



## Overcoming discord in the communion of saints

It is with some trepidation that I introduce this topic. For starters, home schooling stirs up strong emotions. Furthermore, what bias would you expect me, a teacher, to have on this issue? James, a servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ (1:1) warns that *“not many should even presume to be teachers. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check”* (3:1, 2). Identifying the corruption caused by the tongue, James stops to ask, *“Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom”* (3:13). I have much wisdom left to learn. I need God’s grace in Jesus Christ, by which we are declared righteous.

However, I should speak at an occasion such as this. I first observed the magnitude of the tensions around the rise of home schooling when preparing for a *Clarion* article about home schooling. To write this as a teacher, I believed, I should at least first listen to people involved in home schooling. I did, and found that the tension was too much and ran too deep for a single article. It was distressing to see such discord among God’s people. Does not the Form for the Lord’s Supper stress harmony, love, unity, and fellowship in words and in deeds? I ended up writing a M.Ed. thesis about the topic, and found that it was not a simple matter of whether home schooling was okay or not, but of a fundamental understanding of what is the communion of saints. I formulated the premise for my thesis as:

*It is more important for each member of the body of Christ to ‘show true thankfulness to God with his entire life and, laying aside all enmity, hatred, and envy, to live with his neighbour in true love and unity,’ than for all members to follow the same model for educating their children.*

This premise implies a challenge to the conception that the school equals the communion of saints. It implies a recognition that the institution we have designed and built with God’s help and blessing is not necessarily the only way in which we can help parents fulfil their baptismal vows. It does not deny that the school constitutes a significant, laudable, and necessary effort undertaken within the communion of saints. Schools are virtually indispensable to most people, and we should do everything we can to make them the best they can be. However, the exercise of the communion of saints is a scriptural principle, and therefore of a higher order and more important than the manner in which we apply it in our age and our culture. We must not make a human tradition, or our application of a principle, equal to God’s Word.

*Those who are of the church may be recognized by the marks of the Christians. They believe in Jesus Christ the only Saviour, flee from sin and pursue righteousness, love the true God and their neighbour without turning to the right or left, and crucify their flesh and its works. Although great weakness remains in them, they fight against it by the Spirit all the days of their life. They appeal constantly to the blood, suffering, death, and obedience of Jesus Christ, in whom they have forgiveness of their sins through faith in Him.*

Belgic Confession, Article 29

This premise may also be adapted to relate to other sources of discord within the church. The last clause, for instance, could be replaced by “than for all members to use the same Bible translation.” The communion of saints applies to much more than education, and discord arises around many issues. However, the dynamics, the sins, and the grief are similar. In this article I consider what James says about discord, the dynamics of disputes, the context and outcomes of my study, and the divisions in Corinth. Finally, I offer some thoughts that may help office bearers prevent or deal with disputes.

## James

James addresses a congregation that is not only scattered by persecution but in disarray because of an infiltration of earthly wisdom. It has replaced true heavenly wisdom by proud and devilish envy, by ambition, boasts, and denials of the truth. The result is disorder and every evil practice. Quite obviously, people don't love their neighbour as themselves. They claim faith, but their deeds don't show it (2:8, 14, 18; 3:14-16).

With deep pastoral concern for this congregation, James both chastises the people and points out the way to comfort and restoration. They must resist the devil: Wash your hands, you sinners! Purify your hearts, you double-minded! Grieve! Mourn! Wail! Change your laughter to mourning, and your joy to gloom. Your boasting is evil. (4:7-11, 16.) Your words, behaviour, and attitude are in opposition to the Holy Spirit. You oppose God, who opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble; who comes near to those who come near to Him; who is the Lord Almighty and decides the success of your plans. You should cry to God (like David did in Psalm 32) to receive heavenly wisdom, which is pure, peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial, and sincere. Such wisdom produces peacemakers who sow in peace and raise a harvest of righteousness (3:17-18). Indeed, *"Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins"* (5:20). Humble yourselves before the Lord, James says, and He will lift you up (4:10). When we read this let us do so as looking in a scriptural mirror, see ourselves, and also remain humble.

Paul addresses division among the Corinthians. Perfectly in line with Jesus' command to *"love each other as I have loved you"* (John 15:12), he shows that love is key to how gifts ought to be used for building up the body (1 Corinthians 12:31-14:1). To the Philippians he writes that peace with God, based on forgiven sins, passes all understanding (Philippians 4:7; see also Isaiah 44:21-22). It is God's gift of reconciliation in Jesus Christ which allows us to reconcile with others (2 Corinthians 5:18; Colossians 1:20 ff.; Matthew 5:24). It is not for lack of scriptural direction that we still have disputes.

## Dispute

Twenty-some years ago I inadvertently became privy to a dialogue between an elder and a much older and more vocal brother of his congregation.

Council had just published a decision about a piece of church property without explaining the reasons very well. The elder supported the decision, but the brother was not pleased. Slightly disturbed, and probably lacking some wisdom, he postulated that the decision lacked wisdom and foresight. The brother had a point, and felt rather certain of himself. (Perhaps he had found others who supported him: such coalitions improve our sense of security.) As the elder got trapped in the challenge, feeling that he had to defend Council's decision, he turned somewhat crimson. He also exhausted his arguments before the brother did. The elder then made a comment typical for escalating disputes: "I don't care what you think. I don't want to talk with you anymore," and walked away. Clearly, he momentarily lost sight of James' counsel that *"everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires"* (James 1:19).

By the grace of God the dispute between this elder and brother was settled before long, in keeping with Matthew 18 and Paul's command, *"In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold"* (Ephesians 4:26-27; see also Psalm 4:4). If I understand our depravity correctly, this outcome was the result of the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. If I understand James correctly, this will only happen when we, by the grace of God, cry to Him (see Canons of Dort, V).

Disputes keep popping up in our lives, about all sorts of topics, and they do not always end well. As they escalate tempers rise, files increase, original issues may be forgotten, and resolution is increasingly difficult (see Diagram). While a simple problem may be talked out, escalating conflicts often involve increasingly unsatisfying steps of negotiation, mediation, arbitration, or litigation to resolve. The dispute between the elder and the brother started with a basic question about the use

of some property, and might have been resolved with an additional clarification from Council. However, when it became a personal disagreement, misconceptions surfaced about roles and responsibilities. Soon it was a win-or-lose contest of arguments, which often involves personal charges and factual distortions. The elder lost, and walked away angrily. The conversation ended, but it was an escape, not a resolution of the dispute. Escape can take the form of flight, denial, or suicide (see Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker*, Baker, 1997). Sometimes people attack rather than escape: They resort to litigation, assault, or murder. Whether people escape or attack, the dispute reaches a stage of intractable escalation. It is shameful, Paul suggests in 1 Corinthians 6, that such should happen in the church.

Dynamics of Conflict and Principles of Christian Conciliation		
Escalating Conflict!	Common Intervention	Christian Conciliation
<div><div>Intractable</div><div>Attack/escape</div><div>Contest</div><div>Disagreement</div><div>Problem</div></div>	<div>Increasing discord!</div> <div>Murder/suicide</div> <div>Litigate/self-help</div> <div>Mediate/Arbitrate</div> <div>Communicate/negotiate/mediate</div> <div>Avoid/communicate</div>	<div>Discipline</div> <div><i>Glorify God</i> 1 Corinthians 10:31 <i>Get the log out of your own eye</i> Matthew 7:5 <i>Go and be reconciled</i> Matthew 5:24</div>
<div><i>Those who are of the church may be recognized by the marks of the Christians. They believe in Jesus Christ the only Saviour, flee from sin and pursue righteousness, love the true God and their neighbour without turning to the right or left, and crucify their flesh and its works. Although great weakness remains in them, they fight against it by the Spirit all the days of their life. They appeal constantly to the blood, suffering, death, and obedience of Jesus Christ, in whom they have forgiveness of their sins through faith in Him.</i></div> <div>Belgic Confession, Article 29</div>		

Much like Adam and Eve we are good at justifying our behaviour and at blaming others. This easily leads to more grievous error and sin. We entrench ourselves in our position. We lose all humility. Our complete love for and devotion to God and our love for others turns into devotion to the dispute. Wanting to resolve things ourselves, our way, we may even believe it is God's way. Inadvertently we no longer praise God in all our words and works. Our worship and prayers are hindered or distorted, and we do not rest from our evil works. We have no patience for office bearers, and slight their admonitions. We have negative feelings about our opponents, neglect their good, twist their words, condemn them without listening, and seek revenge (Romans 12:19). The fruit of the Spirit disappears (Galatians 5:22). Of the Ten Words of the Covenant we break virtually all, and commit the sins that would bar us from the Lord's table. The catechism rings true:

*"But are we so corrupt that we are totally unable to do any good and inclined to all evil? Yes, unless we are regenerated by the Spirit of God"*

(HC, Q/A 8)

The Lord's command to love Him with our whole heart, soul, strength, and mind, and our neighbour like ourselves, does not jive with the attitudes we easily assume in dispute escalation (see Matthew 5:21-26). Can one still duly examine himself when involved in a heated conflict, and can we defend admission to the Lord's table before parties are reconciled? Sande rightly calls for church discipline in an escalating dispute, and seeks Christian conciliation of the parties. He reminds combatants of the Lord's standards for resolving differences. Christian conciliation is based on four basic principles: glorify God (1 Corinthians 10:31); get the log out of your own eye (Matthew 7:5); go and show your brother his fault (Matthew 18:15); go and be reconciled (Matthew 5:24). By the grace of God and the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit a deadly dispute can turn to brotherly love (Titus 2:11-14).

Rather than be labouring personal conflict escalation, I turn now to group discord. Personal conflict takes on an additional dimension and dynamic when it involves groups of people. Such discord is also more difficult to resolve, if only because more people are involved. It is one thing to have one person repent and humble himself, but quite another to have a whole faction seek conciliation. I specifically studied discord around the rise of home schooling, and will now first present the context of my study: the effort of our communities to establish Reformed day schools.

## **Raising covenant children**

Parents are responsible for raising their children. That is natural, but also an explicit command in Deuteronomy 6 and 11, and in Paul's apostolic instruction about bringing up children (1 Timothy 5; Ephesians 6; Colossians 3). However, as I have elaborated in *Clarion* (Volume 54, Issue 13), raising children is also integrated in the covenant community. Deuteronomy 6 follows on the heels of the Ten Commandments; it decrees that the law which parents must teach their children must also be posted at the gates. Furthermore, there are public monuments, communal feasts, and even dress codes that support the parental tasks. Elders, priests, and Levites instruct; teaching fathers in Proverbs are not just biological dads; Elisha curses the youths of Bethel. The community may not be silent bystanders in bringing up the next generation, but must take roles of participation, modelling, and even correction and discipline. This would, quite naturally, be increasingly the case as the child grows older and becomes more socially involved.

In Bible times children received much of their education at home, while the community played a big role in their acculturation and socialization. In the New Testament, after the exile, some schooling was received in synagogue schools. However, there is no scriptural imperative to institute schools. Neither does Scripture condemn them. According to Scripture children must be raised by their parents in the fear of the Lord, in the context of an interested, supportive, involved, and responsible covenant community.

## **Day schools**

We established and maintained Reformed day schools. For a good part that goes back to the reformers. Luther implored the princes of Germany to take care of educating children, as parents were useless for this lofty task. Calvin held that all education must direct people, and must therefore also itself be directed, to God's honour. He saw an important role for the church in education, and acknowledged the government's interest. He also believed that schools must prepare students for both theological studies and for government office. The Great Synod of Dort (1618-1619) by-and-large accepted Calvin's ideas on education.

The Dutch did not accept Calvin's notion that a school teacher was an office bearer (Ephesians 4:11), but maintained that it was the government's responsibility to establish schools and the church's task to see to the teachers' soundness in conduct, doctrine, and curriculum. After the Secession of 1834 parents began to establish Christian schools because the public schools had become unchristian by definition; Synod Dordrecht (1893) urged the parents to also apply for government recognition of their schools. It was understood that schools are not extensions of the churches, but should be parental. Upon receiving full government recognition and funding, Synod Leeuwarden (1920) elaborated on this. It urged parents, as first responsible, to establish Christian schools, and suggested that the consistory oversee the school's scriptural and confessional

aspects using a locally designed mechanism. Article 58 of our Church Order (adopted at Synod Coaldale, 1983) reflects the notion that there should be unity of purpose in the triad of home, church, and school, and should not be misconstrued to suggest that these three are entities of equal origin or stature.

After the Reformation few people were as concerned with schooling as the Dutch. Other immigrants to North America did not hurry to establish schools. In Puritan settings, such as Dedham and Plymouth, Massachusetts, children were home schooled, participated in community activities, and were apprenticed to learn needed skills; but one of the first things Dutch pioneer Rev. A.C. Van Raalte thought of in 1847 was to establish a school in Michigan's wilderness. A few years after, in Ontario, the Methodist clergyman and later chief superintendent of education, A. Egerton Ryerson (1803-1882), pioneered to develop and establish a universal, compulsory, comprehensive, and publicly funded Protestant school system.

Ontario's public schools still had a Protestant flavour when our parents or grandparents came to Canada. However, as they had just painfully learned in the Liberation of 1944 that there could be no ecclesiastical unity even with other Reformed people, they realized that "religiously neutral" Protestant schools could not be good enough for covenant children. Raising the children of the covenant was a 24/7 kind of task, and devotions at the beginning and end of the day just didn't cut it. There must be full unity of purpose between home, church, and school. When the Ontario government's Mackay Committee began to formally secularize the public schools in 1969, our communities were establishing their own Reformed day schools.

It wasn't easy. There was no government funding and no full community support. Dads worked many hours, mothers were frugal beyond grasp to feed and clothe the children, and frustration and fatigue took their tolls; but the efforts bore fruit. The schools came: Burlington, 1962; Smithville, 1964; Fergus, 1967 (high school in 1977); Orangeville, 1967; Chatham and Hamilton, 1973; Guido de Brès Christian High, 1975; London, 1976; Woodbridge, 1979; Covenant Teachers' College, 1981; Millgrove, 1987; Owen Sound, 1994; and Attercliffe, 1995. The schools, though by no means perfect, were and continue to be an answer to many prayers; they filled, and still fill, a deep need. Our communities continue to thank God for Reformed day schools and work hard to make them the best they can be.

## **Community**

It was not just parents who established schools, but communities. Sure, there were dissenters and disagreements. There was no concord on what Reformed education was like, or how it was done. However, to those who did start a school, it was part of the call to be a covenant community. The Lord had given Himself to them and them to each other, as believers and members of Christ, in order that they might have communion with Him and share in his treasures and gifts, and further, in order that they would use their gifts readily and cheerfully for the benefit and well being of the other members. This tied them together in getting to church, catechism, societies, choir, church picnics, in building a church, filling offices, calling ministers, worship, and also in building a school. Their children grew up in a covenant community in which all were involved, as all belonged to Christ. It was a time in which Sundays were highlights, because they constituted communion with people who sought to serve God as they did, and who experienced the same hurdles of immigrant life. Sundays were the heart throb of being church.

Scripture depicts the church as the body of Christ. He is the Head, we are his members. The body has different parts, each with their own function: eyes, mouth, feet, etc. As a body, it also consists of cells – say, individuals. Cells work together to make tissues – say, families. Tissues work together to make organs – say, various groups or associations of church members. Organs work together to make organ systems. Organ systems work together to make the whole body work. The body's parts are intimately knit together, and interdependent. With David we are awed at how wonderfully God had knitted him together in his mother's womb (Psalm 139). Like that, God knits together the fabric of the body of Christ in the church. While not instituted by God, the school functions as one of the parts, as an organ that fulfils a specific role. Much like a men's or women's society, it is not itself the body or communion of the saints, but, as it aims to provide community

assistance to other tissues and organs, it is an active part of it. It does not replace the parents, and it also is not the only way in which the parents may receive help from the community. Yet the effort necessarily expended in the school is a weighty element in the fabric of the communion of saints.

There is some danger inherent in the commitments that communities make. An influential secular sociologist, Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), found that Australian aboriginal communities create their own religion, as well as moral and ethical standards. They do this to give their society the solidarity it needs to function. Since there is no higher authority from which to draw ultimate truth, their society decides what is acceptable. Durkheim applied this to Western society and declared that what society calls right is right. Note, however, that it is one's god who determines what is right. Thus, for all practical purposes, Durkheim concluded, society, or the state as its representative, is god (*Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, pp. 208-210). Of course, this is purely secular and horizontalist thinking that reckons not with God Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth. When people declare that God is dead, people seek something to replace Him with.

Let us be sure that we know God from Scripture. Through Christ we have a vertical connection and fellowship with Him. Through God's Word we also know right from wrong. Our solidarity and our fellowship, our communion, do not exist in manmade rules but in our common salvation in Christ. Yet, there is amongst us a struggle with these questions: may people withdraw from the Reformed day school? Should not all people support it? This generates a more profound query: is the commitment to build and maintain schools a principle that all must subscribe to? What about Christian liberty? Should we be looking for a balance (among others) between community and a lack of group cohesion (*Nederlands Dagblad*, April 18, 2005, *Kerken op zoek naar balans*)? Do we have to balance community commitment and individual freedom? I will briefly comment on what the Reverends Rutherford, Trigland, and Kloosterman say about this.

## **Christian liberty**

Samuel Rutherford was one of the Scottish Commissioners who helped draft the Westminster Confession of Faith in the 1640s. Earlier, he wrote a catechism, which speaks of Christian liberty as a fruit of justification (Cap 29). Christian liberty and justification are linked: our Catechism also notes that those who are grafted into Christ by faith produce fruits of thankfulness (HC 24, Q/A 64). The way in which God's people, justified and made righteous in Christ, are knitted together in love has much to do with how they ought to treat one another. In the common Scottish spelling,

Rutherford asks,

*Quherin standeth our Christian libertie? In that we are freed from the curse of the law and sinne, and from the commandementis of men and all ceremonies.*

*Quhat is our libertie in things indifferent? We may use them or not use them, providing we hurt not the conscience of other men.*

(Romans xiv 13; 1 Corinthians viii 13)

During the Arminian controversy of the early 1600s in The Netherlands, Rev. Jacobus Trigland granted that people can decide certain things for themselves, depending on their preferences. These are the indifferent things Rutherford speaks about. Indifferent must be understood here as not specifically prescribed by the Lord, not as being of absolutely no concern. Trigland continued, however, that for the sake of peace in the household of God *"we must at times let go of some of our preferences; but in God's matters this tolerating and letting go may not take place"* (*Rechtgematigde Christen*, p. 9).

Dr. Nelson Kloosterman connects this notion to what Scripture teaches about the "weak" and the "strong." The "strong" in the church should not claim greater liberty to do as they please than the "weak." Christian liberty should not lead to individualism and isolation, but rather spur people on to love their neighbour and do what is best for him or her. This is so because Christ has set us free to do good works. Good works, as the Heidelberg Catechism observes, are *"only those which are done out of true faith, in accordance with the law of God, and to his glory, and not those based on our own opinion or on precepts of men"* (HC 33, Q/A 91).

Communion with Christ (the first part of our confession about the communion of saints) results in fellowship with and good works towards the neighbour. The purpose of Christian love and liberty is the edification of the church and its individual members, in order that in Christ *“the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love”* (Ephesians 4:16). We no longer seek our own good in the first place, but that of others, for God’s sake.

## **Community shift**

Communities, including our own, reflect what happens in the world around them. There is a shift towards individualism in our society. Sociologists identify this as a move from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* types of communities. In the 1950s and 1960s our own communities could be characterized as *Gemeinschaft*: people lived together and depended on each other; they were united in spite of all separating factors. There were Frysians, Grunningers, and Hollanders, but they piled together in the same truck to get to church; they were bonded together in the blood and Spirit of Christ. As people became more independent, however, they began to make choices about where they would rely on and be present for the others, and where not. Instead of car pooling, each now took their own car. They became more separated in spite of the uniting factors. They began to show *Gesellschaft* characteristics, in which people only associate with like-minded others, or if there is some benefit to be had. This is happening, and, in the secular mind, it generates a dilemma that is defined as seeking a delicate balance between individual freedom and community interests.

In the context of what I said about Durkheim, and society being god, I note that there are human commandments and ceremonies about which Scripture is indifferent. Our Church Order (Art 50) also acknowledges this. Secular authors cannot make that distinction, simply because they know no higher authority than man. This leads to the majority determining what is right and wrong, what is morally acceptable and what is not, and imposing its human opinion and its manmade principles on the minority. Moderates may propose a great deal of tolerance, but in the end it leaves little room for God’s truth. Canada’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms constitutes the ultimate standard, and has been interpreted and applied to justify increasingly flagrant departures from the divine standard on which the country was founded. Without recognizing God’s higher authority, that is all they can devise.

To look back at our Canadian Reformed community now, what are we doing differently if we raise indifferent things to principles? I submit that we may set a social norm or a longstanding tradition as a preference, and agree to abide by it, that we may even commit ourselves to do so; but that we may not make ourselves a durkheimian god which everyone is forced to follow. In that vein, in 1944, we rejected being bound to a particular interpretation of covenant and election.

The rise of home schooling in our society may be understood in part by the societal shift in which people seek to do their own thing, with or without likeminded others. That, however, is certainly a much too general notion to help understand the discord in our own communities. I must now elaborate on the rise of home schooling and the associated discord, as it challenges our tradition and as it generates need to revisit the reasons for having our own schools.

## **Rise of home schooling**

At the time that our parents established Reformed schools, John Holt and Ivan Illich introduced de-schooling as an alternative to the failing American public schools. Philosophically distinct, both de-schoolers and home schoolers keep their children at home. At the time, Christians had widely accepted the public system (Fairchild & Wynn, *Families in the Church*, pp. 34-35). The removal of Christian content from the curriculum changed this, and *“an increasing number of North American families turned... to home schooling in an attempt to rescue their children from the cynicism, disillusionment, and delinquency (of public schools)”* (MacMullen, *Home Schooling*, p. 88). Authors like Moore and Moore (*Home grown kids*) and Pride (*The way home*), the market, and organizations like the HSLDA (Home School Legal Defense Association) helped establish legal and social acceptance of and support for home schooling. It is also financially more attractive than

Christian day schools, and technological progress made home schooling more manageable. Norman De Jong concedes that *“the battle for acceptance has been won. But the battle about quality will go on and on. Just because a school is small is no guarantee that it is good.”* He describes a principal’s objections to a pastor’s *“defiant, unconscionable, school authority-rejecting, chaos-inviting, tuition-avoiding, too-proud-to-ask-the-deacons”* decision to home school and advised him to sit aside and watch for the outcome (*Teaching for a change*, pp. 123-124).

Here, then, is the controversy. Home schoolers are seen to transgress the social norm of supporting the Reformed day school. They reject the labour, sacrifice, and commitment of the previous generation. They do not pull their weight in supporting the school. They do their own thing. They generate chaos and division. They are too proud to ask for assistance. They undermine the communion of saints and withdraw their talents from it. They are snobs. They imply that the school is not good enough. They generate envy. They talk on the other side of the parking lot and sit together on their own side in the church. They... but hold it! Has it ever occurred to you why they do this? Have you cried because the Body of Christ was in discord? This was the context for my study, of which I will highlight a few things next.

I asked home schoolers (HS) and current and former school board members (SR) from two different communities (N and T) a number of relevant questions. N stands for Niagara and T for “The other community,” which had a reputation, for some reason, of not experiencing the same level of discord. I had a total of six interviews, each lasting from about two to three hours, in October and November, 2002. Locally, there were four separate interviews with individual home schooling couples, and one focus group interview with school representatives. In the other community, I had one focus group interview with both school representatives and home schoolers. My participants were honest. What follows is a summary of my findings.<sup>1</sup>

NOTE: Table at the end of this document

## **Why to start and why to continue**

I first asked the participants in my study why they started home schooling, or why they thought people did. People responded in a variety of ways and with different specifics that it would be better for the child and better for the family, that they had objections to school policy, and that it was cheaper. Contrary to common perception, financial reasons were not the most prevalent reasons to start home schooling. While home schoolers often cited social, psychological, pedagogical, policy, program, personal, and personnel stressors as triggers, school representatives (who collectively recognized most of the reasons) tended to think more of (often selfish) benefits as triggers. A number of disputes (between parents and agents of the school) surfaced that should have been resolved a long time ago but never were. It is a common dynamic that unresolved disputes fester and encourage giving up (flight) and doing one’s own thing.

My second question was about justifications for *continuing* to home school. I found that people had principle and practical justifications and some other considerations. School representatives did not clearly distinguish between reasons to start and reasons to continue home schooling and were less aware in this context of practical benefits the home schoolers observed. School representatives resisted what they perceived to be individualism on the part of home schoolers and tended to stress the immediate concern for the communion of saints. Home schoolers, on the other hand, tended to stress the benefits for their families and their children and expected long term benefits for the church. Here another common dynamic surfaced: people who disagree with each other stop communicating, drift apart, and start to make (usually wrong) assumptions that lay blame with the wrong party.

## **Tension**

My next set of questions searched for perspectives on *what generated tensions* in the community around this issue. When I organized the answers in a table (see Table), I was shocked. People had not only stopped communicating with each other but developed coherent perceptions of how wrong or how stupid the others were. Look at how little agreement there is: the views are radically diverse. Look at what they think of each other and how strongly those perceptions are represented.



See how simple preferences were raised to principles and how the dynamic leads to gossip, slander, misattribution, exclusion, and further distress. It is no wonder that people spoke of disappointment, jealousy, resentment, frustration, anger, offence, grief, irritation, and fear. Here the migraines, the ulcers, and the sleepless nights came clearly in view: discord.

This was a grievous observation. I had chosen to study tension in the communion of saints, but was not prepared for how ugly it was. Were these people who could sit at the Lord's Table together people who examined their consciences whether it was their sincere desire to show true thankfulness to God with their entire life and, laying aside all enmity, hatred, and envy, to live with their neighbour in true love and unity? Quite aptly, one participant referred to the social dynamic as a satanic division among God's people. Is it a surprise that well-intentioned pastoral and open letters, explanations, and even sermons generated a flare-up of emotions, new accusations, and a deepening of the rift? The dynamic of a personal dispute took on new and ugly dimensions when it became a group dispute.

## **Resolution**

All participants in my study agreed that something needed to be done about it – that was, in fact, an integral part of their motivation to participate in my study. My remaining question wondered: *what should we do to get out of this?* The findings constitute hope, because there is broad, although not full or unanimous, agreement on applicable principles. On both sides I heard moderate and conciliatory voices, even though tension and distrust prevailed. Participants identified elements of restoring love, harmony, and unity similar to Ken Sande's Christian conciliation elements: *Go Back to Scripture* (1 Corinthians 1:31), *Show Your Brother His Fault* (Matthew 18:15), *Examine Yourself* (1 Corinthians 11:28), and *Care for One Another* (1 Corinthians 12:25). They also realized that they had to explain things to each other and that it would take time. Still, practical ideas diverged about how to address the tension.

To know what to do and then to do it are two different things. I may return to Scripture, but if my eyes are closed to what it says, it will be of little use. I may show my brother his fault, but if we resist listening, there is no communication. I may examine myself, but if I only find justification for my former position, I will gain no communion. I may care for my brother, but if I believe that this requires him to become like me, we gain nothing. Paul points out that

*If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.*

(1 Corinthians 13:1-3)

HS's Views		<b>Issues that generate tension</b>	SR's Views	
N	T		N	T
✓✓✓	✓	Thoughtless opposition and adherence to tradition		
✓✓✓	✓	People hide behind others, too afraid to broach the topic		
✓✓✓	✓	Home schooling seen as a serious threat to, or as negative about school	✓✓	
✓✓✓	✓	Unfairness in financial advantage evokes emotions and resentment	✓	✓

✓✓✓	✓	The school claims home schoolers' money and support		
		The school is expensive, and home schoolers offend by being aloof to the effect of non-support for the communion of saints	✓✓✓	✓✓
✓✓✓		People are offended by defences or justifications of home schooling and home schoolers' parenting choices		
✓✓✓	✓	Home schoolers unfairly treated as isolationist, elitist, generating guilt		
<b>Unmet or overstated expectations</b>				
✓✓✓		Church, not school is covenant community		
✓		Withdrawal from the blessings and the calling to share talents in JCS	✓✓✓	
✓✓✓	✓✓	Perceived implications of (not) sending children and support		
		Home schooler support in prayer and Winterfest Bazaar is easy	✓	
✓✓		School may be too large, or stress finances too much	✓	
<b>Actions (or lack thereof)</b>				
✓✓✓		PTA and Board tried to persuade people to reject home schooling		
		Home schoolers' joining of para-church-like organization and avoidance of reconciliation about differences divisive, weakens unity	✓✓✓	
		Exclusion of home schoolers from church office leaves others stressed	✓	✓
		Church leadership avoids dealing with controversy or calls home schooling an acceptable and viable alternative	✓✓	
✓✓✓		Home schoolers conscientiously support causes others can't		
✓ indicates singularly stated or implied support; ✓✓ indicates repeated support; and ✓✓✓ indicates strong support. For T, ✓✓ indicates significant support. N = Niagara; T = The other community; HS = Home Schoolers; SR = School Representatives.				

## **Corinth**

The Church at Corinth was characterized by a culture of division, yet it was sanctified in Christ and called to be holy (1 Corinthians 1:2). There is more to be said, but the theme of division surfaces throughout 1 Corinthians. Some go for Paul, others for Cephas, Apollos, or Christ. As a result, they miss out on the grace of God, the wisdom of the Spirit, and the mind of Christ. As they drift from the unity in the one and only Saviour, they argue, and condone immorality. They ask worldly courts

to settle their cases. They miss the point on straightforward questions of doctrine and lifestyle. The sacrament gets corrupted and even the purpose for which the Lord has different gifts for each part of the body becomes a source of discord. It is like uncontrolled cell division, like cancer; and here it destroys the precious and delicate Body of Christ. Discord, like cancer, leads to death. The Corinthians live as though this life is all that matters. Paul must remind them that there is a resurrection, thanks to Christ (1 Corinthians 15), that this is the core of the gospel by which they are saved, and that it is meaningful for life today. If there is no resurrection, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die (1 Corinthians 15:32); but if there is – and there is! – let us give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord (1 Corinthians 15:58). Stop the disputes, end the discord, be united in the one gospel of salvation and life, and live!

How marvellous is God's grace to and patience with this divided congregation. He gives them his grace and peace right off the bat (1 Corinthians 1:3). In the end, having heard all the admonishments, they must now greet one another with a holy kiss, be cursed if they do not love the Lord, and receive the grace of the Lord Jesus (1 Corinthians 16:20-23). The church may be divided by discord, but the Lord does not drop it just yet. He is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and mercy. If, by God's grace, we repent, if we are contrite, if we expect all from Jesus Christ alone, and are wholly devoted to Him, then we may still celebrate the Lord's Supper and be reminded of his unfailing mercy. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits! But He does not condone slacking off, forsaking the first love, acceptance of sin and heresy; He rather calls to repentance, lest He come and remove the lamp stand (Revelation 2). Restoration comes by faith that reconciliation is a gift of God. It responds to God's call in Isaiah 44:22: Return to me, for I have redeemed you. It is the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.

Greet one another with a holy kiss; be holy together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; love the Lord. And (with Hebrews 12:15) let there be no roots of bitterness, no missing out on the grace of God. By grace, you are the Body of Christ, united in the one Spirit, and should not be divided (Ephesians 4:3). Here is room for humility, to bow our heads and to confess our sins. In such humility we can be a communion of saints, all individual parts of the one body; one with a gift to do this, another with a gift to do something else, much like different tissues and different organs each have their own role in the body. We all are fed with the same bread and the same wine, and all need each other; all parts are indispensable. It is not for us to mutilate the Body of Christ, or to get our pound of flesh, or to be right always.

### **Concluding reflections**

All this does not mean, I believe, that all people now ought to make the same choice (that would be sectarian), but the focus shifts from us-versus-them or me-versus-you to how we, for Christ's sake, can be of mutual assistance. It is not a matter of what is best for me, or for us, but of how God is honoured. The question is not at all one of a balance between individual rights and freedoms on the one hand and community expectations and commitments on the other. Rather, it is one of how the Lord calls us to be church, to be living members of the communion of saints.

Our age is one in which people like to claim the freedom to do things their own way. In the church, office bearers who comfort, admonish, and rebuke, and so execute their office as faithful ambassadors of Christ, may be told to mind their own business, or that the members are okay and that it is a matter between them and the Lord. Such attitudes generate discord, as there is no common humility before the Lord, no common desire to do what is best for the Body of Christ and God's honour. People may come to the same worship services and sit at the same Table, but go their separate ways when the communion in worship is over; they do their own thing, with their own agenda, disconnected. This ought not to be so.

Scriptural principles apply in resolving discord. We may have to let go, as Trigland said, of matters of personal preference for the sake of the Body of Christ. If it is a matter of the Lord's standards, however, we may not let go. Some things are too central to maintaining the truth to compromise. If we have made an agreement, as in the Church Order, we shall honour it until we change it (see Article 76). It is the task of church leaders to clarify the principles Scripture sets out before us – and

that is not automatically the same as what our tradition, established practice, circumstance, or emotion would suggest.

In a dispute we ask polarizing questions: Are you for or against; is it right or wrong? But home schooling, or the Reformed day school isn't my god; they are both efforts to apply God's principles. Let's not argue about who is the greatest or who is right (Matthew 18). Let's worship Christ and stop breaking down his Body. Let's read what Scripture says about being a communion of saints! Christ gathers a church, his Body, and inside that body there are cells, tissues, organs, and organ systems which all need each other. These parts don't each do their own thing as though the others aren't there. They mind the business of the whole body, because it is Christ's. If not, do they really belong?

What if your community is torn by discord, whatever the specific issue may be? Ask your minister to preach the Word of God. Let him point to Christ, who reconciles us to God and in whom we can be reconciled to each other. Let him expose our depravity and the mercy we receive in Christ and preach the call for a life of gratitude. Elders, encourage loving and listening communication with opponents. Do not get trapped into taking sides, except where it is a clearly Scriptural requirement; provide spiritual leadership that does not make gods out of positions, preferences, traditions, or shibboleths. You are ambassadors of Christ, not of certain factions. Seek the wisdom of Solomon (1 Kings 3) and remember the requirement for judges (Deuteronomy 16:18). Deacons, may the Lord grant you the grace to show God's care to all members of the church alike, also to those with whom you may disagree. If people in your ward feel lost, lonely, or forsaken because of an ongoing feud, direct them to Psalm 13 or 88, and let them find peace in Christ who was truly forsaken of God, so we might never be forsaken by Him. (Matthew 18:11).

When councils prepare a slate of new office bearers, let them look for moderate and spiritual men who could, on occasion, advise a brother or sister even against their personal preferences. Before anything else, keep reading the Word of God, and give it higher credence and authority than your tradition. Read the Form for the Lord's Supper a few extra times between celebrations. Pray for love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Take note of the words with which the Lord welcomes us in church: "*Grace be unto you, and peace*" (1 Corinthians 1:3). Take to heart also the words with which He sends us off:

*"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."*

(2 Corinthians 13:14)

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<sup>1</sup> Considering the nature of *Clarion*, I include only one table out of several that illustrate respondents' answers. People interested in seeing the others may email me for other summary tables.