



The idea of a federation¹

Federation, not the only model

The model of a federation is not the only model worth considering. Church history tells of various attempts to find legitimate structures for church unity. Throughout history churches fragmented. At times they also sought one another again and discovered ways of acknowledging and becoming one with one another. Lutherans and Calvinists have gone their own separate pathways through history, but not without trying to find each other. They were successful for instance in the 1536 Concord of Wittenberg. However, this Concord did not bring about a unity within one federation of churches. Nevertheless it was significant in that it removed the sharpest contrasts and for some time made Christian contact possible among believers from among different federations of churches.

Ecclesiastical forms of unity

In Germany, America and in India there have been various movements of ecclesiastical alliances. There were attempts between denominations, that for decades had lived separately from one another, towards reunion with one another. Sometimes there was first a form of ecclesiastical *contact or correspondence*, a structure that we know in our own church order with regard to churches in foreign countries. The Christian Reformed Church in America makes use of the term *ecclesiastical fellowship*, which can have various forms or contents. It can be *ecclesiastical fellowship* in a broader but also in a more restricted form, depending on a variety of circumstances.

Another ecclesiastical form of unity is the *alliance* between evangelicals. We know of the alliance in the nineteenth century between well-known leaders of *Le Réveil*² and the Secession churches. It can also be applied to an alliance between churches, or federations of churches, in some form in order to promote closer contacts and unity.

Another form of unity is *inter-communion*, which arranges the possibility of admitting one another's church members to the Lord's Supper.

There are various possibilities, then, which deserve to be considered. Each may shed light upon a certain aspect of what it means to be a church. The question we wish to explore in this article is whether this can also be said with reference to the idea of a federation of churches.

Biblical?

When we turn to Scripture for forms of unity among the people of God, we notice that the unity of God's people is emphasized throughout the Old Testament. Israel is pictured as the people of God with whom He has made His covenant of grace. God's grace stands out in the way in which the covenant was established and experienced. We cannot think of God's covenant apart from the unity of the whole nation. A sense of the favour of the Lord was the secret of this unity. Whenever this sense of the Lord's favour was alive, then there was the experience of the fellowship that was there among the tribes of Israel. But whenever the experience of God's loving kindness waned, then the bond which held the tribes together also dwindled away.

God's people were one. They all went through the Red Sea. They all were nourished and refreshed by God's grace in the wilderness. They all crossed into the promised land through the Jordan river, at which point they also all passed by the ark of the covenant. Later on they found

their unity expressed in the one temple with the one sacrifice of atonement. Similarly, in the New Testament the unity of God's people is expressed in that one cross of Christ.

Diversity

We may, however, not think that this unity is the same as uniformity. Within the one nation there were twelve tribes. Each of those tribes held a separate inheritance. Each tribe had its own territory. Each tribe also had its own characteristics, as is evident already from the blessing with which Jacob blessed his sons before he died. We would detract from this diversity if we minimized it to some outward characteristics. The Old Testament Scriptures make clear that sometimes the peculiar characteristics of one certain tribe were so strong that the unity of the people suffered harm. Indeed, when the kingdom was divided, the brokenness of that peculiar identity of the tribes of Israel painfully came to light. The tribes even oppressed one another and at times battled against one another. In alliances with foreign nations they even turned against their own brothers.

But a true reformation always came about together with the confession of the one people and the one covenant of God. A moving illustration of this is provided in 1 Kings 18 where on Mount Carmel,

Elijah *"repaired the altar of the LORD that was broken down."*

(1 Kings 18:30)

The altar had been broken down by the schism among the people. It was *"repaired"* through Elijah repairing it with

"twelve stones according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob."

(1 Kings 18:31)

The whole nation was guilty. It lacked the fire that could purify. Elijah prayed for it from heaven and it came down from above on this repaired altar.

It is important to see that when the kingdom had been divided, God held on to the unity of the nation. Elijah did so too. There was a unity in diversity. It is possible to see this unity as a federation of twelve tribes around the one sacrifice of atonement. The word 'federation' reminds us of the Latin word for covenant, *foedus*, the covenant of God. It is a fitting word, for we cannot think of a federation of churches without the covenant of grace.

The new covenant

All this has not been done away with in the New Testament. The Christian churches formed themselves first in Jerusalem, in Samaria and from there on in continually wider circles around the promised land. The New Testament data make two things clear. First of all, there is a greater diversity. The churches in certain areas characterized themselves in such a way that it is impossible to say that there was uniformity. We disagree with the modern and the old Higher Criticism of Scripture which plays off the differences against each other in ways that give rise to contrasts between the so-called Pauline churches and Petrine churches, between the so-called Johannine churches and the churches that are pictured in the pastoral letters. This interpretation begins with a reconstructed oral tradition known to the authors of the New Testament writings which detracts from the unity of the Scriptures.

On the other hand, we also detract from the Scriptural data when we consider all those churches to be uniform. Scripture shows a great diversity in the walk of faith, in experience of faith, and sometimes — so it seems — in the way in which one articulated the content of faith. But that diversity was not considered to be a danger to the unity. When at times that danger did threaten, they assembled together, as for instance in the council at Jerusalem. There they assembled *"with one accord"* (Acts 15:25) and found the expression of the churches' unity in the guidance of the

Holy Spirit who caused them to say: *"It seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us"* (verse 28) to make the decisions that Acts 15 records.

Unity in the covenant

Perhaps in this case we are not ready to speak of a federation of churches in the early Christian churches. But clearly there was a unity which bound all those young churches together into a faith-fellowship that did allow for a diversity which did not break the unity. Schism was clearly rejected, particularly when it was raging within one congregation. At the same time the unity of the churches did not come into being at the expense of the freedom which they mutually guaranteed and respected in each other. They did not think that the Gospel was begun in one church and, therefore, that church became the final authority. Rather they believed that all of them together could give expression to the manifold wisdom and grace of God.

That's how Scripture in the Old and in the New Testament gives us a picture which makes us think of an alliance, a federation of churches, in which both elements were done justice to: unity in diversity and the other way around, diversity within unity.

A Reformational idea

The idea of a federation of churches was developed particularly in the days of the Reformation (sixteenth century). The church of Rome had brought itself into a *"Babylonian captivity."* Its structure was determined by the distinction between clergy and laity. But both groups, both the clergy and the laity as a whole, were brought into a position of subordination to the pope.

To be sure, the church of Rome was not totally unfamiliar with the idea of a synod. But the council (as the church of Rome calls a synod) was governed by the pope. Rome and Reformation clash particularly in their concept of the church. It is at this point that they departed from each other. Rome's massive, sacramental thinking stood over against the organized riches of the priesthood of all believers. True, the Reformation was not structured everywhere along the same lines. In the districts governed by Lutheranism, the churches were organized in a way in which the country's ruler kept great influence. He became some makeshift-bishop, who had to give leadership also to ecclesiastical life.

Development in Reformed districts

In the districts where Reformed Protestantism gained a firm footing, a different structure was developed. This was partly due to the situation in the areas where the Reformed were in the majority.

These were the Swiss cities which in a certain way carried over their democratic model of city-government to the church. But there also was a different factor which was decisive here, particularly through the Genevan sphere of influence, which insisted that the church needed its own spiritual rule which had to be derived from Scripture.

That's how the presbytery or council came into being, whose name and model were mainly determined by the elder. A church was considered to be church, only if a presbytery or council had been formed. Only then did one speak about an instituted church. The thought behind this was that the local church was entirely a reflection of the relationship between Christ and His church. Indeed, also the Calvinists knew that the church is much broader than this reflection in one local church, but they insisted that the essence of the church consists in the preaching of the Gospel.

Then in an area around a central place did they find a certain form of ecclesiastical unity. For instance, the church at Geneva did not only consist of the churches in the city itself, which had been divided into a number of parishes, but it also included the churches in its vicinity which had joined the Reformation. That's how the church at Basel did it, the church at Strasbourg, Bern and Zurich.

It should be mentioned that there were considerable differences between these centers of churches. There were liturgical differences, sometimes also confessional differences, at times also differences with regard to government. But among these centers of Reformed Reformation, there was a higher unity which was, however, not expressed within one federation of churches as such.

A federation of church federations

The idea of a church-federation was applied to the local situation, in which the surrounding country-churches were included. But these various centers of the Reformed Reformation felt a close bond to one another. They kept in contact by means of correspondence, by means of a personal delegation to one another's synods.

We may well think of these relationships in terms of a federation. They felt a close bond to one another, without detracting from the peculiar identity of the churches at Basel, Geneva, Bern, Zurich and Strasbourg. They sympathized with one another, but they also allowed one another freedom at various points, of which we today are inclined to say that they surely endangered the unity of the churches. These circumstances arose in regions where the magistrates had chosen for the Reformation. To a considerable extent they determined the peculiar character of the ecclesiastical situation in such regions.

Church federation in France

The development in France and in The Netherlands ran entirely differently. There the church encountered a government which opposed the Reformation as much as it could. In France the Huguenots had to defend themselves against all sorts of government regulations which put their faith-life under pressure.

Nevertheless, under the great influence of Calvin and after him Beza, there developed a flourishing church life. French Calvinism in the field of religion actively opposed the government. It was no wonder that these churches were looking for a form of organization which fitted their peculiar situation and time. They found it in the model of a presbyterial-synodical federation of the local churches.

This development in France was carried over from France to the Southern Netherlands. Also there the church organized itself after the French model. We find evidence of this in the first church orders which were drafted in the Southern areas and later also towards the Northern areas. Various factors played a role in the fact that the Reformed churches in the Netherlands chose this model.

Church federation in The Netherlands

There was a political factor. The Protestants in The Netherlands, in their battle against the Spanish governing authorities, oriented themselves to the Huguenots. The German Protestantism, to which Prince William of Orange felt attracted, did not appeal to them. Rather they felt attracted to the French Reformed model.

A second factor was the fact that church councils sometimes functioned as cells of resistance, along which church-life could develop itself, also when the Spanish governing authorities severely persecuted them. In that way they knew how to keep their heads above water. It is not surprising that these churches in a time of uncertainty, even when finally their freedom had come, did not give their 'autonomy' out of hands to a Reformed magistrate.

A further factor was the conviction, which gradually developed into a confession in accordance with the Word of God, that the church had to develop its own life. In such a development there must be room for a spiritual way of governing the church in accordance with and by means of the Word of God.

All these factors, together with other insights and developments, led to these churches organizing themselves as 'autonomous' local churches, in which the Word of God was proclaimed and the

sacraments were administered. That is where there was a true church, according to the Confession.

These churches met one another at ecclesiastical assemblies. Such a church-federation displayed itself as a coming together of federated churches which knew how to appreciate and safeguard their own 'autonomy.' No church shall lord it over another church. That was the rule that made a church-federation possible.

In this way these churches experienced their unity in a federation of churches. Moreover, the church which was structured in this way regarded itself as the reflection of the church of Christ in these lands, both at the local level and at the federative level. The Reformed Church in the Netherlands honoured both the 'autonomy' of the local church and the unity within the federation. That is in accordance with the Reformed confession as well as with the Reformed church order.

Was there ever one Reformed Church in The Netherlands?

But have the churches in the united provinces of The Netherlands ever known the full reality of having one Reformed church in the Netherlands? The answer must be negative, with one exception. At one time in history that unity came through, namely at the great Synod of Dort 1618/'19, where Reformed Protestantism in the Netherlands stood out amidst the European Reformed church life. It was at this synod also that a split came about within Reformed Protestantism. And it was, at the same time, this Synod which last demonstrated the unity of the Reformed churches in the Netherlands.

After that date, the government no longer gave permission to convene such an assembly. After 1618/'19 Reformed Protestantism in The Netherlands displayed its unity in the way of a federation of provincial churches. For that matter, church-life in the Netherlands from 1618/'19 till the 1830's, has been in some way a federation of provincial churches.

An article from Church Order

There is an article in our Church Order which spells out the possibility of giving expression to the unity of the church in special circumstances by means of correspondence. It is article 48 in the version spelled out by the synod of Dort (1618/'19). It reads as follows:

"Each synod shall be at liberty to request and have correspondence with its neighbouring synod or synods in such a form as it deems most profitable for mutual edification."

We know that the Reformed church in The Netherlands wished to manifest ecclesiastical unity by means of general synods. These general synods assembled through classes sending delegates to regional or provincial synods, which in turn sent delegates to the general or national synod. This basically is still the way in which general synods assemble in accordance with the Reformed Church Order.

Problems with the government

But what we take for granted in this regard was not allowed by the government in the sixteenth century. The synod of Middelburg decided in 1581 that such a general synod should be convened after three years. But the government disagreed. For fear of it being a threat to national unity, it delayed the next general synod till 1586.³ Again for fear of a general synod threatening national unity, the government delayed the convening of the next general (national) synod for 32 years,⁴ till 1618.⁵ After the general synod of 1618/'19, the government delayed the next general (national) synod for almost 200 years, right up to the year 1816. At various times and varied places the government interfered in ecclesiastical matters. Finally, in 1816 there was again a national synod. This synod, however, was not a general synod as called for by the Church Order of Dort. Instead, a governing board, appointed by the king, assembled. This took place after a royal decree was enacted on January 7/1816, which contained restrictions on the freedom of the Reformed church.

It was not until 1836 that a synod convened somewhat along the lines spelled out by the Church Order of Dort. This synod, however, was not of the Reformed State church but rather of the Secession churches. As to the Reformed State Church, for about 200 years provincial synods met with great regularity and carried on considerable correspondence with each other. By this means a remarkable unity was effected by the churches of the land.

Not an ideal unity between the provincial churches

It must be clear that this was not an ideal unity, for two reasons.

First of all, church life developed differently in the various provinces. For instance, in Zeeland, for a long time the government forbade the churches to convene in a provincial synod. They did assemble at classical meetings. Moreover, although the churches in Zeeland did send delegates from time to time to the other provinces for their provincial synods, not all "provinces" participated in this. The unity which was expressed in this way was therefore deficient. Furthermore, the *correspondence* that they as provincial synods carried on with each other was below par. It was not by way of letters but by way of deputies who only received permission to join in the various discussions but received no voting status. This may have been understandable, but it surely was not an ideal means to truly reflect the fellowship of the churches in The Netherlands.

In general this deficiency was acknowledged. Nevertheless, they made use of this relationship of correspondence to offer to the various provincial churches the possibility of arriving at a common church polity. There are noted cases which show that they did not abandon one another, but rather assisted one another, for instance in cases of doctrinal issues or in the phenomenon of the conventicles⁶ that the local churches were struggling with.

How to picture this

When we think of this situation, we may well use the term *federation* to indicate that they did strive for ecclesiastical unity under difficult circumstances. In this way they could consult with one another as to what to do with regard to issues such as Bible translation, Psalter version and also supervision of the synodical archives. Even though it was not the ideal means, the institute of *correspondence* in this period of church history turned out to function as a means to promote the unity of the churches.

Closer relations desirable

I wonder if this idea of *federation* could be helpful for the discussion with reference to seeking closer relations between churches of Reformed persuasion today. Ever since the Second World War, the synod of the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in The Netherlands has repeatedly urged the churches to prayerfully seek and set foot on the way of unity.

Here in North America I am thinking in terms of closer relations between the Canadian Reformed Churches, the Fellowship of Uniting Reformed Church, the Free Reformed Churches of N.A., and the Orthodox Christian Reformed Churches. In some areas there are steps being taken towards closer relations, such as in the Fraser Valley in B.C. and just south of the border in Washington.

Wait till every one shares this insight?

We may regret that it is not in every local or regional area of the above-mentioned churches that steps are being taken towards closer relations. Nevertheless for those who are taking such steps the question becomes urgent: How must we proceed? If we would have to wait with taking any further steps until every congregation and every region will take similar steps, then any steps taken now would be premature. But must we wait?

If the unity we seek is entirely in accordance with Scripture and the Reformed confessions and Church Order, then what is done in some regions can be of benefit to other regions.

However, if it turns out that among these above-mentioned churches there is a unity in Scripture, the Reformed confessions, and there is the conviction that Scripture calls for ecclesiastical unity, then there may still be a number of 'hurdles' in the way. Then we will need a great deal of patience, love and wisdom in order to clear those 'hurdles' in a Scriptural, confessional and church orderly way.

Following the example of the churches in the past

We saw that the unity of the Reformed Church in The Netherlands during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was a federative union of provincial churches. Certainly, it was not yet the highest ideal. Nevertheless they knew of the one church of Christ in those lands and confessed that unity. They recognized that through various political factors they could not attain to the highest ideal.

Could we today not follow them in this approach? May we in our current situation not think in terms of a federation of those church federations that have come to recognize one another around Scripture, Reformed confession and Church order? How about the idea of a federation of federations as a phase on the way to the unity of all who desire to be truly Reformed?⁷

The deputies for church unity of the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in the Netherlands in a report to the 1980 synod of those churches, urged some caution with reference to the idea of a federation of church federations. They alerted us to the danger of using this idea simply to express the desire not to let go of one another as Reformed church federations, and yet evade the demand to come to real unity. A federation of church federations is only acceptable as a step in a process of becoming one on the basis of recognizing and acknowledging one another as churches of Christ. Otherwise, we would simply institutionalize the idea of the pluriformity of church federations, a Kuyperian error.

Although the deputies of these churches considered the idea of federation of church federations acceptable only as a structure in which one aims at coming to unity in the long run, it is remarkable that the synod did not pick up this line of thinking. Nevertheless, the thought of a federation of church federations continues to come up in various discussions.

The question is: Can we in good conscience set foot on this way, as a possibility, not simply to experiment in this regard but rather as a Reformed way toward unity?

The Union of 1869⁸

A reference to the Union of 1869 can be helpful to illustrate the usefulness of a federation of church federations. It came about as a miracle that only few had dared to hope for. Many opposed the union of these Secession churches. But the union came about on the basis of simply accepting one another as churches of the Lord Jesus Christ and on the basis of Scripture and confession. More was not required, even though beforehand all sorts of demands had been placed from both sides on each other's table.

Even though on the level of synod it was called union, in many a local situation it was in essence a federation, for in some cities or towns there continued to be two local congregations for a long time, and locally, there was not a union but a federation. For instance in The Hague there was a Secession church and a "*congregation under the cross*." When in 1869 nationally the two federations of churches united, it took until 1892 before the union there was affected. A union therefore can take the form of a federation. It may take quite a while before such a federation becomes a union.

Why could we not make use of this model in today's situation?

If 1892 had been a federation, history would have run differently

One of our⁹ objections to the Union in 1892 was not to unity as such but to the time and the way in which the whole process was put into motion. Various developments took place, without properly acknowledging the role of the local congregations, as well as our strong disagreement with the teaching of Abraham Kuyper and others. We also objected to the 'haste' with which a merger was forced on congregations which before that time had existed alongside and even over against one another. I would defend the thesis that the Union in 1892 could have become a real success if it had been begun in the form of a federation. For that matter, the course of events after 1892 has confirmed the thesis that the Union in 1892 in fact was a federation. In various cities, towns and villages the A-and B-congregations for a long time continued to exist alongside each other until a natural course of events led to a merger of the two. The point I'm trying to make is that a federation instead of a Union in 1892 would have shed a different light upon all these things.

Federation as a step today to real unity of Reformed Churches

If church federations recognize one another as churches of the Lord Jesus Christ, have they then not already in fact confessed unity? Must they not then in accordance with what God's Word requires, continue to put it all into the hands of the Lord and do what can be done? Let us consider this idea of federation as a step towards real unity of the churches of the Reformed persuasion. I have been thinking in the first instance of the Canadian Reformed Churches, the Fellowship of Uniting Reformed Church, the Free Reformed Churches of N.A., and the Orthodox Christian Reformed Churches.

But our Reformed confession requires the unity of *"all those who love the appearing" of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

They all will receive a *"crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give them."*

(2 Timothy 4:8)

In striving for unity we must include other churches, such as for instance the Netherlands Reformed Congregations, who *"love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity"* (Ephesians 6:24) and who hold dear the Reformed confession.

We need to remember, as we strive for unity, that there is a great diversity. It is Reformed to state that the unity that Scripture calls for is a unity within diversity. It is Roman Catholic to think of unity in terms of uniformity. It is also a Lutheran aspiration to place everything under a unity-formula. At the same time we must acknowledge that the Reformed churches have not been very successful in forming unity while at the same time honouring diversity.

The point I am trying to make is that the whole idea of federation is open for looking beyond the churches we tend to look at. For this we need not merely a balanced approach but rather a striving for truth and uprightness. We also need to be careful and cautious as well as courageous and willing through God to rise to bold endeavour (cf. Psalm 60:12).

There needs to be activity at the local level and at the level of the federation of churches. At the latter level the churches, by way of delegates, need to form an ecclesiastical body to work through the various issues and concerns. It may be a long road to travel. But let us take the first steps. Calvin once remarked that for setting foot upon the path of obedience we do not need to be certain of success. Let us take those steps and labour while it is yet day, before the night comes when we cannot labour.

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¹ In the issues of *De Wekker*, March 31, April 7, 14, 21, 28, May 5, 12, 1995, Prof. Dr. W. van 't Spijker, professor in church history and church polity at the Theological University of the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in The Netherlands, wrote an article, entitled, "De idee van een federatie." Pastor L. W. Bilkes, with the approval of Prof. Dr. W. van 't Spijker, translated most of the first four of these, then reworked, in a very abridged form, the last three of these, accommodating them to the North American scene. Prof. Dr. J. DeJong in his article "Pursuing federative unity: obstacles, possibilities and strategies," in *Clarion*, Vol. 45, No. 17, makes reference to and evaluates aspects of Prof. Dr. W. van 't Spijker's article.

² An evangelical revival which began in French-speaking Switzerland in the early nineteenth century and spread to France and The Netherlands by 1825.

³ The Prince of Orange had been murdered at Delft on July 10, 1584. After a brief succession of others, the English Earl of Leicester served as the head of the government. Leicester appointed three representatives of the States as delegates to the synod. The rest of the delegates came from the eight provinces plus two delegates from the Walloon churches in The Netherlands. There were tensions at the synod resulting from differing views of church-state relationships.

⁴ During which years several regional synods were held.

⁵ It is remarkable that the States General did not approve the church order of Dort 1618-19.

⁶ "Conventicles" (house services instead of the church services). Many churches consisted of members who felt they could not sit under the liberal preaching in the State church in their town or city and, therefore, instead gathered together in 'conventicles,' whereby they naturally left themselves open to individualism and subjectivism.

⁷ If I am not mistaken, Dr. J. Visscher in his ARCH approach has something similar in mind. Over against the "immediate federation" approach of Prof. Dr. J. DeJong, he proposes an Association of Reformed Churches, with the purpose of promoting "good relations between the member churches" and "the unity of the member churches, and, should the Lord bless it, federative unity," "'That they may all be one': A modest proposal for the unity of the church," *Clarion*, Vol. 45, No. 18, pp. 393-396.

⁸ In 1838 in the Netherlands some congregations separated themselves from the Secession churches and formed the "congregations under the cross." In 1869 a partial reunion occurred. Those "congregations under the cross" which remained outside of this reunion later became the Netherlands Reformed congregations.

⁹ That is, the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in the Netherlands which did not join the Union in 1892.