

# **Scriptural Principles of Church Polity Concerning Broader Assemblies**

by Dr. S. Greijdanus

## **The church is the Lord's**

The church is the Lord's. In particular, the church is the Lord Jesus Christ's, the Mediator between God and men, the Son of God revealed in the flesh. He is not, of course, to be seen in contrast to the triune God. For this one God created heaven and earth with all that is in them. The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof. But God gave His chosen people, who had fallen into sin, to His Son to salvation, to the one who came into the world, taking on our flesh and blood; the one who atoned for the guilt of mankind and the world by His suffering and death on the cross, thus becoming the Saviour of the world, 1 John 4:9, 10, 14; and to whom was given all authority in heaven and on earth, Matthew 28:18.

The church especially is now His possession. The church is called His people, whom He came to save from their sins, Matthew 1:21, and consists of those who have been given Him by the Father, John 17:6, 9, and is called His body, Romans 12:5, Colossians 1:24. He Himself speaks of it as His church, or congregation, which He builds upon the foundation of the confession that He is the Christ, the Son of the living God, Matthew 16:18. Accordingly, the apostle Paul warns the officebearers, "Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God which He obtained with the blood of His own Son" Acts 20:28. The Lord also

calls the church His sheep, and “my own”, speaking of it as a flock, John 10:14-16.

### **Christ is the only Authority**

Now, because the church is the Lord’s special possession, which He obtained by His self-surrender to the death on the cross for the atonement of our sin, it is at His bidding, at His alone. Again, this is not in contrast to the triune God. For He is the LORD’s Servant, Isaiah 42:1, sent and anointed by God, Luke 4:18; doing nothing of His own accord, but judging as He heard from the Father, John 5:19, 30. He does not speak on His own authority, but has received a commandment what to say, John 12:49; and testifies, “My teaching is not mine, but His who sent me,” John 7:26. He spoke of the works which He did as “the works of my Father”, which He did in His Father’s name, John 10:37, 25, indeed, which the Father did in or through Him, John 14:10.

However, in distinction from any creature, whether man or angel, whether a whole assembly or merely a single created being, no matter how high and mighty, no matter how great in number, only the Lord Jesus, the Christ of God, has power to command His church, internally and externally, both with respect to its inner existence and its outer actions, its organization, its operation, or its experience.

Only He has any right of command in and over the church. It is His absolute possession. No one, man or angel, has any right to ordain the least thing in his own name in or for the church of the Lord. Not even all the millions of church members together. Each and every member only has to perform whatever He commands or has ordained, and only as He has instituted or revealed it in His Word, without deviating from it in the least thing, not even with respect to the manner in which it is done.

The church belongs to the Lord, not to any creature, nor to any

number of creatures together, whether few or many, whether humble or exalted. Therefore He, and He alone, has everything to say over it, He has exclusive and absolute authority over it.

### **The church is bound to Christ**

With respect to the church and its life and actions we must never consider what we would like to see, or what would seem the wisest or best course of action to us, or what would please us the most. Rather, we should simply ask what the Lord's will is, and what He says about any point or any matter, upholding what He has ordained.

The mind of every man has been darkened by sin; every feeling and sense is corrupt and impure. These may never provide the standard for our thoughts, speech, and actions, least of all in the church of the Lord. Only what the Lord says, what He has commanded, ordained, and revealed is to control ecclesiastical action, and regulate the entire church and its organization and activity. "You are my friends if you do what I command you," John 15:14. "If a man loves me, he will keep my word," John 14:23. Also in ecclesiastical matters, if one does not keep the Lord's word, he does not love Him. He may be ever so mighty in the world, highly respected, pious, influential, a Pope, or represent a synod, but if he fails to keep the Word, he has no love of the Lord, and is not a friend of His. "Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven," Matthew 7:21.

### **Christ speaks in His Word**

Now in His Word, the Holy Scripture, the Lord has revealed to us His will also with respect to His church, its thought and life and activity. We are to regulate all our actions with regard to the church

according to that Word, that Holy Scripture.

How that church is to be organized, how it is to act, as a whole and towards each of its members, how it is to take action with respect to its individual members and in its community of distinct local manifestations of the one body of Christ, His congregation - all of this Christ has shown us in Holy Scripture, His Word, be it in greater detail or be it in summary or in principle. His Word alone is the regulation and standard, the exclusive and absolute authority. In ecclesiastical life, whatever agrees with that Word, that Holy Scripture, whatever is based on it and is regulated by it, is good. Only on these principles will He command His blessing, and everything depends upon the Lord's blessing. Whatever deviates from His Word in Holy Scripture, whatever is not derived from it either directly or by valid logical deduction, whatever does not accord with it, is to be rejected and does not bear the Lord's approval and blessing. As our confession says, Article 30: "We believe that this true church must be governed according to the spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in His Word." This consideration will have inspired the question put by churches to the Synod of Emden in 1571, "... whether all things are to be confirmed by Holy Scripture?" The answer was, "that those things which concern the conscience must be confirmed by God's Word, but those things which concern the order of the churches or are indifferent ought not to be driven to such necessity."<sup>1</sup> In a similar vein, the Synod of Dort in 1578 answered the question "... whether the articles of Synod ought not to be confirmed by testimonies of Scripture", by stating "... that this is not necessary with respect to matters which are indifferent and which merely concern the order of the church. Concerning those matters which are not indifferent

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<sup>1</sup> P. Biesterveld and H.H. Kuyper, *Kerkelijk Handboekje*, (J.A. Bos, Kampen, 1905), 49

Synod has declared that it considers the same to be grounded upon the authority of the Holy Scriptures.”<sup>2</sup>

Because the church is the Lord’s, only He has a say over it, and that with absolute authority. No creature has any right to command with an authority binding the conscience, as before God’s judgment seat, unless he is thus appointed as the apostles were according to Matthew 16:19; 18:18; John 20:23. The church may promote order in its life by making regulations and arrangements, for example, at what time public worship is to begin, where it will be held, in what order the officebearers will carry out their task and service, and so on, but such agreements and arrangements are never of such a nature that transgressing them may lead to censure, suspension from the Lord’s Supper, deposition, or excommunication.

In regulating ecclesiastical affairs, therefore, we are not merely to ask what previous generations did, our fathers in earlier centuries, in order to apply these precedents as though they had divine authority. These men may indeed have been most pious, and may have courageously fought the Lord’s battles; but this does not guarantee that they spoke and acted rightly in every instance. David was a pious man, a man after God’s heart, as the LORD Himself testifies. However, he sinned grievously in the matter of Bathsheba and Uriah, and in the census of the people. Peter was called blessed by the Lord, and he was awarded the keys of the kingdom of heaven, Matthew 16:17-19, but a moment later he was called Satan because of his wrong thoughts and words, verse 23; subsequently, he denied his Master three times, Matthew 23:69-75; and later, he had to be admonished by Paul because of insincere actions, prompted by the fear of men, Galatians 2:11-14.

What our fathers did is not a norm in itself, and not a divine

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<sup>2</sup> Biesterveld and Kuyper, 127

ordinance for our ecclesiastical actions. Those fathers were also people, darkened in their understanding, defiled in heart and life, despite the renewing and purifying work of the Holy Spirit of which they were made worthy. Besides, they were living in circumstances which made it difficult for them to act as even they themselves would consider proper in ecclesiastical life. They were also influenced by views regarding the relationship of church and state which repeatedly caused both their thoughts and their actions with regard to the church to deviate from the demands of God's Word.

Therefore, also with respect to what previous generations, our fathers of earlier centuries achieved in the ecclesiastical realm, the standard of God's Word must always be applied to investigate whether these achievements agree with that Word, and thus may and must be followed; or whether they deviate and conflict with the Word, and are thus to be condemned and rejected.

Our confession says in Article 7, "We may not consider any writings of men, however holy these men may have been, of equal value with the divine Scriptures; nor ought we to consider custom, or the great multitude, or antiquity, or succession of times and persons, or councils, decrees, or statutes, as of equal value with the truth of God, since the truth is above all; for all men are of themselves liars, and lighter than a breath. We therefore reject with all our heart whatever does not agree with this infallible rule..."

### **Abiding in Christ**

The Lord revealed His will concerning the church and its life and activity through His own words and deeds, as well as through His disciples or apostles and first servants, as recorded with divine authority in Holy Scripture. He Himself builds His church, Matthew 16:18. He knows His sheep, John 10:14; calls them by name (that is, individually)

John 10:3; leads them out and gathers them all together as one flock, John 10:18. He is also called the Chief Shepherd, 1 Peter 5:4, Hebrews 13:20, which is not merely a manner of speaking, or a figurative expression, but an indication of the highest reality of the Lord's attention, concern and care for and with His whole church and each of its members, personally, at every moment throughout all ages. As He said, "I am with you always, to the close of the age" Matthew 28:20. This, of course, applied not only to the eleven disciples or apostles and the others who actually heard those words. For none of them would live until the last Day; rather, the Lord was addressing those words to His church as a whole and to each of its members throughout all ages. In a very real sense, the Lord is still with His whole church on earth, where it continues; and with every officebearer in the carrying out of his office. With every gathering of those officebearers and of His congregation, He also says: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them" Matthew 18:20. He is with every believer. He appeared to John in the midst of the seven golden lampstands, Revelation 1:13; He also refers to Himself as the One "who walks among the seven golden lampstands" Revelation 2:1. He knows His whole church and every congregation and every member of that church, special officebearer or not; He knows their works and labour and endurance, their tribulation and poverty, their suffering, sin, the good and the bad, Revelation 2:9, 13, 19, and so on. He pays attention to all, praises and finds fault, encourages and rebukes, promises and admonishes, as His letters to the seven churches in Asia show. It is true that He addressed these letters to the angels of the churches, but not exclusively and individually; rather, the letters were addressed to the whole congregation whose angels they were, as well as to each member. For the invariable conclusion is, "He who has an ear, let him hear..." Revelation 2:7, 11. We cannot be too concrete in our conception of the Lord's presence in or with His congregation as a whole, and also with every part of that

congregation and each member; of the Lord's activity there; of His paying attention to, observing, taking note, being concerned with those congregations both as a whole and in their parts and members. We should have a constant and vivid impression of it. "I know your works, where you dwell, your love and patient endurance, that you have the name of being alive and yet you are dead, that you have but little power, that you are neither cold nor hot", Revelation 2:13, 19; 3:1, 8, 15.

To be sure, the Lord uses people and all sorts of means as His instruments and organs in the building of His congregation and in the gathering of His sheep into one flock. "Go and preach", He commanded His disciples, Matthew 10; "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you", John 20:21; "he who hears you hears me", Luke 10:16. But these never replace Him, and never take His place. He does not merely supervise labour which is essentially theirs. He actually speaks and works in and through them. Moreover, He still performs His own work immediately, for and in His whole church in all its parts and members, without the intervention of any creature. Paul plants, Apollos waters, but God gives the growth, 1 Corinthians 3:6. At all times and in all respects, the congregation remains God's field, His building, 1 Corinthians 3:9. The apostle Paul writes, "Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from ourselves; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant", 2 Corinthians 3:5, 6. And he asks the Corinthians, "What have you that you did not receive?" 1 Corinthians 4:7. This applies to the whole church as well as to each of its officebearers and members. "Apart from me you can do nothing", the Lord Himself said to His disciples, John 15:5. He means, of course nothing good, nothing for the salvation or wellbeing of His congregation. For without Him, we are certainly able to do evil. Alexander the coppersmith, for instance, could do Paul much harm, 2 Timothy 4:14. Judas can betray the Lord, Peter can deny Him, and all His disciples can forsake Him. The sinner in the congregation at



Corinth can cause it to be the object of pagan gossip, 1 Corinthians 5: 1. Pharisees and scribes can deprive someone of the key to knowledge and prevent one who would otherwise enter the kingdom of God from doing so, Luke 11:52. Ecclesiastical assemblies can cast out those who should not be cast out, and they can establish and prescribe false teachings by which the whole church, or a larger or smaller part of the church, is led away from the truth of God's Word. The apostle Peter writes of those who secretly bring in destructive heresies, 2 Peter 2:1. It is certainly possible for officebearers and ecclesiastical assemblies to do harm, great harm. However, it is impossible to do good, to achieve any saving benefit for the Lord's congregation without Him.

Therefore, the Lord's church, the Lord's congregation at every place, every officebearer, every ecclesiastical assembly, every member of that congregation, must always remain in the Lord in order to do good and not to work evil. "If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers," said the Lord, John 15:6. He will not merely be cast forth at some time in the future, but at that very moment, when he is not abiding in the Lord, he is cast forth. At once, he is thus severed from the Lord, and withers. That congregation immediately loses its vitality, that officebearer his worthiness and authority, that ecclesiastical assembly its competence. Then that congregation is no longer a congregation of the Lord, that officebearer is not an instrument or organ in the Lord's hand, and that ecclesiastical assembly is not a lawful, rightfully speaking and establishing, dictating and regulating gathering of the Lord's church. All the positive efficacy, significance and worth of the congregation, officebearer and any official function or ecclesiastical assembly depends exclusively on its abiding in Christ. "As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me," said the Lord, John 15:4.

Abiding in the Lord depends on abiding in His Word. "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it

shall be done for you," John 15:7. Abiding in the Word of the Lord entails speaking what He has said or revealed, doing what He has ordained or commanded. "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love," John 15:10. Then the Lord's life force flows, as it were, into the church and into its members. Then He works in and through it. Then the church is manifested as His congregation, the officebearer is employed as His organ or instrument, the ecclesiastical assembly is a gathering behind whose decision and acts He Himself stands in His divine authority. If not, there may be the name, the appearance, the pretension of His presence, but the essence is lacking, the life, the power of the Lord. Then there is death. The life of the church, the life of the officebearer, the genuineness of an ecclesiastical assembly consists in absolute adhesion, in word and deed, of church and officebearer and ecclesiastical assembly to the Word of the Lord, and is limited to the extent to which they adhere to it in all their actions.

As soon as they in any way do not adhere to and order themselves by that Word, they lose their essence, significance, right, and authority. Their genuineness, competence, inner reality and power depend completely upon their abiding in the Word of the Lord. "If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers," John 15:6. Whoever claims to be church of the Lord, whoever functions as officebearer, or whoever has pretensions of being an ecclesiastical assembly - any ecclesiastical declaration and action - must be evaluated by that Word and its adherence to it in order to be acknowledged as such. Everything depends on faithfulness to the Lord and King of the church. Whatever decision does not obey His Word, no matter how high its pretensions in name or in form, is unfaithful, and must be withstood and rejected as rebellion against the Lord of the church. "It is the duty of all believers, according to the Word of God, to separate from those who do not belong to the church," Article 28, Belgic Confession. "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me

scatters,” Matthew 12:30.

### **Spiritual unity among local churches**

In addition, the Lord has revealed that His church is a spiritual unity, a whole. It is called His people, whom He came to save, Matthew 1:21, and whom He says He brings together as one flock, John 10:16. It is presented as the household of God, 1 Timothy 3:15, and God’s temple, 1 Corinthians 3:16; it is the Lord’s body, Colossians 1:24. All those given by the Father to the Son and ransomed by Him form one great spiritual unity, like the human body. All believers are like members of this body, Romans 12:5; they have diverse gifts and callings, Romans 12:6, 1 Corinthians 12:4-27, but all belong together as one organic whole, and together form a well-ordered unity, as one body, with Christ as the Head, Ephesians 1:22-23, 4:16.

Thus all local churches throughout the whole earth really form an inner spiritual unity. They all live out of Him and through His Spirit. “There is one body and one Spirit... one Lord, one faith, one baptism,” Ephesians 4:4, 5. In that sense, the whole comes before the parts, the one church of the Lord before its local manifestations and institutions. In most cases, also, the church at any one place was the result of the labour of a church already manifest and instituted elsewhere. Paul and Barnabas went from Antioch in Syria, upon the Spirit’s commission, to Cyprus and Asia Minor, and Paul later went to Europe to preach the gospel everywhere, to gain believers, to establish churches, to have the body, the congregation of the Lord, manifest itself, Acts 13. Philip went to Samaria, Acts 8, and men of Cyprus and Cyrene departed from Jerusalem and came to Antioch to proclaim the gospel there to Gentiles also, Acts 11:20.

However, this does not mean that we should see local churches as being subdivisions of a greater whole, the church. Nor are they

subordinate to the churches from which the preachers came, and through whose gospel proclamation they acknowledged the Lord who bought them. For although the churches in Palestine may have formed a certain whole, so that Acts 9:31 can say (according to the better manuscripts) "the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace"; nevertheless, we have no evidence that an institutional relationship existed among the various churches formed by Paul's evangelizing activities, or among others mentioned in the New Testament. They have an external bond of coherence in their communal dependence upon and subordination to the apostle Paul, or the other apostles, but other than that they exist side by side in independence. The congregation at Philippi has nothing to say over that at Thessalonica or that at Corinth, and the latter nothing over the former. The apostle writes his letter not to the church in Galatia, but to the churches, Galatians 1:2. In Revelation 1:12 John does not see one golden lampstand with seven lamps, but seven distinct lampstands.

For the unity of the Lord's church throughout all the earth is spiritual, not institutional, nor official. The Lord did not provide His church congregation on earth with regional, provincial, national, or ecumenical officebearers - outside of the apostles - but He gave it the local officers: ministers of the Word, elders, and deacons. That church is a spiritual whole, but not an institutional, official unity with national, provincial, or district chapters. That church does form a unity in district, province, country, and world, but it is not an organised, officially articulated, divinely appointed universal institution in increasingly subordinated administrative units; rather, it is spiritual, like a body in that each organ or member needs every other in order to be healthy and to function properly, but has no authority over any other organ or member. The Lord has only established churches which are locally organised or officially arranged, that is, churches which are supplied only with local offices and officebearers, churches which are mutually

independent and autonomous, whose officebearers have official authority only there, and not in another church without election, calling, and cooperation by that church.

An exception must be made, of course, for the New Testament apostles and evangelists, who obtained a general, or at least less limited, calling from the Lord for His whole church in all places and all times. They achieve this broader mission after their death by their ordinances once given, left behind and preserved in their writings, which God bequeathed to us in the New Testament. After their death, they had no successors. The Lord did not replace them after they departed. The Lord did not give the office of apostle, prophet, or evangelist as an enduring institution, as He did that of elder or deacon, which is taken up by another if a previous holder falls away or steps down. For this reason, a minister of the Word, an elder, a deacon is only a minister of the Word, an elder, a deacon - an officebearer - in that particular local church where he was called and appointed to that office. Only if another church calls him as officebearer and requests him to function as such, as occurs within a federation with respect to the minister of the Word, does that officebearer have any standing and authority in that church, **by virtue of that office or agreement**, but not out of the calling or office in the church whose officebearer he actually is. Although all local churches form a spiritual unity, and are manifestations of the one body of Christ, no local church has any right at all by its own existence or essence to take action in a church at another place. It has no authority with respect to that church, no competence to command, order, or regulate. It can obtain such power only and in so far as that other church lends it authority and permits its exercise.

Article 31 of the Belgic Confession used to read, "Ministers of the Word, in whatever place they are, have equal power and authority, for they are all servants of Jesus Christ, the only universal Bishop and the only Head of the church. **Therefore no church has any power or**

**authority over another, in order to rule over it.**" Since 1582, these last words have been left out of the article; but not because the authors had come to another conviction. For, in agreement with the French Church Order of 1559, which began with this article as first, our fathers, in their first national Synod at Emden in 1571, placed this prescription at the head of the Church Order: "No church shall rule over another church, no minister of the Word, no elder or deacon over another, but each one shall ward off any suspicion of or temptation to domination."<sup>3</sup> And although this article may have been placed at the very end of the church order at the Synod of Dort in 1578, and remained there ever since,<sup>4</sup> this was no more than a change in sequence, not in any way a change of heart. This article has been upheld in all the centuries since that time. It was already stated thus at Emden in 1571 and maintained in subsequent editions of the Church Order, "No minister of the churches will be permitted to preach in another congregation without the agreement of the minister of that congregation and its consistory, or, in the absence of the minister, without the consent of its consistory."<sup>5</sup>

Although it is the manifestation of the one body of the Lord, of the one church throughout the whole world and through all times, a church has not even the least authority over a church at another place.

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<sup>3</sup> The article of the French Church Order reads: "Aucune église ne pourra prétendre primauté, ou domination, sur l'autre: ni pareillement les ministres d'une église, les uns sur les autres, ni les anciens, ou diacres, les uns sur les autres".

<sup>4</sup> Biesterveld and Kuyper, 126, 249; see also the Church Order of 1618/1619, Art 84.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 38. The present Article 15 of the Church Order of the Canadian Reformed Churches reads "No one shall be permitted to preach the Word or to administer the sacraments in another Church without the consent of the consistory of that Church."

A consistory is but consistory of one particular church at a particular place, and not that of another church at another place. An officebearer, elder, deacon, is officebearer only of the church at the place where he was elected and appointed. A minister of the Word is minister of the Word only in the local church which called him and whose minister of the Word he is. He has no authority to perform official duties, whether to preach or to administer the sacraments, unless he has been previously called or authorized by the church at that place. He has no official competence in himself, in his own person, without a particular, local church and its call. By mutual agreement among the churches, in a federation the various ministers of the Word in those churches are given such a call and such a competence to official functions beyond their local church. This is not so with respect to elders and deacons. Their authority is exclusively local. In no way do they obtain, by mutual agreement among the churches, any broader call to perform official tasks in other churches. "No church shall in any way lord it over other churches."

Therefore, also broader ecclesiastical assemblies have no competence or authority and power to regulate, intervene, censure, suspend, depose, in or over any church belonging to it, except in so far as that church has previously granted such authority to the broader assembly. In fact, such previous authorization has long been rejected and overruled by mutual agreement of the churches in their federation, see Article 74 (Dort, Article 84, Emden, Article 1); or limited in Article 31 and other articles. Any such intervention is now, and has been since the beginning of the Reformed church federation, nothing other than a human, unlawful, hierarchical arrogation; despite the fact that our fathers have been guilty of these things in previous centuries. Not what our fathers have done, but what the Lord's Word says should be our standard of what is permissible and right; and by this also our fathers' actions must be judged, and approved or rejected.

Because no church, in itself, as local church, has anything to say

over another; because no officebearer of that church, minister of the Word, elder, or deacon, has any authority apart from or outside that particular church which called him and appointed him to the office, unless he has been in some way granted a calling or office by another church within it, therefore no assembly of such churches or officebearers has anything to say over the churches of that assembly, other than the particular church of those diverse delegates, unless and in so far as a mutual accord has been first been achieved. Here the product remains the same: twenty-five times zero is no more than one times zero. Everything depends on the mutual agreement, the permission granted, the cooperation of those churches. Whatever goes beyond and above this is merely human arrogation, an unlawful hierarchy, an infringement of divine rights, which cannot be excused or justified by an appeal to what fathers and forbearers have done.

### No coercion

We must distinguish carefully when we consider the unity of the church as the body of the Lord Christ, as the household of God and His temple, as one flock; we should not draw false conclusions from this with respect to the local churches. A concept like that of Dr. H.G. Kleijn, who suggested that the relationship here is that of a universal church and a local congregation, is completely wrong. This would introduce the idea of a large body spread over the whole world, or over a single nation, a particular province or region, of which the local churches are but subdivisions, and to which they are hierarchically subordinated.<sup>6</sup> Dr. Kleijn writes, "In order that the consistory, often a

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<sup>6</sup> H.G. Kleijn, *Algemene kerk en plaatselijke gemeente*, 1888. (Ed. note: Kleijn was a noted opponent of the church polity of the Doleantie. He  
(continued...)



very small assembly, should not lord it over the congregation, the former is subject to the classical assembly, this one to the provincial Synod, and the latter to the General Synod.”<sup>7</sup> Thus an ordered ranking of ever higher command, an ascending or descending scale of authority is proposed. In a clear deviation from the Church Order of Dort (Article 36) Dr. H.G. Kleijn says, “The same power which the consistory has with respect to the congregation the classical assembly has with respect to the consistory.”<sup>8</sup> This is entirely incorrect. The authority of the consistory over its members is of a completely different nature than that of a classical assembly over a consistory. A consistory has power over its congregation received directly from God, though bound, of course, to the Word of God; a broader assembly, whether classis, regional or provincial or national synod, lacks any inherent authority, directly ordained by God, over the consistories and congregations, and exercises power over them only in so far as those churches or consistories have delegated authority to the broader assemblies by mutual consent.

This power, then, rests upon mutual agreement, and is limited by that mutual consent, and therefore has merely a human character. The authority of the officebearer and consistory over their congregation, however, does not rest upon mutual agreement between congregation and consistory or officebearer; rather, it depends upon divine institution, and therefore bears a divine character. What has been determined or prescribed by a broader assembly in accordance with God’s Word is to be kept, but then because it accords with God’s Word, because God’s

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<sup>6</sup>(...continued)

maintained that the ecclesiastical goods of seceding bodies belonged to the *Hervormde* [state] church).

<sup>7</sup> Kleijn, 25

<sup>8</sup> Kleijn, 22

Word prescribes or commands it, not because the assembly ordains it. The broader assembly has no inherent divine authority. The Synod of Dort 1618/19 did speak of “the authority which it has by virtue of God’s Word over all the members and their churches,” but it had this only, and in so far as, its decisions were strictly according to God’s Word. We can read this also in its statement “Thus it is that the Synod, after calling upon the holy Name of God, sufficiently aware from His Word of the power which is its due...” although it continues, “...following in the steps of all lawful Synods, both older and more recent, and strengthened by the authority of the Right Honourable Lords Estates General,” as though those Right Honourable Estates General indeed had any authority over the Lord’s churches in these lands and could assign this to the Synod.<sup>9</sup> Thus also the Westminster Synod of 1647 said, in its confession, that “the decrees and determinations” of synods and councils “are to be received with reverence and submission, not only for their agreement with the Word, but also for the power **of the assembly** whereby they are made, as being an ordinance of God, appointed thereunto in his Word.” Chapter XXXI, 3.<sup>10</sup> However excellent a confession this synod may have composed, it was not convoked in accordance with Dutch Reformed church polity, but by an extra-ecclesiastical power, by Parliament, “while various members of Parliament were appointed to take part in the work of the synod in addition to theologians and elders.” This synod taught, apparently in accordance with its own convocation and composition, that “magistrates may lawfully call a synod of ministers and other fit persons...[and] if

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<sup>9</sup> *Acts of Synod of Dort*, 138th Session, (Dordrecht: I.I. Canin, 1621), 321-322

<sup>10</sup> Translator’s note: the words in bold are an expansion by Greijdanus in his translation, but are not indicated by him as such.

magistrates be open enemies to the Church, the ministers of Christ, of themselves, by virtue of their office... with other fit persons, upon delegation from their churches, may meet together in such assemblies.” Chapter XXXI, 2. The civil authorities, then, were first called to take action.

If the authorities failed to do so, because of enmity against the church, ministers of the Word might take action by virtue of their office (perhaps with other fit persons); in this case, they ought to be delegated by their churches. According to this system, then, it was not the churches who had to act first, nor did delegation by the churches have priority. On the contrary, the civil authorities came first, and these called together whomever they considered necessary and suitable. Ecclesiastical deputation came a distant second or third.

It was according to this system that King William I acted in 1815/16. If the Westminster system is legitimate and worthy of approval, then King William I's actions are also not to be condemned, although one might still maintain that he should have selected other men. His act of convoking a synod could not be rejected as illegitimate. That a synod such as that of Westminster in 1647 should claim that the decisions of broader assemblies “are to be received with reverence and submission, not only for their agreement with the Word, but also for the power of the assembly whereby they are made” is understandable, but hardly vouches for the correctness of this declaration. It too must first be judged according to God's Word. And it knows nothing of lawful authorities in or over the Lord's church other than the officebearers, whether special or ordinary, called and authorized by Him. Here too, then, we can see that in ecclesiastical matters we may not merely ask what pious forefathers and distinguished previous generations have done, in order to recognize and follow those actions as divine ordinances, or as naturally right and just; rather, we must simply investigate what the Lord has instituted and commanded concerning His church and its life and actions,

in order that we may keep that, judge according to that, also with respect to what previous generations and pious fathers have done or said.

The English Presbyterians of the 17th century may not without further qualification be represented as purely Reformed in their church-political opinions and activities. With respect to the way in which the churches live together, Dutch Reformed church polity has a somewhat different character, if not always in practice then certainly in theory. Nor can we adopt the French Reformed church polity of the 16th and 17th centuries without certain corrections, for it did not entirely coincide with Calvin's views on the church. At least, this was suggested by Dr. A. Kuyper Sr., when he wrote, "Lechler has already demonstrated very accurately that the French synodical system does not agree with Calvin's theory." He explains what it lacked, "His (Calvin's) synodical system was based on confederation by joining voluntarily, and rejected any compulsion."<sup>11</sup>

Exactly because the local churches, though local manifestations of the one body of Christ, the one church from the beginning of the world to its end, are independent and not subordinate to each other with respect to organization and the instrumentality and provision of the offices, therefore these congregations can only join in confederation by mutual consent, as equals, none having any inherent authority over another; voluntarily they will agree together how they must act in various particular situations, and their authority with respect to each other does not extend beyond what has thus been mutually agreed and beyond the Word of God concerning these things. Whatever goes beyond and above this must be resisted and rejected as unlawful human arrogation and a violation of God's church.

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<sup>11</sup> A. Kuyper, *Het Calvinisme, Oorsprong en Waarborg Onze Constitutionele Vrijheden*, 74 and 49

### **The freedom of the Body**

There is then one church throughout the whole earth and in all ages. And each local church is but a manifestation of the one church of the Lord, of His congregation. However, that local church is not merely a subdivision of the greater regional, provincial, or national whole. The local churches are not subordinated or superior to each other; rather, they are independent equals, which, although they are called by God to form a cooperating bond, have no authorization or right from God to compel others to such cooperation, or to dominate in such a cooperative effort. In his attack upon Voetius' church polity, Dr. H.G. Kleijn seems often to neglect this. Although he does acknowledge "even if no one church nor federation can compel such a church to join any federation", here he is only denying the actual possibility, the power, not the authority, or the legitimacy by divine right.<sup>12</sup> Would such be allowed if the possibility, the physical ability to carry it out were present? Not according to Reformed church polity. This excludes all compulsion: it allows only impulsion, moral persuasion with the power of God's Word. All kinds of divine obligations may rest upon one; yet another has no right to compel him to fulfil these obligations.

A child must honour his parents. This fact does not permit just anyone to force a disobedient child to obey by means of a sound beating. Everyone is required by God to pay his creditors what he owes them. However, this does not permit just any other person to confiscate his goods and to ensure payment. The church, as body, may be a spiritual unity throughout the whole earth and in every country and region, but this does not make it an organized, officially instituted unity, of which the local churches are subdivisions. With respect to each other, the local

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<sup>12</sup> Kleijn, 315-323. See also 19

churches are independent, autonomous, with no right to rule over each other; although there is a divine obligation to form an orderly relation and to live in good cooperation, none has the right to force another to meet this obligation, even if it were possible. From the side of the churches, the bond between the churches rests solely upon mutual agreement, voluntary association, mutual consent. From God's side there is an obligation, if that relation is possible, but with respect to each other the local churches are free, and the relationship implies no other rights than those voluntarily ceded by the churches when the federation is effected. As soon as that federation, or the churches in that federation, or the broader assemblies of that federation go beyond the rights given or received in the federation, they are assuming what is not theirs; they are then in revolution against the churches and against God, and they are showing only human arrogance and self-exaltation.

When Dr. Kleijn argues against Voetius' thesis that the local church has no authority over any but those who have joined that church, confusion reigns again. He says "If there is no authority, then there are no obligations. But a local church certainly does have obligations, for it has to admonish them (that is, outsiders) to divine worship, and the magistrates are to have God's Word preached everywhere (Belgic Confession, Article 36)."<sup>13</sup> The apostle Paul writes on this "For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside." 1 Corinthians 5:12, 13.

Here a distinction is indicated, and the Lord says concerning him who continues to reject admonitions, "... let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" Matthew 18:17. Here He makes a distinction in obligations and behaviour towards those who do and those who do not

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<sup>13</sup> Kleijn, 318

belong to the congregation. From God's side there may be a call or obligation to preach the gospel, with warning, or admonition, without this implying the right to reprimand, censure, or exclude. Discipline can and may be exercised, from man's side - and here we are discussing only the competence, or divinely granted power of church or officebearer to take action - only where someone is already under that disciplinary authority. This stands to reason: excluding someone from the Lord's table and banning him from the congregation is only possible with respect to one who has already been granted admission to the table and membership in the congregation. "I am not praying for the world, but for those whom Thou hast given me," the Lord said, John 17:9. The Lord has not given His church either the right or the means to compel subjection, if any should not want to listen to His gospel, or should refuse Him and faith and obedience in His Word. "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them. It shall not be so among you," Matthew 20:25, 26. He sent out and called his disciples, His church to preach, to proclaim His Word, Matthew 10:7. He did not give His church means to exercise dominion beyond that Word. Accordingly He said, "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word," John 17:10. "Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers," Paul urged upon the consciences of the Asian elders, Acts 20:28. There is a boundary fixed to the authority of church and officebearer, a boundary which is drawn, in part, by unwillingness to believe and obey the Word which the Lord sends forth. "Let them alone," the Lord said to His disciples concerning the Pharisees, who were offended at His words, Matthew 15:14.

### **Spiritual unity is first**

The Lord's church of all times and over the whole world is a

single whole, but not one officially organized by Him throughout the world in its various lands and regions; rather, it is a spiritual unity, one like the human body. This unity exists despite a lack of organized connections in district, province, country, or world. This unity does not consist of an organization, nor does it require external, visible relations and organized coherence. The churches in Galatia were the one church of the Lord, His body, even though they did not have any official relations or interconnected organization. And the congregations at Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth, Ephesus and the rest of Asia Minor, as well as those at Rome and elsewhere, did form the one church of the Lord, although they were not brought together in a visible unity by an arrangement agreed to or imposed. The seven churches in Asia stood beside each other independently as seven lampstands, among whom the Lord walked. No external connection existed among them. John did not see them as one lampstand with seven lamps. Yet they were local manifestations of one and the same body of the Lord, His one church.

The unity of the church does not require necessary official relations and a mutual organization of local churches into a minor, major, and ever greater visible whole in region, dominion, and world. If it did, the Lord would have indicated this clearly in His Word. Moreover, He would have provided the offices necessary for this, with district, provincial, national, and universal authority, rather than only local offices - leaving aside, for the moment, apostles and prophets and evangelists. He would not have shown the seven churches of Asia to John as seven separate and distinct lampstands. He would also have had the apostle Paul establish an external organized relation between the congregations he had been instrumental in founding. However, we read nothing of this in Holy Scripture. The congregations in Palestine, in Cilicia, in Asia Minor, in Greece and elsewhere, those at Jerusalem, Antioch, Smyrna, Thyatira, Berea, Nicapolis and wherever they existed at that time, were the one body of the Lord, His one church, but they



had no mutual organised relation, no further official and external connection or association as a district church, regional church, national church, or universal church. All of them existed independently beside each other, none subordinated to the other. Therefore, when the Lord prays, "that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in me, and I in Thee, that they may also be in us so that the world may believe that Thou hast sent me," John 17:21, and "that they may be one even as we are one, I in them, and Thou in me, that they may become perfectly one," verses 22, 23, we should not understand this merely as an external, organized unity, and certainly not exclusively or primarily. The unity exists even when all external bond of cohesion is lacking. It can become evident even when no visibly connecting organization or relation is to be found. This is clear from the seven churches of Asia Minor, from the many congregations in various places mentioned in the New Testament. The unity consists in something else, and must become evident in something else, at least primarily. The external connection or organization of the churches mutually at various places is a matter of secondary or even more remote importance. It is not the main issue by far.

What then is that unity, and what is the main issue? "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all," Ephesians 4:4-6.

That unity is first of all, besides the fact that all true believers and all true churches have one and the same God and Father, one and the same Lord Jesus Christ, and one and the same Holy Spirit, that all true believers and churches share in and confess one and the same faith, namely, in the same Christ of God. That unity is that they acknowledge and accept Him in faith as the Son of God, sent by the Father, as the one who assumed our flesh and blood and gave Himself as ransom for and

reconciliation of our debt and sin, and who saves us from death and corruption, making us God's children, and who will finally grant us eternal blessedness out of sheer mercy; that all salvation is by God's mere grace through the Lord Jesus Christ; that there is no Redeemer other than He alone, the Saviour of the world; that whoever believes in Him with all his heart has eternal life, and will not die, even if he descends into death and the grave; that His Holy Spirit purifies and sanctifies, solely and completely; that His Word is the truth; that He will come to judge the world, and to take to Himself for eternity those who have accepted Him, in faith, as their Saviour.

That unity manifests itself in boasting only in the Lord. It becomes evident in obediently walking in the way of His Word, in acknowledging the Lord as Saviour and Lord with heart and mouth and deed. For "no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says 'Jesus be cursed!'" and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit," 1 Corinthians 12:3.

That unity is not merely a matter of external organization, although this may be connected with it and may flow from it. That external bond of unification or relation of the various local churches is of secondary, if not entirely subordinate significance and value, as appears from the lack of reference to such organisational coherence of the congregations in the New Testament. That unity is first and foremost a spiritual one, and is to manifest itself in unity of faith, confession, and life: faith in, confession of, and life for the Lord. It is thus that the world can learn to believe that the Father has sent the Son into the world, and it is thus that it can learn to acknowledge this and learn to discover the love of the Son. That does not occur through an outward organisational unity, through the connection of local churches into a visibly greater regional, provincial, national and world church. Rather, it occurs through unity of thought about, of faith in, of confession of, and of life for one and the same Christ of God through the Holy Spirit.

That unity exists only where all is regulated according to God's Word. In order for that unity to be manifested, there must be conformity in thought and faith and confession and life with what the Lord says in His Word, the Holy Scriptures. Where that conformity exists, there the unity is manifested, there the one church of Christ is evident as His body, even though there may not be an external, visible union or an organization of local churches. Where that conformity is lacking, on the other hand, there the unity of Christ's body, of His church is not to be found, even though there be the most tightly knit coherence of various local churches into one visible whole.

For the unity of the local churches as manifestation of the one church of the Lord, His body, to be found, there must be complete agreement of those churches in faith and confession and life with the Word of the Lord. Where that is present, the unity of the church is visible, even if the local churches exist independently and autonomously, like the seven golden lampstands among whom John saw the Lord, and among whom they walked. Where that agreement is lacking, that spiritual unity is not visible, even if those concerned can boast of a superb external complex of local churches in a brilliant organization. Then the words of Revelation 3:1 might apply, "You have the name of being alive, and you are dead."

Everything depends on agreement with the Word of God. On that agreement in faith and confession with respect to God and His Christ, or with respect to sin and our redemption from it, or the sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper, or the judgment and the eternal retribution or reward, or whatever else could be mentioned here, -- on this everything depends.

The manifestation of the one church of the Lord is to be found, or is lacking, according to the presence or lack of this agreement in each and all of these things with the Word of God, apart from any organizational ties. Where that agreement exists, there the Lord is

acknowledged as Saviour and Lord of His church, also of that particular local church. Where that agreement is lacking, there the Lord is not acknowledged as the Lord of His church, the only one with full and exclusive authority over and in His church, also over that particular local church. The external organizational ties between various local churches has no inherent value here. What matters is that a church, and a federation of churches, believes and confesses what the Lord has revealed in His Word, also with respect to the sacraments of baptism and Holy Supper, for instance, or of the work of the Holy Spirit in the salvation and sanctification of sinners. Where there is deviation from God's Word in that respect, disagreement with what the Lord has revealed in His Holy Scriptures, there is a breach of the unity of the church, schism, denial of the Lord and of His Word, not to be made good or replaced by external organization or ties with other local churches, whether few or many.

The true unity of the church, the evidence that a particular local church is a manifestation of the one body of the Lord, His church, is also to be found in the recognition of those who have been the Lord's servants over the course of the centuries. This entails not only recognition of His apostles and servants mentioned in the New Testament; but also of His later faithful servants, such as Irenaeus, Ambrose, Augustine, and so many others. From the time of the Reformation and later we might mention Luther, Calvin, John Knox, Guido de Bres, Voetius, and many others, despite the shortcomings to which they were subject. It is not their persons with which we are concerned, but the work of God which becomes evident in them, and which was done through their labour.

This too provides a distinguishing mark. Rome issued the anathema against Luther, Calvin, and Knox because of their work. We condemn, judging by God's Word, the labour of Ignatius de Loyola, and bless the ministry of Rev. H. De Cock and Dr. A. Kuyper, without

intending thereby to justify all their words and actions. Thus, in various ways, the unity of the church is displayed, without necessarily dealing with the question of external coherence or ties between the local churches. The latter is not the sum of what the Lord prayed for when He begged for the manifestation of the unity of His church. Nor is it the important thing. It has its worth, and when regulated and operating according to the Word of God, it has its utility and great significance. However, it also has a dangerous side: it has often worked for the corruption of the Lord's church. We need only think of the Roman hierarchy, or the synodical hierarchy of the Reformed Church of the Netherlands, of what has occurred at councils and synods. More than a few times the Lord was not honoured there as the only Head of His church, or His Word maintained as the exclusive measure for thought and deed. The Israel of the Old Testament had to be told by Isaiah, "Oh my people, your leaders mislead you, and confuse the course of your path," Isaiah 3:12. The New Testament Israel is no better than that of the Old, its leaders no more worthy than theirs, nor their assemblies no more excellent than those of the Old Testament. Then, too, there were excellent and just leaders, pious kings, true prophets of God; and such continued through all the ages of New Testament Israel. Of this the Lord made sure. But also in this respect it proves to be true that not all is Israel in heart, inclination, decision, and conduct that bears the name Israel and has an office to carry out among the New Testament Israel. For this reason, the Lord warned against unfaithful servants who do not care or regulate according to His Word, whom He will one day remove from their place and put with the hypocrites, Matthew 24:51. "Who then is the faithful and wise steward, whom his master will set over His household, to give them their portion of food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master when he comes, will find so doing. Truly, I say to you, He will set Him over all His possessions" Luke 12:42-44.

**Institution of offices**

The Lord has instituted offices in and for His church and these are of two kinds: offices for His whole church of all places and times, and offices for the distinct local manifestations of His one church, the local churches.

The first kind includes His apostles, the prophets in their time, and the evangelists. To the second belong the overseers or elders, the deacons, and such, see 1 Corinthians 12:28, Ephesians 4:11. His appointment of the apostles was not of such a nature that after their departure others had to take their place, that they could be replaced in their service by successors. Such a notion, held by Irvingites and Apostolics, is completely mistaken. The apostles could not and ought not to be replaced by successors. They individually were given by the Lord to His church of all ages spread throughout the whole world. Not as if they would have had to live on until the last day, never to die. But in such a way that their labour and preaching and regulative guidance would control and determine the whole church everywhere and at all times. That would be possible because the Lord ensured that what the whole church required in their work and preaching and regulative guidance was recorded and preserved in His Holy Scriptures. This is evident from John 17:20, where He speaks to the Father, "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word." The disciples or apostles would be taken away from the earth through death within a few decades. Then no one would be able to hear them on earth anymore. But the Lord is apparently referring not only to those who would physically hear their preaching and accept it in faith, but also to the subsequent generations. However, if these were to believe the word of the apostles, it would have to be preserved, in order to reach the subsequent generations in an unadulterated and reliable form. This happens in the Holy Scriptures. This is the way the Lord has bound His whole church

of all ages and all places, throughout the whole world, and to the last day, to the preaching and ordinances of His apostles. There must be faith through their word. All preaching which does not bring this word, which is not in accordance with this word, is not proper preaching, and is to be rejected. "He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me" He told them, Luke 16:10. This continued to hold true, since the Lord preserved their preaching in His Holy Scripture, and thus ensured that it could come to all people throughout the ages. The same is true for the ordinances or regulations given by the apostles for church life. In this way, the apostles are officebearers for the whole church, throughout all ages.

However, He gave pastors and teachers, overseers, elders, and deacons, to His church in such a way that they are appointed only in a particular local church, and at their retirement or death were to be replaced by others. Their office continues, but it is not permanently associated with their person. In it, others may succeed them and serve in their place. The office of apostle, however, was permanently bound to the person. This could and should not be taken up by others. Of them the Lord said, "You shall be my witnesses... to the end of the earth," Acts 1:8; with the Holy Spirit "you also are witnesses, because you have been with me from the beginning," John 15:27. This is true only for them. But then all the work of all subsequent overseers, elders, shepherds, teachers, and deacons, is bound to the witness of the apostles concerning the Lord and His speaking and acting, as well as to their regulations.

Whoever distances himself, in preaching or in regulation of church life, from the word of the apostles, from their preaching and from the order they established, is distancing himself from the Lord and His Word, and ceases, thereby, to be an officebearer of the Lord's church. "He who rejects you rejects me," Luke 10:16. "As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless

you abide in me... If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love," John 15:4, 10.

We may read of the appointment of deacons in Acts 6 and of the elders we read in Acts 11:30. Paul and Barnabas appoint elders in every congregation, Acts 14:23. At Philippi there were elders and deacons, Philippians 1:1. Paul called the elders of the congregation of Ephesus to himself at Miletus, and warned them to take heed to themselves and to the flock in which the Holy Spirit had made them overseers, Acts 20:28. Thus 'elder' and 'overseer' indicate the same office in the Lord's church. The apostle gives all sorts of prescriptions concerning the selection of overseers and deacons, and directions concerning their requirements in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

The one thing that must strike us when we consider the Lord's institution of the offices for His church, whether immediately, or through the mediation of His apostles, is that He gave no general offices for any group of churches, whether organized in a district, a province, or a country. He gave only the offices of apostle, prophet or evangelist to His whole church. However, He gave these in such a way that after their death, they would still serve His church through their word which was preserved; and without their being replaced by successors. Beyond these, He gave only local officebearers, who were to be continually replaced, and whose office was and is limited as to place and time: only there in the congregation which had chosen them, and only until their death, or as long as they were not replaced by successors. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in every church, Acts 14:23. Each of the churches in Asia had its own angel. The angel of the church of Ephesus was not such for Smyrna or Pergamum, or vice versa. There was not a single angel over all or some of these churches. Each congregation had its own angel, and each angel had its own congregation. The Lord has not given His church a general office which is not limited locally, apart from the offices of apostles, prophets and evangelists. This corresponds to the fact



that the Lord did not institute district, regional, provincial or national churches, but only local churches, which essentially are each others equals, not subordinated the one to the other, but completely independent with respect to each other; which, in so far as they do enter into correspondence and cooperation, do so in accordance with the Lord's demand for the unity of His church, but apart from this, completely voluntarily, by mutual agreement and mutual consent, with complete retention of their independence. If it were not so, the Lord would have had to give His church district, provincial, and national officebearers. As it is, He has given, besides apostles, prophets, and evangelists, only local officebearers, whose jurisdiction and authority does not extend beyond the terrain of the local church which called and appointed them to the fulfilment of their office. He also gave them His Word, by which they are to carry out all the work of their offices. For only that Word may dominate in the Lord's church, only that Word may act - or rather, the Lord, through His Word - because the church is His; He bought it with His blood, and it was given to Him for salvation by the Father.

### **Obligation to mutual assistance**

Because these local churches, however mutually independent and autonomous, are all local manifestations of the one church of the Lord, His body, and form the closest and most intimate spiritual unity, they also ought to enter into correspondence and cooperation with each other, in so far as that is possible.

For that cooperation and correspondence must serve the absolute supremacy of God's Word and the wellbeing of the churches. As soon as those two things, which are closely connected, and which are actually one, are prevented or harmed by the correspondence and cooperation, these must be broken off, annulled, whether in part or completely, depending on the circumstances.

However, in so far as it is possible, the local churches are bound before God to enter into communion with each other, to work together, to maintain effective correspondence. Dr. H.G. Kleijn says "In order to prevent individualism of local churches from destroying unity, and to enable the church truly to fulfil her calling, a federation of churches is necessary, the union of local churches into one body is the demand of Protestant principles."<sup>14</sup> But this view is somewhat too narrow. He infers the necessity of a church federation from the situation of human sinfulness, and from the danger of individualism in a local church. Immediately before this, he had written, "Since human sin and weakness makes such a misunderstanding possible, indeed, eventually actual, the ecclesiastical bond between those who confess the one faith would be dissolved unless the unity is maintained as much as possible." It seems that the Classes are to achieve this maintenance of unity. A little later he says, "As the consistory maintains oversight and discipline over the congregation, the Classis maintains oversight and discipline over the Board and all subsequent activities of the Consistory or its members."<sup>15</sup> The latter, it should be noted, is a hierarchical construction, not one based on Reformed church polity. Aside from this, however, the local churches should, in fact primarily enter into a church federation and work together because they are a spiritual unity, local manifestations of one and the same body of Christ. Church federation is not necessary, in the first place, because of sin and its unhappy results; rather, that which is essentially one must also manifest itself as such in the world, in so far as this is possible. Sin and its effects are only of secondary importance in this regard. Church federation ought not only to be sought to ward off danger, to prevent or resist individualism; each church has the calling,

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<sup>14</sup> Kleijn, 17

<sup>15</sup> Kleijn, 22, 23

just as each individual does, to use its treasures and gifts readily and cheerfully for the benefit and wellbeing of the other churches and believers. One church must serve the other with the gifts it has received from the Lord. This may include, of course, making up for one's own shortcomings, and turning away potential or actual abuses in one's own or another's ecclesiastical life.

Furthermore, it is questionable whether, on Dr. Kleijn's reading, only good would result from a church federation. The opposite is also possible: the federation or cooperation and correspondence with other churches could well endanger purity and right ordering of church life according to the Word of God. How much harm has not the Roman Catholic hierarchy done in the many centuries of its corruption and oppression, how much damage the synodical hierarchy in the Dutch Reformed Church since the last century, how much unhappiness have not the General Synods of the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands caused by false teaching and tyranny. No, a bond of churches is not a guarantee of well-being, it does not always achieve good. Although it is to be desired, where possible, and implied by the spiritual unity of all true local churches as manifestations of the one body of Christ, His church, it is not always strictly necessary, as shown, for instance, by the seven congregations in Asia seen by John as seven separate lampstands, independent and separate from each other, and not as one lampstand with seven lamps. The congregations in Galatia were also severely threatened by contact with men from Jerusalem, Galatians 1:6ff. Paul's courageous stand and actions then averted the danger.

However, in normal circumstances church federation is desirable and prescribed. One could even say that it is a divine calling, the more so since the apostles have departed - although constant watchfulness remains necessary.

**Rejection of hierarchical synodical structure**

People often appeal to Acts 15 in order to support a divine calling to church federation. Men from Jerusalem came to Antioch in Syria, insisting that believers from the Gentiles had to be circumcised and maintain the Mosaic law in order to be saved. When Paul and Barnabas strongly opposed this teaching, and a major conflict resulted, these two and several others were delegated to Jerusalem. After what proved to be a vehement discussion there as well, the requirement is lifted, but the believers from the Gentiles are instructed to maintain certain rules for life.

However, even when we examine this account carefully, it is difficult to obtain any certainty concerning the way in which the discussion proceeded and the decision was reached. Nor is it easy to say what application this account has to a church federation.

We may probably assume that what is related in Acts 15 and in Galatians 2 both apply to the same gathering at Jerusalem. First of all, we will have to remember that the discussion was not held in order to shed light on a dark, unknown subject. Paul was quite clear on the will of God in this matter, that there could be no discussion of a divine requirement that the believers from the Gentiles be circumcised and maintain the laws of ritual purity in order to share in the salvation of Christ. The other apostles knew that equally well. The Lord had clearly revealed this in bestowing His grace upon the Gentile Cornelius at Caesarea, Acts 10. The issue was not unclear to the apostles; it was not a matter upon which the light of God's revelation had yet to shine.

A party of believers from the Pharisees resisted the notion that believers from the Gentiles were free of circumcision and the laws of purity, that salvation through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ could be obtained independently from circumcision and the laws of purity. Of course, the issue had not appeared in Jerusalem, since there only Jews

came to the faith. It was different in Syrian Antioch, where also Gentiles came to faith in the Lord. When those in Jerusalem heard that there people of Gentile descent had accepted the Lord in faith, and that they had been admitted as members of the congregation without being circumcised, and that they had not been required to maintain Israel's laws of purity regarding food and drink, this party was aroused to vehement opposition, Acts 15:1, 2. They did not yield to the authority of the apostle Paul and of Barnabas. They apparently considered Paul an apostle of lower rank, not really an apostle, in fact, one who could not speak with divine authority, see Galatians 1 and 2. Only the original apostles could do that. For this reason the dispute had to be forwarded to Jerusalem for a decision. Apparently, these men thought to have the other apostles and the congregation at Jerusalem behind them on this. With this support they would compel Paul and Barnabas and the congregation at Antioch to give way.

Thus it was not a matter of incomplete divine revelation among the Lord's apostles or congregation, but an unwillingness on the part of these men from Jerusalem to acknowledge Paul fully as an apostle, and to accede to the Lord's previous revelation about this issue through Paul and through the history of Cornelius. Even in Jerusalem, it seems, this party had forcefully maintained its opposition, also with respect to the other apostles, as Acts 15:7 suggests, "... and after there had been much debate", namely at Jerusalem. In Galatians 2:3, Paul says that Titus, whom he had taken with him to Jerusalem, though fully a Gentile by descent, "was not compelled to be circumcised"; this suggests that there had been strong pressure upon him to have this done. Neither at Antioch, nor at Jerusalem, then, was it necessary to obtain divine illumination in a dark matter. Neither at Antioch, nor at Jerusalem, we should note, do we read of earnest and continuing prayer for revelation about what was not yet known, or about what had not yet been revealed by the Lord. But at both places there were vehement discussions. Both parties were clear

on what they wanted. Paul and Barnabas and the other apostles knew the will of God concerning this matter; their opponents probably knew less, but they did know that they wanted the believers from the Gentiles circumcised and bound to the laws of Moses. God had given those laws, had He not? Had not Israel been scourged time after time, eventually to be cast out of Canaan into exile because they did not maintain these divinely ordained laws? Thus we read, not of earnest prayer for illumination, neither there or at Antioch, but of vehement debates and dissension, Acts 15:2, 7. The men at Antioch who had come from Jerusalem, with those who were of like mind, would not bend before what God had already revealed, both through the incident with Cornelius and through His apostle Paul, and tried to enforce their opinion, demanding, when all else failed, that the decision would have to be taken in Jerusalem. Paul would not be able to express the will of the Lord in this matter, nor Barnabas, nor the prophets and teachers who may have been working at Antioch, but the apostles and congregation at Jerusalem. Apparently, they had counted on being supported there; though that did not occur, see Acts 13:1.

However, even after that, these men seem not to have ceased their agitation against Paul, but despite everything, they continued to attempt to move the congregations established by Paul in the Gentile world to accept circumcision and a life of adherence to Jewish ceremonial laws. This may be inferred from the apostle's letter to the Galatians, from Philippians 3 and from 2 Corinthians 10ff., all written after the events related in Acts 15 and Galatians 2:1-10.

This alone indicates that one can hardly speak of a synod in the usual sense when referring to this gathering in Jerusalem. But there is more: all manner of things are unclear. The uncertainty begins with the question by whom Paul, Barnabas, and the others were delegated from Antioch to Jerusalem. Naturally, we would say, "By the congregation there, of course." And this seems to be self-evident, at first glance.

However, this is not all that certain. Grammatically, Luke's account could also indicate that those who had come from Jerusalem arranged or made the delegation. This, indeed, is also the view of Th. Zahn: "Those who had come from Jerusalem (Judaists), however, ordered them, that is Paul and Barnabas, and several others, to travel up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders, in order to argue the case in this juridical conflict in their presence."<sup>16</sup> Now this is not likely. We will probably have to assume that the congregation at Antioch sent Paul, Barnabas, and the others to Jerusalem as their deputies. Those who had come from Jerusalem will surely have understood that the ministers of the gospel were not simply at their beck and call. But even if we assume that the congregation delegated them, there is another remarkable point. If the congregation delegated them, why does Paul say in Galatians 2:2 that "I went up by revelation"?

In fact, these two statements do not exclude each other; rather, they complement each other. At the same time, however, there is an important lesson for us: Paul would not have accepted this delegation by the congregation at Antioch unless he had also received a divine revelation concerning the matter. The congregational delegation was not a divine obligation, as far as he was concerned, to go to Jerusalem to discuss this issue. Ecclesiastical delegation does not prove to be divine calling just like that. It would seem that the apostle had grave misgivings about accepting the commission, and probably would not have gone as a delegate. However, he received the divine revelation, and then he went. It is not hard to see why he would have had objections. He knew what the will of God was in this dispute. He did not need more light upon the question. God had let him come to know the Lord Christ and

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<sup>16</sup> Th. Zahn, *Die Apostelgeschichte des Lucas II*, (Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1921), 499

His work of salvation so clearly that he had no trouble seeing how this demand that believers from the Gentiles be circumcised and keep the law underestimated God's grace in Christ and the completeness of His merit and redemption, Galatians 5:2-4. He did not need more light to be shed on this, least of all through the apostles and the congregation at Jerusalem, whom he had not approached either at the beginning, or at his conversion, for instruction, Galatians 1:16-18. Going to Jerusalem to consult with them about this issue might suggest that he was not completely sure, and that he did not really know what to do in this case. This would be, in fact, a denial of the knowledge which God had already granted him, and might weaken his stand with respect to the truth in this matter. More importantly, the other apostles also knew quite well that salvation could not be obtained by circumcision and keeping of the law, and that Christ's gracious deliverance did not need to be supplemented by human efforts to obtain salvation, and that circumcision and maintaining the ceremonial laws were not a condition for sharing in the Lord's work of reconciliation and salvation. They did not need information or revelation concerning this either. What would be the point of going to Jerusalem, and taking counsel there? Was that necessary because of these hardhearted erring persons, who refused to be instructed or taught? Did the gospel truth have to be risked for their sake, did it have to appear as something not yet certain?

What if the apostles and congregation at Jerusalem gave in to these men who had come from Jerusalem and their fellow zealots, men who were apparently of significant numbers, force, and courage, as may be inferred from their actions at Antioch and Jerusalem, Acts 15:1, 2, 7ff.?

Peter was not immune to fear of men, despite the fact that he knew better, as his subsequent surrender to this party at Antioch shows, Galatians 2:12. Even Barnabas did not remain steadfast on that occasion, verse 13. Paul must have known the people he was dealing with. The



others too might shrink back before the insistence of these fearless men. Then the gospel would be adulterated, the completeness of Christ's work of salvation denied, the full grace of God in Christ sold short, the church torn asunder, Paul's missionary task gravely damaged, the congregations from the Gentiles presented as second-rate, and so incalculable harm done to the Christian religion. It is no wonder that the apostle hesitated, considering these potential effects, and perhaps even refused to accept his delegation, until the Lord gave him the revelation by which he could, and knew he should, go up to Jerusalem. The apostle does not write what that revelation was. It must have been something to the effect that he could freely go, for the result would be positive, and that the Lord would ensure a favourable course of events.

This divine revelation is by no means a legitimization of the gathering at Jerusalem; certainly it is no approval, or a divine indication that it was right and according to His will. For it should not have been necessary. God's revelation concerning this matter had already been given. Paul and the others already knew God's will about it. And from a human perspective, there were many dangers associated with this gathering and consultation. God, of course, could avert those dangers, and He did. But we should not tempt God. We should not enter into situations where only God's special guidance or intervention can preserve us from smaller or greater disasters.

For this reason, the Lord's revelation to Paul that he could go to Jerusalem without fear, is not, in itself, a divine approval of the insistence of those from Jerusalem who had come to Antioch; nor of the assembly there, and therefore, it cannot be seen as an indication that where there are difficulties in one or more churches a solution is to be sought in a similar way, by the assembly of a classis or synod. One should not jump to hasty and careless conclusions here. The Lord has certainly not forbidden such assemblies, but He has not prescribed them either. Though there may be good sides to them, at the same time there

are also weaker sides, which may cause dangers.

Even now, however, there are difficulties and obscurities left with respect to the meeting in Jerusalem. It is not clear, namely, just who considered the matter and came to a decision, and what the part and significance of the congregation was in this process. From Galatians 2:2 we may and must conclude, it seems, that there was a twofold meeting: a narrower session and a broader one. Meetings, one or more, of Paul and Barnabas with the apostles and leaders at Jerusalem; and meetings, one or more, with a far greater number, in which the congregation at Jerusalem was also present, see Acts 15:22. Acts 15 does not mention the twofold nature of these meetings and consultations. It leaves us with the impression of one single discussion. Acts 15:6 says that the apostles and elders gathered together to consider this matter; this corresponds with the greeting of verse 23, addressed to the brethren in Antioch, which is in name of "the brethren, both the apostles and the elders." This reading of the manuscripts is generally considered the most reliable. Other manuscripts have, "the apostles and the elders and the brothers." In the latter reading, three groups are named, in the former, two. These brothers would be members of the congregation who did not have a special office. However, it seems more likely that the latter reading is an alteration, introduced because the former was considered somewhat odd. We will, therefore, maintain the first reading. That would mean that according to verses 6 and 22 only the officebearers are indicated as making the decision. However, verses 22, 23 indicate: "Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas... with the following letter..." In the original it says, "writing through their hand..." which refers to those who were sending in verse 22. The question, then, is in how far the congregation was involved in the considerations and decision. We may conclude in all probability that the apostles and elders took the decision, formulating the conclusion, but

that the congregation was present during the deliberations and discussions, at least those in the broader meetings, and shared in assenting to the delegation of men to go with Paul and Barnabas to Antioch. The apostles and elders would then be the ones actually deliberating and coming to a conclusion, but this happened in the presence of the congregation, which then gave its assent, probably silently. We cannot be very definite here, of course. If there are any lessons to be drawn from this gathering for classical and synodical assemblies, they would be that, even if only the delegates have the right to speak and decide, the deliberations should not take place in isolation from the congregation, but should occur before it, especially those which concern doctrine. Matters should not be dealt with outside of the congregation, with the result that a decision is imposed upon the congregation out of the secrecy of a deliberating assembly, a decision of which it has no prior knowledge, and from the discussion of which it has previously been totally excluded.

Now Dr. D. Jacobs believes that the decision at Jerusalem was made without the cooperation of Paul and Barnabas. Jacobs writes, "Paul and Barnabas are not again mentioned as among those by whom the decision is published, although they will have received it with joy."<sup>17</sup> It is true, as he also says, "In the letter, which does refer to Paul and Barnabas, though not as among those who have made the decision, the latter are referred to only as the apostles and elders, brethren."<sup>18</sup> However, Paul was an apostle as well. And was not Barnabas reckoned among the apostles? Acts 14:4, 14. In Acts 15:22, 23, we read "apostles". Should Paul and Barnabas be excluded from these? Were

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<sup>17</sup> D. Jacobs, *De Verhouding tusschen de Plaatselijke en de Algemeene Kerk in de eerste drie eeuwen*, (Leiden, 1927), 51.

<sup>18</sup> Jacobs, 51

they not present? Paul and Barnabas had taken part in the discussion, see verse 12. Would they not have taken part in the decision? Why not? Should this decision be one made exclusively by the congregation at Jerusalem and its apostles and officebearers there, without the delegates from Antioch? Why? Did they not have a profound interest in the outcome? Why should they only speak there, and not be able to influence the decision by taking part in the vote? It is true that we read in verse 25, "...to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul." Does this necessarily exclude the involvement of these two in making the decision? Paul and Barnabas will not have drafted this letter themselves. That is self-evident. But they also did not get the letter to take along with them. Others from Jerusalem brought it to Antioch, although they travelled with these two, and will have read it to the congregation at Antioch. However, does this exclude Paul and Barnabas' part in taking the decision of verses 28 and 29? Even if this were so, they certainly had influenced the decision, for at the meeting in Jerusalem they had not been silent, but had spoken, verse 12.

Dr. D. Jacobs notes the emphatic *we* in Acts 21:25. No other congregations, no delegates from elsewhere, not even Paul and Barnabas can be included as the promulgators of this decree. This one comes solely from Jerusalem, and that is indeed how the elders of this congregation also saw it. This is clear from what they say, Acts 21:25. All emphasis falls on that *we*, (Greek: *humeis*). They are responsible for the decision, not Paul.<sup>19</sup> Is this how we are to understand Acts 21:25? Is this the emphasis we are to take note of? But had not Paul also delivered to his congregations the decision of Jerusalem, Acts 16:4, and that only as a decision of the apostles and elders who were at Jerusalem, without his own agreement? Should we not rather explain this emphatic

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<sup>19</sup> Jacobs, 54

we in Acts 21:25 as in contrast with the **you** of the previous verses, in which what Paul would have to do is described?

Whatever is the case, the congregation at Jerusalem was not kept in the dark about what was being discussed. At the very least, it seems to have been present during the discussions and deliberations, the decision, and selection. Apostles and elders did not act in isolation from the congregation; not even the apostles. Similarly, Paul would later not wish to proclaim a sentence of exclusion by himself upon the sinner at Corinth, but wanted to act in concert and cooperation with the congregation there: "When you are assembled, and my spirit is present..." he writes, 1 Corinthians 5:4.

The demand of those who wanted also believers from the Gentiles to be circumcised and to maintain the ceremonial laws, without which there would be no salvation in Christ, was rejected. Certain rules of life were given, which would serve to create greater harmony between believers from the Gentiles and those from the Jews. Here the phrase "it has seemed good" is used, (Greek: *edoxe*) and the text refers to decisions (Greek: *dogmata*) which are determined (Greek: *kekrimena*), that is, established as by the judgments of a judge, (Greek: *krites*), Acts 15:22, 25, 28; 16:4. The force of that 'it has seemed good' (*edoxe*) and decision (*dogma*) depends completely on the authority which pronounces it: if it is the government, Luke 2:1, it is a command, if it is a philosopher, it is an opinion. Here it is the Holy Spirit who stands behind it, Acts 15:22, 25, and therefore it is strictly binding. But why? Because the Holy Spirit stands behind it, or also because the apostles and elders have so judged? We should not forget that at this gathering the apostles were present and took part. No later synod can make the same claim. Is it by this that it could be said that the Holy Spirit led this decision? One cannot be definite. Besides, in this matter, God had already given His revelation and had provided adequate knowledge. Of no later synod

decision can it be said that the Holy Spirit caused it to be made and stood behind it, except in so far as it corresponded with God's Word. If it agrees with that, it has divine authority, because it merely teaches or prescribes what the Holy Spirit says in God's Word, the Holy Scriptures. If it deviates from that, or conflicts with that, then it is of no authority, regardless of the size or dignity of the synod which has made it.

People have no authority from themselves, not even if they are gathered in great numbers and unanimity. The only relevant factor to all decisions of ecclesiastical assemblies is whether the Holy Spirit guided the decision-making. People may do no more than judge (Greek: *krinein*), that is, to investigate what the Word of God says, and by that Word of God to evaluate everything and to establish, to reject, to prescribe, or to forbid.

Broader ecclesiastical assemblies are not authorities who by their own competence may command and ordain, who may demand obedience as powers set by God; rather, they are simply to function as judges (Greek: *kritai*), to distinguish, (Greek: *krinein*), to evaluate what does or does not meet the requirements of God's Word, or what is or is not according to the measure of Holy Scripture. If their judgment corresponds to what the Word says, they may declare that they have acted under or by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and what they have decided has authority, because God's Word stands behind it. If not, it has no power at all, regardless of the size or dignity of the synod.

In this respect, the Westminster Synod was totally mistaken when it claimed, in the Westminster Confession, that "the decrees and determinations" of synods and councils "are to be received with reverence and submission, not only for their agreement with the Word but also for the power of the assembly whereby they are made." In all ecclesiastical decisions, also those of synods, what matters is that "it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit." And this is to be known only by the correspondence of those decisions with the Word of God, that is, Holy

Scripture. Without that, they have no lawful, divine authority.

Furthermore, it is remarkable that this assembly at Jerusalem, although it declares, “it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us,” Acts 15:28, does not design any measures, does not prescribe any disciplinary procedures in case of possible disobedience. It does not issue a writ of exclusion. It does not suggest possible courses of action to punish or excommunicate. In this respect, it acts quite differently from other synods of earlier centuries and more recent years.

Though the assembly at Jerusalem may offer some divine indication concerning the permissibility and desirability of synodical meetings of local churches, it is important to note well just what occurred at Jerusalem as revealed by the Lord for our instruction and example; in order that an ecclesiastical assembly does not assume the title of Holy Synod and claim the leadership of the Holy Spirit, although this is not the case, but human conceit and arrogance rule, and the Word of God is put aside and trodden underfoot.

The church is the Lord’s. He alone has the right to take command over and in it. He has full authority over it. And He has revealed His will to us in His Word. Therefore everything must be measured by that Word, ordered according to that Word, based upon that Word, and drawn from that Word. Only what accords with that Word has authority, divine authority. What does not, or what deviates or conflicts with that Word has no divine power, must be rejected and done away with, regardless of the persons or synods who have determined or accepted it.

### **Be on guard!**

It is difficult then to draw firm conclusions concerning broader ecclesiastical assemblies from Acts 15. There is too much uncertainty and unclarity around that meeting in Jerusalem; in addition, there is the very

special fact of the presence of the apostles. Furthermore, the meeting was not concerned with obtaining light which had already been kindled by the Word of God, and which the apostles had already seen; rather, it was concerned with resisting the danger which threatened from the side of those who sought to counterfeit the gospel, to corrupt the church of the Lord, albeit in ignorance and misjudgment, though with force and vigour.

Nevertheless, major assemblies are still desirable and useful. In a sense, they are given with the unity of the Lord's church throughout the whole world. The local churches are but manifestations of that one church, and thus they form one spiritual whole together. As far as it is possible, it is desirable and good that this spiritual unity be brought out by affiliation and cooperation.

However, this must always so take place that the independence of the local churches remains inviolate. From a human point of view, it will always consist of mutual agreement and mutual consent. The affiliation and cooperation may not go beyond what has been agreed upon. Whatever transgresses this is human arrogation, and must be resisted, even though it may be presented piously and with deference to God. The prophet Micah already knew of prophets who led the Lord's people astray, who cried peace when they had something to eat but declared war (in the Lord's name) against him who put nothing in their mouths, Micah 3:5. In all affiliation and cooperation everything is to be regulated according to the Word of God. Whatever does not agree with that Word is to be rejected. Therefore everyone who may be affected should evaluate the cooperation and decisions by the standard of God's Word: in the first place the local congregations and their officebearers or consistories. No one may comfort themselves with the thought that the decision has been made by this one or that one and must therefore be alright; all should investigate, to the best of their ability, whether there is indeed agreement with God's Word. Only in this way will one rest



only upon the Word of God, and not upon human pretensions.

This affiliation and cooperation may be necessary to supply certain wants, to remove abuses, to serve those who need it with gifts and goods, or to perform more effectively what is the responsibility of all, but cannot be achieved alone. However, in all this, one may never forget that harm may stem also from such cooperation, no less than it may from the individual believer or the individual local congregation. The bond of churches can serve the wellbeing of the churches, if everything is done according to the demands of the Word of God. However, it may also serve their destruction if there is a deviation from the Word of God, or if there is human invention and self-sufficiency, or if the tyranny of human domination takes over to prescribe and regulate everything.

For this reason our fathers have included this basic stipulation in the Church Order, originally as the first article, and later as the final one which dominates all that has preceded it: "No church shall in any way lord it over other churches, no officebearer over other officebearers..." (Article 74). Furthermore, they agreed that "whatever may be agreed upon by a 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..." (Article 31). God's Word will have to be the standard, and the Church Order will have to be applied, the mutual agreement of the churches, before anything has force of law, even something that a general synod decides on. This is in full agreement with Paul's word, "but even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed... if anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed, Galatians 1:8-9.

Our Saviour said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you," Matthew 20:25-26. Paul wrote his letter to the

churches of Galatia, not to the church of Galatia, Galatians 1:2. And John saw the Lord walking amidst seven separate lampstands, not holding in His hand one lampstand with seven lamps, Revelation 1:13, 2:1.

The Lord knows the desire for domination and superiority, also among His own, dressed up in religious apparel and with pious words, also in His church, among its leaders, even among His apostles. However, He condemned it and forbade it among His own. "But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren," Matthew 23:8. "Tend the flock of God that is your charge, not by constraint but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly, not as domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock," 1 Peter 5:2-3.

Throughout the ages we may see how great the devastation was which hierarchy continually wrought in the Lord's church, even in the churches of the Reformation. And now, after a recovery of almost fifty years it has once again arisen in our Reformed Churches, with its unhappy misery and destruction and false teaching and schism. Again and again it becomes clear that the demands of God's Word with respect to church life, namely, that He alone be honoured as Lord and sole Owner of the church, are not taken seriously enough, and that not every act in and for the church is performed according to God's Word. Our own insights, our own desires, our own dignity are allowed to dominate the Lord's church, though they are concealed to a greater or a lesser degree under pious appearances and religious pretexts. The result is disturbance, distress, and disaster. The events of the past few years in the Reformed Churches are a witness to this.

A good shepherd is recognized by his sheep. They know his voice, he calls them by name and leads them out. "When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from

him, for they do not know the voice of strangers," John 10:3-5.

This is also true when a synod takes on the role of shepherd. What matters is whether the voice of the good Shepherd is heard out of that synod, that is, the voice of God's Word, the correspondence, in word and deed, with God's ordinances or revelation in Holy Scripture. If this is lacking, if there is a conflict with what the Lord has revealed about His church and its faith and life in those Holy Scriptures, the sheep will flee, and they must flee, for the voice of the synod is not that of the good Shepherd, but of one who disturbs the flock, regardless of what shepherd's garment he has put on, and regardless of how flatteringly and softly he lisps, or how mightily he roars. The sheep should, therefore, not temporarily entrust themselves to such a shepherd, hoping later to be able to release themselves and be liberated from his corrupting care. That is too dangerous. By then such deliverance may be out of reach, and the corruption may have spread too deeply. The apostle Paul, for instance, did not write to the Galatians that they should continue to entrust themselves, for the time being, to the false teachers and their preaching, until he himself could come to them and straighten everything out again. Without any attempt to mollify them, without any compromise or postponement he said, as sharply as possible, "But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one which you received, let him be accursed," Galatians 1:8.

When? Later? In a little while? After this or that? May or should matters continue for the time being? No, now, immediately. "As we have said before, so now I say again, If any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed," Galatians 1:9.

The apostle knows nothing of temporarily permitting and acquiescing in what conflicts with the Word of God, until others too will share your insight, and will admit, that this or that preaching, that this or that synodical decision, conflicts with the gospel of God, the Holy Scriptures. Everyone has his own responsibility, which cannot be passed

off to others. Everyone must judge for himself, must decide now, when something does not conform to God's Word, to reject it and to break with it, not continuing with others in the wrong. No synod, no church federation affords you any excuse. People are not the lords of the church. Christ is its absolute owner and commander.

"Oh, that today you would hearken to His voice! Harden not your hearts," Psalm 95:7, 8.