evangelism may be a side benefit, but it is most likely not the over-arching motivation for most people's involvement in outreach. Charity requires us to assume that these brothers and sisters are first of all eager to reach out to the lost with the good news of our Saviour. That is not a bad thing! Nevertheless, the desire is often there to bring about change in our worship, especially amongst younger people.

Those who participate in various evangelistic activities are generally loathed to incorporate our Book of Praise in the always-necessary singing. Nobody knows the songs from our Book of Praise and they are low on the excitement scale. Besides, they will argue, the Bible tells us in Ephesians 5 (and Colossians 3) to sing also "spiritual songs," and there are no such things in our

Book of Praise. So, in a way, these evangelistic activities and the associated singing are making up for the perceived lack in our Book of Praise (and our worship services).

In some instances, this may be taken further. Some of our churches have been involved with evangelistic efforts along the lines of church planting. In these instances, singing and styles of music which were foreign to our Reformed heritage were introduced at some point. The Book of Praise (especially the psalms!) gets shoved to the side in favour of evangelical songs of various sorts, including so-called praise and worship songs. When this is done in church planting efforts, one wonders what kind of Reformed churches are being planted. Are these going to be Reformed churches holding to the Reformed faith?

Now, one could argue that evangelistic activities are not worship services and hence do not fall under the agreed stipulations of the Church Order (esp. Art.55). So, the argument goes, we are free to sing whatever songs we want when we do evangelism. But is this really in line with the *spirit* of the Church Order, especially if we see evangelism in its proper connection with the church? And what of these evangelistic efforts where we have an established church as the goal – are we preparing such a congregation for life within the federation when we encourage the baby gathering to sing songs of questionable character and background? Are we encouraging them to develop Reformed character? The patterns that are set in the early days of a church plant are often hard to break in later years.

For the sake of argument, let's grant that Ephesians 5:19 (and Col. 3:16) speaks of spiritual songs as something separate from the Psalms. One traditional Reformed interpretation argues that psalms, hymns and songs all refer to the Psalms and I personally find this convincing – but for the sake of argument let's grant that our Book of Praise needs a change to fit the tenor of Scripture. What is the proper way to seek that change?

### ***Reformation Proper***

The proper way is the ecclesiastical way that we have agreed upon. One can make submissions to the Committee for the Book of Praise. One can write to his Church Council and to the other ecclesiastical assemblies. The problem is that *this* takes work. It takes diligent effort and there is no guarantee that change will take place. Change is easier to bring about through the back door. The problem is that *this* is revolutionary and displeasing to the Lord. Unfortunately, our human nature prefers revolution and ease as opposed to faithful and hard.

Now, I suppose that many readers of *Reformed Polemics* will probably agree with this assessment of the situation. The question is: what can we do about it? First of all, as brothers and sisters in the Lord we need to give proper attention to mutual discipline administered with great wisdom. When we see younger brothers and sisters with intense zeal for evangelism, we have to be careful that we do not crush their zeal – for in itself such zeal is admirable. On the other hand, we have to be zealous ourselves to persuade them that there are right and wrong ways to pursue such zeal. We may also tenderly probe their motivations for being so zealous and if they are in any way dissatisfied with the practice of our churches, they need to be gently reminded of the proper way to address their dissatisfaction.

Second, the office bearers have a special task to oversee whatever evangelism is done by the congregation. This is not meddling. It is perfectly legitimate since the evangelistic task was given

to the church by our Lord Jesus Christ. The overseers have been made such by Jesus Christ. Hence, it is only right that office bearers have an eye for what is happening in the evangelistic efforts of the congregation. When office bearers see revolutionary worship practices (including foreign songs) being introduced, there should be a gentle but stout reminder that these things are not in keeping with sound Reformed teaching. Naturally, Scripture and the Confessions must serve as the basis for these reminders – a simple appeal to tradition will not suffice!

The Reformed faith and evangelistic zeal are not antithetical. We can have Canadian Reformed churches that are excited about evangelism without compromising their Reformed commitment. Evangelistic zeal has to be tempered with Reformed wisdom. Admittedly, that is difficult to achieve today. One challenge for us is to discern the spirit of the age in which we live. Another challenge is to look around us and fully realize that much of evangelical Christendom has sold out on the riches of the Reformation. They are not richer than we are. The challenge for Canadian Reformed churches today is to maintain Reformed character and a zeal for evangelism when many others *outside our churches* see those as antithetical. The question is: are we going to believe them?

## The Six Creation Days

When The Lord was going to lead Israel out of Egypt the Jews were going to experience something very unique, something that had never taken place before in all of human history, something that would never take place again after that.

In the desert, at Mount Sinai they also discovered that when the Lord spoke, He meant exactly what He said and said exactly what He meant. When He gave the Ten Commandments He said, "You shall not take the name of the Lord in vain". Look what happened to the Egyptian who did it anyway. It cost him his life (Lev. 24:10-23). The same thing happened to the man who picked up wood on the Sabbath. He also lost his life because of his action contrary to the Word of God (Num. 15:32-36 and Ex.35:1-3).

(1) When the Lord said in Ex. 20:11 that He had created the heaven and the earth in six days, He meant exactly what He said. The Jews understood these days to be six continuous time spans, each including one evening and one morning, what we today would call six spans of time of each 24 hours long. In the same way verse 9 was also understood by the Jews as six continuous time spans of twenty-four hours each. As they were wandering in the desert they understood they considered the six day time span to be, what we would today say 144 hours long, plus twenty four hours for the Sabbath. Since the giving of the law this truth about Ex.20:11 has stood for at least 5,000 years without ever anybody doubting it, or "knowing better". The text was simply accepted a fact.

(2) When the Lord gave the Ten Commandments He gave mostly short and to the point statements. Nothing was to be added or taken away. We could call these Ten Commandments, *ten absolutes*. That would then also count for the statement that He created the heavens and the earth in six days.

(3) The little word "for" at the beginning of verse 11 indicates that the Lord based the Sabbath absolute on the creation absolute.

(4) Another observation that should help us confirm the absoluteness of the six days of Creation is that of all the rules, laws, instructions and further commandments in the Torah only these ten have been written in stone by The Lord Himself with His own finger. Exodus 20:11 is part of one of these statements – never to be changed, modified, improved, detracted or altered!

(5) Very striking is also the fact that the Bible mentions seven times (the number of fullness!) that the Lord engraved the Ten Commandments in stone! See Exodus 24:12; Ex. 31:13; 32:15, 16; 34:1; 34:28; Deut.4:13 and 10:1-4. Also look at Matt. 5:13; Luke 16:17 and Psalm 119:152.

(6) The Lord begins His law with the carved-in-stone Ten Commandments. And consider also the introduction that comes before it - Ex.19:16-19. It serves as an underlining emphasis to the seriousness and absoluteness of what was to come - The Ten Commandments! After all these observations there is nothing left for today's "scientist's" hypothesis or theory with which he might pretend to know better than the Lord (1 Cor.1:19).

Hans Buma, Chilliwack.

## **News Items of Interest to Reformed Christians**

### **UN NOW PROJECTS DRASTIC POPULATION DECLINE**

United Nations demographers warn that the decline in fertility rate shows no indication of stopping at 2.1 - the replacement rate. According to a February report UN, the average fertility rate will decline to 1.85 - lower than the replacement rate - by 2050.

Thailand's fertility rate went from 5 in the 1970s to just fewer than 2 today. In Iran the rate fell from 6.5 children in the 1980s to 2.75. In the West the average is much lower with countries such as Italy currently at 1.2 children per woman.

+ The Sunday Times, New York Feb 2, 2003

### **Teens Sue School over Bible Club**

By LA MONICA EVERETT-HAYNES in the SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER Apr. 4

Two students who wanted to start a Bible club sued Kentridge High School yesterday contending that the school violated their freedom of speech and equal-access rights.

The students, Sarice Undis and Julianne Steward, say the school barred them from opening a non-denominational Truth Bible Club -- once in 2001 and again last year. Attorney Kyle Netterfield of Ellis, Li & McKinstry in Seattle filed the lawsuit in U.S. District Court in Seattle yesterday. Neither the high school's principal nor the attorney for the Kent School District could be reached for comment last night. District spokeswoman Becky Hanks said the district's attorney "will be reviewing this situation and taking appropriate action." Robert Tyler, an attorney with the Alliance Defense Fund, will lead the lawyers in representing the two young women. Undis is a senior, and Steward is a junior. The Alliance Defense Fund is an Arizona group that says it serves people of faith and, among other things, funds "the legal battle for religious liberty, sanctity of life and traditional family values." In a statement released last night,

Tyler said, "The Truth Bible Club is being censored because someone might be offended by its name." The statement also said the students' application to start the club was denied "partly because of the so-called 'separation of church and state.'" Larry Undis said his daughter was unavailable last night and that he did not want to speak about the lawsuit "because this thing is just getting started." Netterfield said the students just want to be heard. "Sarice and Julianne just want to try and reason with them, not to cause trouble," he said. "They just want to be treated like all the other students."

## **News Items from Churches in Ecclesiastical Fellowship**

### ***UNITED REFORMED CLASSIS SOUTHWEST US REPORT MARCH 2003***

Classis Southwest US held its 10th regular session 17-18 March 2003, at the Escondido United Reformed Church in Escondido, California. The main business of classis was the candidacy examination of Mr. Mark Stromberg, and the colloquium doctum of Rev. Gary Findley. Both men were examined in the areas prescribed by the Church Order and both sustained their examinations. Mr. Stromberg has been serving as stated supply and will be called by the newly formed Belgrade United Reformed Church of Belgrade, Montana. Rev. Findley, comes to us from the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, and will be called by the Covenant United Reformed Church of Fresno, California, to continue his work as a prison chaplain with the possibility of doing church planting in the future.

On Monday evening, classis took time to hear reports of what God is doing among the churches. Rev. Ben Wickner of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church brought greetings from that denomination as well as information on the newly forming Providence Christian College. Dr. R. Scott Clark shared with the delegates about the work going on at Westminster Seminary in California. Rev. Jay Fluck from the Western Classis of the Reformed Church in the United States brought greetings and words of encouragement. Mr. Barry Klaasse informed the court about the work of International Theological Education Ministries.

This fall, the delegates will conduct business in the northern-most church in the classis-the Grace United Reformed Church of Kennewick, Washington. That meeting is scheduled for 16-17 September 2003.

Rev. Bradd L. Nymeyer, Clerk of Classis Southwest US, Phoenix United Reformed Church, 2418 N. 127th Lane, Avondale, Arizona 85323