



Why a Federation of Churches?

Apart from a few so-called 'independent' congregations, most churches are part of a federation of churches or a denomination. Those who are no strangers in Jerusalem, know that the cooperation of churches in a federative regime is experiencing strains today. That is easy to determine from statements made by church members and even by ministers. The 'federation of churches' means little or nothing to many young church members. They live in their own congregation and their attention is restricted to it.

You observe that also in the way people speak about their own congregation. They speak about 'Ebenezer Church', or 'Pilgrim Church', but not about 'the Reformed Church at . . .'. This tendency is probably related to the modern lifestyle in which people are guided by their feelings. The modern person is not interested in broad connections, thinks small-scale, and does not care for large organizations.

However, the Reformed Churches live in a *federation of churches*. Is that something arbitrary, something that can be abolished when you experience it as a hindrance for the flourishing of local congregational life? Where does the Bible say that churches must join together in this way?

We shall discuss these questions in this article.

Grounds for Joining Together

I take my point of departure about the principled reason for the joining together of churches in a federation in the *characteristics* of the church. In Reformed circles – insofar as I survey it – we have not taken sufficient account of the grounds for the coming together of congregations in a church federation. Mostly, people argue in its favour from the point of view of the *communion of saints* as it is confessed in Answ. 55 of the Heidelberg Catechism. The common unity in Christ of which Answ. 55 speaks and the unity with each other that exists in him leads to the ineluctable conclusion that congregations must express this unity also in the form of a church federation. For the communion of saints extends further than one's own congregation.¹

I believe that more can be said about this and that we must see, especially in the characteristics of the church, that the coming together as churches in a federation is a *gift* and a *task*. In my opinion, the confession in the Nicene Creed, 'And we believe only holy catholic and apostolic church', *implies* a church federation. When we confess this, we cannot avoid an actively coming together as churches. For these characteristics of the church are gifts that contain, at the same time, a task!

The Unity of the Church

Living together as churches harks back in the first place to the *unity* of the church. Paul speaks about the 'one body' (1 Cor 10:17) and about the 'unity of the Spirit' (Eph 4:3). Jesus will save 'his people' from their sins (Matt 1:21). And Simon Peter described to the church how God himself determined to form 'a people' for himself to glorify his name (Acts 15:14).

¹ See, e.g., S. Greijdanus, *Schriftbeginselen van het kerkrecht inzake meerdere vergaderingen*, (Enschede: no date), p. 28; J. Kamphuis, *Verkenningen III* (Goes: no date), p. 82.

The unity of the church is not primarily an organizational matter, but a profoundly *spiritual* one. The believers are one in Christ and therefore and for that reason they also have unity with each other (cf., Answ. 55 of the Heidelberg Catechism). To paraphrase C. Trimp: first there is *union* with Christ and from it flows the *communion* with each other. Reformed authors have rightly said that living together in a church federation is in substance a matter of the communion of saints. That communion exists primarily in the local church, but it is not restricted to it.

When there are other churches that are united with us in the same Christ and the same faith, we have a duty to search each other out and to give form to that unity. What is one in Christ, must also manifest itself as such.²

Therefore, whoever confesses one Christian church, has the duty to seek that unity regionally and nationally with churches that also serve Christ in accordance with his Word. What Answ. 55 of the Heidelberg Catechism confesses applies here too: there is a unity that is accompanied by *communion* and it must be experienced.

The Catholicity of the Church

The federation of churches is also rooted in the *catholicity* of the church. We confess a 'universal' church. Art. 27 of the Belgic Confession states that it is not confined to a particular place, but is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world'.

It is undeniable that the New Testament often speaks about the local church (cf., e.g., 1 Thess 1:1; and Rev 1:4, 11). But it also uses the word 'church' (*ekklèsia*) for the universal church of Christ (cf., Eph 1:22; Col 1:24). We can see in Matthew 16 and 18 how the New Testament speaks alternately about the church. When the Lord Jesus says that he will build his church on the rock of Peter, the reference is clearly to the universal church (Matt 16:18). But in Matthew 18:17, which concerns an unrepentant sinner, the reference is clearly to the local church.

The way Scripture speaks about the church teaches us to look beyond our own congregation. There is also a universal church! The local church is indeed a 'church of Christ', but it is not independent of Christ's people in the region and in the nation in which the church exists. It is in fact the universal church *in that place* and it is united with the saints in the region, the nation, and indeed in the whole world.

We read of that unity in the epistle of James, who addresses it to 'the twelve tribes scattered among the nations' (Jas 1:1). In his first letter, Peter writes 'To God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia' (1 Pet 1:1). And Paul addresses himself 'and all the brothers with me, To the churches in Galatia' (Gal 1:2).

Those who confess a 'universal' or 'catholic' church cannot avoid the communion with churches in the region and in the nation!

The Apostolicity of the Church

With the Nicaenum, we also confess an *apostolic* church. The church rests on the doctrine of the apostles. With their witness about Jesus Christ, they form the foundation of the church (cf. Eph 2:20; Rev 21:14). Acts 2:42 says of the church at Jerusalem: 'They devoted themselves to [continued stedfastly in, KJV] the apostles' teaching'. That remains the great hallmark of the church. That is why Luther could say, 'Where the Word is, there is the church'. Christ's sheep listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd. His word is their rule.

² F.L. Rutgers, *De geldigheid van de oude kerkenordening der Nederlandsche gereformeerde kerken*, reprint (Amsterdam-Pretoria: 1971), points out that the first synod of the Dutch Reformed church came together in Emden in 1571 on the basis of this *spiritual* unity: 'this unity in confession came first; and because all outward appearance depended on it, when Synod was constituted it not only acknowledged it, but also safeguarded it as much as possible' (pp. 16-17).

But that Word did not come only to the local church (cf. 1 Cor 14:36). The churches have it *in common*. This is apparent from the way the apostles address the churches in their epistles. And we learn from Colossians 4:16 that the epistle to the Colossians was read also 'in the church of the Laodiceans'.

Because the apostolic Word was given to the churches *in common*, the churches also have the calling together to remain true to this Word and together 'to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints' (Jude:3). Therefore the apostolicity of the church imposes an obligation as churches to 'build yourselves up in your most holy faith' (Jude:20).

The Holiness of the Church

We believe a 'holy' church. Living together federally as churches also derives from the *holiness* of the church. This holiness belongs to the local church (1 Cor 2: 3:17), but also to the churches together (1 Pet 1:2; 2:9). Together they share in the sanctification by the Spirit (1 Thess 4:7; 1 Pet 1:2). That is why there is also the *communal* calling to support each other in that sanctification and to resist the intrusion of sin in the life of the church.

Together the churches must strive to be a 'holy nation' (1 Pe 2:9) and take care that they keep themselves from being polluted by the world (Jas 1:27). Churches have a responsibility toward each other to preserve the holiness of life! This is evident in what the council at Jerusalem told the Gentiles, who turned to God, to abstain from (Acts 15). The church at Jerusalem served the Christians elsewhere with respect to a holy life in practice. The many places in the New Testament that enjoin us to keep an eye on each other (cf., e.g., 1 Thess 5:14; Heb 3:12-13) extend further than the brothers and sisters locally!

From all of this it is clear that the matter of a federation of churches is not an arbitrary affair that one can be in favour of or reject. Maintaining contact with each other follows from what Scripture says about the church and what we confess about her. When you take the characteristics of the church seriously as a gift *and as a task*, we can say that *in the name of God* we are *obliged* as churches to work together. The form that the cooperation should take is another matter. But that there must be correspondence is ineluctable in my opinion.

A Few Scriptural References

The New Testament shows us that in the time of the apostles the churches sought and helped each other. They understood that union in Christ leads to communion with each other.

Prophets went from Jerusalem to Antioch to assist in the proclamation of the Word (Acts 11:27). The brothers in Antioch decided to send financial help to the Christians living in Judea (Acts 11:29). Later, the churches in Macedonia and Achaia also made a contribution to the poor in Jerusalem (Rom 15:26; 2 Cor 8:4-5). We also read about a kind of ecclesiastical attestation: the brothers in Ephesus gave Apollos a letter of recommendation to the disciples in Achaia (Acts 18:27).

There was also consultation among the brothers: the churches in Macedonia together appointed a brother to go with Paul to bring the proceeds of a collection to Jerusalem (2 Cor 8:18-19). When a difference of opinion about the need for circumcision arose in Antioch, the church consults the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about the question (Acts 15:2).

On the matter of the conduct of women in the church, Paul instructs the Corinthians about the custom 'in all the congregations of the saints' (1 Cor 14:33) and about the practice in 'the churches of God' (1 Cor 11:16). From this we can deduce that also in respect of the organization of the life of the local church there is a measure of unity among the young churches. The apostle admonishes the Corinthians not to fall out of line in the matter of the conduct of sisters in the church services.

We do not find a church federation in the New Testament like that maintained by the Reformed churches today. But it is clear that the churches in apostolic times understood that they were *united* and that they carried out their responsibility for each other in providing all kinds of help and assistance. The 'unity of the Spirit' (Eph 4:3) was actively maintained and practiced. The churches gave themselves to Christ and therefore also to each other (cf. 2 Cor 8:5). It is very striking that Paul characterizes the assistance provided by the churches in Macedonia as the 'fellowship' (*koinonia*) of ministering to the saints (2 Cor 8:4). It amounted to practicing the communion of saints! And that reaches the heart of all the work the churches do with and for each other.

Our Church Order

Article 30 of the Belgic Confession says the church must be governed 'according to the spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in his Word'. That applies to the local church, but also to manner in which the relationship between the churches is regulated.

It is true that Scripture does not provide us with a blueprint for the latter. But we do find *fundamental principles* in the New Testament that must be taken into account in a church order. I mention the following: The churches are subject to the *Christocracy*. Christ is their king and his Word governs everything. The government of the church is unmistakably entrusted to the college of *elders*. The presbyterian character of the church must shape the church order. The churches have been given to each other. They are responsible for each other and serve each other to be true church of Christ. They hold each other to what the church should be: holy, apostolic, universal, and one. In doing this, no church may lord it over another. The fellowship is voluntary: the churches seek each because union in Christ obligates them to seek communion with each other.

This implies that a church federation may never be organized in such a way that the local churches become branches of the one national church. According to the New Testament, each local church is truly a church of Christ. But that does not mean that local churches may remain on their own. Churches in a region and country must also be 'of one mind' and must put their unity in Christ into practice.

All these fundamental principles must be taken into account in a church order if one wants to give the relationship between the churches a form that accords with 'the spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in his Word' The beauty of the church order in the Reformed churches is that it clearly reflects these principles. On the one hand the independence of the local church is respected, but on the other you constantly see how the unity of the churches is recognized. K. Schilder once characterized the relationship between the churches as 'an organization of mutual assistance'. That is apparent in our church order.

Ecclesiastical Assemblies

Article 1 of our church order presupposes that for the good order in the church of Christ it is necessary that there be *ecclesiastical assemblies*. Those assemblies are the consistory, classis, regional synod, and general synod. The consistory is an assembly with its own unique character. It is an assembly of office bearers, a gathering of elders who work together collegially and who together bear responsibility for the congregation.

It is different for a classis or a synod. At them, *churches* come together by means of their delegates. The members do not attend because of their office, but because they have been delegated by the churches. Thus, as distinct from the consistory, these are not assemblies of office bearers. We call them 'major assemblies', but this does not mean that they are superior to the consistories. The word 'major' simply indicates that more than one church is present.

It is important today that we again appreciate the *character* of major assemblies, especially that of a general synod. For in our churches much is said about synods that is incorrect. People see a general synod as a kind of (higher) authority that meddles in an irritating way with matters that people in local churches would prefer to regulate themselves. But the synod is not composed of

important personages. Rather, it is a meeting in which the *churches* come together to support each other and to help each other to maintain the 'good order'.

For example, what a general synod decides about liturgy and mission work, are decisions that the *churches* have reached together. Thus, they are matters in which the local churches are fully involved.

Concerning the *authority* of synod, the churches have agreed in article 31 of the church order: '... whatever may be agreed upon by majority vote shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved to be in conflict with the Word of God or with the Church Order'. The history of this article makes it clear that it concerns more than appeals.³ The quoted part of article 31 establishes the *validity* of ecclesiastical decisions. Local churches must treat decisions of synods as binding, unless they are in conflict with God's Word or the church order. Consistories do not *confer* legal effect on the decisions of synod, but they have promised to *accept* them as valid and to adhere to them. It is indeed true what Professor J. van Bruggen once wrote: 'Agreement is agreement'! This the more apparent when we realize that every delegation to a major assembly is accompanied by a letter of credentials in which the delegating authority again explicitly *promises* to consider the decisions of the relevant classis or synod as binding, unless . . .

In my opinion, it is high time that we strongly oppose the increasing occurrence of *deprecatory* talk about ecclesiastical decisions. This becomes apparent when people speak about the 'rules' a synod enacts. It is not about rules, but about valid decisions that the *churches together* have taken in their major assemblies in the conviction that they serve the edification and the life of the churches! If people locally think that a major assembly has taken a wrong or hierarchical decision, the church order entitles them to raise that in the ecclesiastical way and to appeal it. No church is forced to act against its conscience. But what has been validly decided, must (subject to the 'unless' of article 31) be complied with.

No Autonomy

Some people today regard decisions of a general synod as in conflict with 'the autonomy' of a local church. But all that discussion about 'autonomy' is unsound! A local church is certainly independent, but it is most certainly not *autonomous*. What an awful word that is in its literal sense! Christ rules with his Word and that implies that the churches are of one mind *in him*. They were given to each other and for each other. Just as we need each other in the congregation in order to be church together, so also we, as sister churches, need each other in order that we may together remain with the Good Shepherd and his Word.

When Schilder characterizes the church bond as 'an organization of mutual assistance', he is exactly right. There are no autonomous churches; only churches that have been given to and for each other, and who need each other to ensure the 'maintenance of good order in the church of Christ' (cf. art. 1 CO).

In my opinion, behind the practice of our ecclesiastical assemblies (classis, synods) there is also a Christian *humility*. It is based on the understanding that the local church does not know everything and the Word of God did not originate with her (cf. 1 Cor 14:36). Thereby the churches respect that the calling: 'find out what pleases the Lord' (Eph 5:10; cf. 1 Thess 5:21) is expressed in the *plural*, to say nothing about other exhortations in the New Testament.

³ J. Kamphuis, *Kerkelijke besluitvaardigheid* (Groningen: 1970), writes about article 31: 'The most striking thing is that [the Synod of] Middelburg [1581] combined two regulations formulated by its predecessor. The first part deals with the right of appeal, the second about the validity of ecclesiastical decisions. It is important to note that the second part was adopted as a separate regulation in Dordrecht-1578. This makes it clear that article 31 is not concerned exclusively with appeal matters, but is concerned with the validity of ecclesiastical decisions in general' (p. 51).

For this reason, major assemblies exist to deliberate about vital matter of doctrine, liturgy, missionary tasks, training for the ministry and examinations for admissions to the ministry, and Christian discipline. The churches wrestle together at those assemblies to follow the Lord's will and to help each other to maintain all things in accordance with the Word of the king of the church.

That applies too when decisions have to be made about what is to be read and sung in our services and about entering into contact with a church from another federation of churches. Local churches should not regard this as patronizing on the part of a 'higher authority'. The churches have *together* decided what is appropriate and that it is improper for a local church to act of its own motion in such circumstances. So long as article 31 CO remains in effect, the churches must adhere to what the churches in common have decided.⁴

'Agreement is agreement' is not rigid formalism, but derives from the commandment of our Lord himself: 'Let your "Yes" be "Yes" . . .' (Matt 5:37). If consistories no longer adhere to this with respect to the decisions of major assemblies, how then can elders admonish brothers and sisters about what they promised at their public profession of faith?

We may not trivialize the deprecatory talk about which I spoke. Because what is involved is none other than *fidelity* to our promise. Also in ecclesiastical dealing we must 'must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to [our] neighbor' (Eph 4:25). That is how we must behave in Christ's church! In a world in which the lie holds sway, the church must be 'the pillar and foundation of the truth' (cf. 1 Tim 3:15).

There are some today who argue in favour of more freedom of action for local churches. Sometimes they bring 'our whole ecclesiastical system' into the discussion. That is not a calamity, *so long as* they adhere to and respect what the churches have together agreed to: 'Agreement is agreement'. And *so long as* they have the *humility* to follow the ecclesiastical way and hold the judgment that the churches reach together in esteem. For these advocates also do not know everything. In the end, the judgment about the matter lies with the churches assembled in general synod (cf. art. 76 CO).

And that is also rooted in the phrase 'with all the saints' (Eph 3:18). It is the essence of the bond between the churches and that bond is a *gift* of Christ and at the same time a *task*.

A.N. Hendriks

© 2015
www.christianstudylibrary.org

Translated by Albert H. Oosterhoff

⁴ That the churches also decide in common what songs may be sung in the services is supported by my arguments above about the unity, apostolicity, and catholicity of the church.