

VII “THE WORD OF GOD IS NOT FETTERED” (2 Timothy 2:9)

HOW DO WE READ THE CHURCH ORDER?

Reopening of debate

In 1988 there was a debate in *Clarion* about the first part of Art. 31 of the Church Order, “If anyone complains that he has been wronged by the decision of a minor assembly, he shall have the right to appeal to the major ecclesiastical assembly. . . .” To summarize the debate: W.W.J. VanOene was of the opinion that an appeal is only to be made if one is personally wronged, while J.D. Wielenga defended the view that the right of appeal is given with the responsibility of all the members of the churches to see to it that the churches are governed by the pure Word of God. The debate was stopped after counterplea and rejoinder in the *Clarion* issue of September 11, 1987.

However, I asked for reopening of the debate. I did that for two reasons. In the first place, I noticed that several people still had questions about the matter. (One of them already wrote an article about it, but knowing that the debate was stopped, he did not ask for publication.) The second reason is that, in my opinion, this topic is so important that we have to discuss it again. It was decided at that meeting that the discussion be reopened.

No principles?

W.W.J. VanOene (1987:221) said concerning the first part of Art. 31 C.O.: “I would certainly not say that ‘a general principle was applied,’ namely, ‘the general principle that wrong decisions of minor assemblies can be appealed.’ Our Church Order does not lay down or contain principles. Our Church Order shows how the ‘principles’ laid down in the Word of our God and repeated in our confessions are to be applied in the life of the churches.”

Now it is so that many principles are to be applied in the life of the churches. Not all of them are written down in the Church order. Therefore I want to underline what, already a hundred years ago, was said by the professor of Reformed church polity in the time that the churches returned to the Church Order of Dordt, F.L. Rutgers: “The church order pronounces only principles. Their elaboration and explication are left to ecclesiastical assemblies.” In the following passage F.L. Rutgers stresses this again: “The church order only gives general principles.” Elsewhere he says that the Church Order has actually two pillars. The first one is the former Art. 1 (in the C.O. of the Canadian Reformed Churches now Art. 74), namely, “No Church shall in any way lord it over other Churches, no office-bearer over other office-bearers.” The second is Art. 31 in which it is guaranteed that God’s Word has the final say in the church. Rutgers calls them the two pillars of the Church Order, or the two main principles (*Collegedictaten* 1892/’93).

Especially regarding Art. 31 C.O. Rutgers wrote: “The principle is here that God’s Word has more authority than all the authority of ecclesiastical assemblies” (*Ibidem*). I expect that the Rev. VanOene will reply, “but that is only the opinion of one man, and I am not bound to human opinions.” We should bear in mind that this was said

precisely after the return to the Church Order of Dordt in a time (the time of the Doleantie) that hierarchy and human wisdom had the upperhand in the church. In that same time it was said that there are three principles of Reformed church polity: 1) absolute binding to Scriptures, and therefore also 2) absolute authority of Christ Himself in the church and 3) exclusion of every human dominion in the church. I may again refer to the church polity expert of the Doleantie time, Rutgers, who said that this former Art. 1 (now 74) is a very important principle which, at the first Dutch synod after the Reformation, even preceded the article about unity in doctrine (Art. 2 of the Synod of Emden, 1571). Then Rutgers continued, "Not that this former Art. 1 is *the* fundamental principle, as if in this one point everything is already said. It is certainly true that belonging to the confederation of churches also brings along certain obligations. Nevertheless, with the acknowledgment of this principle expressed in Art. 1 of the Synod at Emden 1571 the whole Reformation is at stake." (Rutgers, 1918:156).

No *via media*

I agree with WW.J. VanOene that the Church Order is not taking the "golden mean," the *via media*, in order to avoid the two cliffs of hierarchy and independencism. It indeed does not do so. But we add immediately: the Church Order goes the good Reformed way, following the Scriptures and the confession. This means that *principles* are laid down in the Church Order. One of the principles is that no church, no office-bearer, may lord it over other churches or office-bearers. This principle goes back to what our Saviour commanded His disciples, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves" (Luke 22:25, 26, cf. also Matthew 20:25-27). We may say that the Church Order has a scriptural and confessional character. This does not mean that the Church Order has a value or authority equal to that of Scripture. But it means that the Church Order is built upon the basis of Scripture and confessions.

In our book *Decently and in Good Order*, G. Van Rongen and I came to the conclusion that the Church Order is a further exposition of what our churches confess on the ground of God's Word. I quote, "It is true, a number of clauses included in the Church Order are nothing more than agreements between the churches to handle certain matters in an identical fashion, where in fact different paths could be chosen. Also contained in our Church Order are several stipulations which cannot be traced back to any commandment of Christ or His apostles, yet they were laid down as being beneficial to the churches in showing unity and presenting a common front. We may refer here e.g. to Articles 32, 43, and 44c. Apart from that, it is not a kind of code, containing all kinds of detailed rules and regulations. However, generally speaking our Church Order is based on the 'Spiritual order' which we are taught in the Scriptures. It is therefore an important element in maintaining the unity of faith among the churches and in each local congregation. This does not mean that our Church Order is a perfect document. It goes without saying that neither creeds, confessions, nor church orders ever attain equal level with Holy Scripture; if ever anything in them is recognized as being incorrect or wrong, it must be amended. The late Professor P. Deddens of the Kampen Theological Seminary used to say: "To have a Church Order is a good thing, but only together with an open Bible!" " (p. 13ff.)

This means also (and my father stressed that in his inaugural speech of 1946, just after the "Liberation"), that all human decisions in the church need examination. I translate from another speech of my father the following words: "Church polity, as it is summarized and expressed in the Church Order, is a matter of confession. The

contents of the Church Order is nothing else but a specified explanation of what the Belgic Confession says e.g. in the articles 7, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, and 32. Basis and all-important factor of it is that Jesus Christ is the only King of the church. He rules the church by His Word and Spirit by means of the consistory, the *only* body which received from Him authority for leadership and rule in the local church” (Deddens, 1950:17).

Open Bible!

I want to stress especially the matter of the “open Bible” when discussing the Church Order. This year a book was published in the Netherlands with the title “*De kerkorde, regel voor vrede in de kerk*” (The Church Order, rule for peace in the church). The author is H. Bouma and it is published in the series *Woord en Wereld* (no. 8), Ermelo. It is remarkable that Bouma shows from page to page that the Church Order is based on the Scriptures. Time and again he quotes texts from the Bible in order to demonstrate that not only a confederation of churches is based on the Bible, but also that all kinds of articles of the Church Order are to be considered in the framework of texts, c.q., passages from the Scriptures.

We read in this book, “As for the matter of an appeal to broader assemblies, this matter is not something trifling or to carry one’s point. Article 31 C.O. discusses a wrong due to a pronouncement (‘uitspraak’), not a decision (‘besluit’) but a sentence, a judgment.” Bouma continues, “Imagine that a consistory came to a decision on a certain point. But somebody in the congregation is of the opinion that this decision would harm the church and its Lord. Then one shall bring this before the consistory with good grounds. Then the consistory has to examine that decision and it has to come to a decision about its first decision: was it a good decision or was it not? So, an appeal about a decision is not mentioned here, but an appeal about a pronouncement, a judgement. One must not appeal to a broader assembly too rashly, but first of all call the consistory involved to further reflection” (Bouma, 1989:43).

I agree with the Rev. Bouma in this respect. But what is now the scriptural background of the right of appeal? Of course, that no injury, no injustice, no wrong is to be tolerated in the church. Therefore there must be the possibility of an appeal.

Inadmissible?

Now the question is, is an appeal to a broader assembly inadmissible when it comes from someone who is not personally wronged? Not really! If there is injury, injustice, wrong in the church, everybody must have the right of appeal with regard to that evil. Why? Because injustice must be taken away, as soon as possible. Imagine that the person who is wronged by a minor assembly will become seriously ill after the decision. Imagine that he passes away before he can do anything. Or imagine that he was so upset that he withdrew from the church. Of course, such action would be wrong. But the question is, what about that wrong decision? Is then injustice to remain because there is no possibility of an appeal? May nobody else appeal? Is everything then blocked and will the injury be maintained? Here we have a ground which shows the need of an open Bible when we read our Church Order. The Bible says, “How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? Give justice to the weak and the fatherless, maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute” (Psalm 83:2, 3). The late Prof. Dr. S. Greijdanus quoted this text in connection with the bad decisions of the General Synod of 1944 in the Netherlands.

Now this is just one text. There are many more texts in the Bible which point to the necessity that injury and injustice must be taken out of the church, without delay.

The freedom of God's children must be honoured in the church, including the freedom that they have the right to point to injustice and injury, and to appeal unjust decisions also when injury is done to others. It could be that consistories and also other ecclesiastical assemblies are blinded, so that they do not see that there is something wrong.

Confession and Church Order

We need an open Bible when we read the Church Order. But there is also a close connection between the Church Order and the Confession. I quote with respect to this Prof. J. Hovius of Apeldoorn, "Already in Wezel 1568 the *principles* are indicated according to which ecclesiastical life had to be developed." (Hovius, 1962:15). Of course, in the Church Order some practical rules are given, but the main purpose of the Church Order is to *preserve* the churches by the Scriptures as summarized in the Confessions. Hence Hovius did not say: the Church Order is only an application of the Confession, but he stated that "there is an essential and very close relation between our Confession and our Church Order. Both are structurally as well as essentially correlated."

We may even say — and this has been taught for many years in "Kampen" — with the words of W. Niesel in his book about Reformed Confessions and Church Orders: "According to Reformed doctrine, also the order of the church has a confessional character" (Niesel, 1938:V).

Only if personally wronged?

This brings me again to Article 31 of the Church Order. I read in Joh. Jansen, *Korte Verklaring van de Kerkenordering*, (Kok, Kampen, p. 143), that this article implies that decisions of ecclesiastical assemblies are not infallible but fallible. Jansen said this in the first edition of his book, in 1923, in which he adhered to the Church Polity of the Doleantie, as this was taught by F.L. Rutgers. The same was taught in Kampen for many years by Dr. H. Bouwman. I quote from his second volume of *Gereformeerde Kerkrecht*: "Now this article could be read in this way that the right of appeal is only given when someone is personally wronged by the pronouncement of a major assembly. *Undoubtedly this has not been the intention* (italics, added, K.D.), as appears from the general formulation of the synod of Emden (1571, in fact the first synod, K.D.), that anyone may appeal from the classical assembly to the provincial synod. *Anyway, the right of appeal is never limited to those cases in which one's own personal rights are violated or one is personally wronged*" (italics added, K.D.). H. Bouwman then gives several examples, also from the beginning of the federation of the churches in the Netherlands, and he concludes: "The legal ground upon which an appeal can be based, is broader than the case that someone is personally wronged. This legal ground is also there when someone is of the opinion that a decision made by the consistory is in conflict with the Word of God and dangerous for the congregation. It is in the nature of the case that there must be the possibility to receive justice in a higher instance (Bouwman, 1934:41ff.).

Self-evident

Why was H. Bouwman so certain in his writing about this matter? Did he not know that history is not normative? I think he considered it as self-evident that an appeal must be possible, not only if someone is personally wronged, but also if injury or violation of justice is at stake. This has to do with the *principle* that no injury, in whatever

form, is to be tolerated in the church, and that it is merciful to point to that injury or violation of one's rights, so that injustice can be taken away.

Around the Reunion of 1892

Not only in the 16th century was this practice regarding the right of appeal for each and every member of the church maintained, but also later on. I take as an example what happened at the first synod after the reunion of the churches of Secession and Doleantie, namely the synod of Dordrecht 1893. This synod had to finish a matter with which the last synod of the churches of the secession dealt which, namely the synod of Amsterdam 1892. There was an appeal of a brother from Dedemsvaart on the decision of the maintenance of excommunication by the particular synod of Drenthe. This synod had maintained the decision of the consistory of Dedemsvaart. There was a discussion at the synod of Amsterdam 1892 whether or not the appeal was admissible. What was the case? Not the man involved, but his brother appealed. But the synod decided to deal with the appeal. Synod pronounced that *a member of the church may appeal on a major assembly when he or she is of the opinion that the consistory has wronged another member of the congregation* (italics added, K.D.).

Finally the whole matter was solved by the decision of the first synod after the reunion in 1893. I think this was an important matter, because the new federation of Reformed Churches had just started and also the brothers of the Doleantie agreed with the decision. (See the *Acts* of the Synod of 1892, Amsterdam 1892, p. 34, article 56, also p. 76, article 99. See also *De Reformatie* 31, no. 19, p. 151).

After the liberation of 1944

In the liberated churches after 1944 this principle was maintained. Immediately after the liberation a brief explanation of the Church Order was published in Enschede, written by the three local ministers, H. Meulink, H. Vogel, and I. de Wolff. (Enschede, n.d., 17.) In this booklet they say: "This article deals with the right of appeal. He who is of the opinion that he is wronged has the right to appeal to a major assembly. *This is in force for assemblies as well as persons* (italics added, K.D.). Then there follows in Article 31 that most important part, in which a guarantee is given against hierarchy which wants to impose on the churches and the consciences of men human ordinances which are in conflict with truth and justice." As far as I know, "Kampen" taught the students in the same way after the liberation, even until nowadays.

On guard

History is not normative. But history is very instructive. We can learn much from it. The reformer Bucer wrote once, "God's Church did not just today fall down out of heaven" (cf. Van't Spijker, 1972:40). This must make us modest.

I quote again J. Hovius: "The Church must be diligent that the Church Order does not degenerate to a petrified law that kills life in an atmosphere of formalism and legalism" (l.c., p. 25). This is not a sledgehammer argument, as VO says. It is a warning to read the Church Order always in the light of Scripture and Confession, taking into account their totality, comparing Scripture with Scripture, so that the articles of the Church Order are not read as an iron law, but in a *pastoral* way, because the church is the gathering of *living* members who, in the church, expect their salvation from Jesus Christ, the only Head of the church, who must always have the final word!

Now I come back to the question asked in the beginning. How do we read the Church Order? Do we read the Church Order in a formal, or even a formalistic way?

Do we say, when something is not literally mentioned in the Church Order, that the matter is out of order, and that we have nothing to do with it? It is an easy way to say: "inadmissible!" But is this correct? My answer is: no! We have to read the Church Order with an open Bible and we have to apply the admonitions of the Bible to the concrete situation in the church. This means as far as Art. 31 C.O. is concerned — the expression is again from my father — that we have to stand on *guard*. We have to examine whether decisions in the church are in conformity with God's Word, the confessions, and the Church Order or not. It is important that we keep in mind not only the literal text of the Church Order, but also the "spirit" of the Church Order. This is not something vague, something hanging in the air, but it is a matter of what I called "principles, derived from Scripture and confessions." A Church Order should never be in conflict with these principles, but must reflect them! I hope that the Rev. VanOene will reconsider his views in this respect. I also hope that the Canadian Reformed Churches will stand on guard concerning the scriptural principle of Art. 31 of the Church Order, so that no freedom and no right of any of God's children is contradicted or counteracted!

CHURCH POLITY AND CIVIL LAW

Spiritual body

When we speak about Church Polity, we should always bear in mind that the church of Jesus Christ is a *spiritual body*. This is especially important when we discuss the connection between Church Polity and Civil Law. In the Netherlands a debate was held about this topic. Last year J.R. Krol, LL.M., who studied law and who is a crown prosecutor, published an essay entitled "A Reconnaissance around the Church Order" (Krol, 1988:227ff.). In that essay he regretted the fact that the General Synod of Kampen, 1975, did not appoint one or more lawyers to the committee for the revision of the Church Order. Says J.R. Krol, "The Reformed Churches need a thoroughly revised Church Order. For that purpose a committee of lawyers and theologians who are interested in matters of Church Polity must be established within our churches. In this committee there is then the possibility for both to discuss this revision together" (Krol, 1988:227).

A response to this essay came from W.G. de Vries in a few articles entitled "Church Order and Jurisprudence." He first reminded his readers of the fact that the most recent revision of the Church Order dated from the General Synod of Groningen-Zuid, 1978, about ten years ago, and then dealt extensively with the difference which exists between Church Polity and Civil Law. He especially pointed to the fact that in many countries Civil Law is based on the pagan Roman law. Also the Roman Catholic Church bases its Canon Law on this Roman law of nature. In this respect, the Canons of Dort, III/IV, Article 4 can be quoted: "To be sure, there is left in man after the fall, some light of nature, whereby he retains some notions about God, about natural things, and about the difference between what is honourable and shameful, and shows some regard for virtue and outward order. But he is so far from arriving at the saving knowledge of God and true conversion through this light of nature that he does not even use it properly in natural and civil matters."

W.G. de Vries continued by referring to lectures of the late F.M. ten Hoor, who was professor of Theology in Grand Rapids for many years after 1900. Ten Hoor said, "The naturalistic view of life denies the divine origin of law. It is derived from man, but not from a single man, because that should lead to individualism and should make law

impossible. No, it is derived from society or the community. The state is here the source of law, also of ecclesiastical law” (De Vries, 1989:426).

I read practically the same in Ten Hoor’s *Theological Encyclopedia*, his introduction on theology, dating from the year 1918. In this work Ten Hoor wrote about the theology of ecclesiology, “The Church has the right to make regulations. But these regulations must always proceed from the Scriptures, and no elements may be brought in which are in conflict with the principles which are embodied in Reformed Church Polity.” In other words, there is a great difference between Church and State in this respect. “The true status of the Church is only to be known from the Scripture, and that status is in agreement with the spiritual body of Christ” (Ten Hoor, 1918:13). “It belongs to the task of Church Polity to give an exposition about the relation between Church and State. Emphasis must be put on the Church’s independence from the State, and also upon the fact that the civil government has to recognize the Church and her right of property. In this respect it may not be forgotten to point out from history that whenever the government exercised its power in and over the Church, this caused incalculable damage to the Church” (Ten Hoor, 1918:14).

Luther and Calvin

In the law of nature, as followed by the Roman Catholic Canon Law, the Church is treading in the footsteps of the State. However, the Reformers of the 16th century rejected this idea completely. As for Luther, on December 10, 1520, Luther burned not only the papal bull with which the Pope had condemned and excommunicated him, but also the whole papal law, as stated in the *Corpus Juris Canonici*, the whole collection of Roman ecclesiastical laws. It is no wonder that lawyers of that time opposed Luther’s act. Unfortunately, after Luther the lawyers won the battle, and the result was that the churches again became dependent on the State in several countries, especially in Germany.

As for Calvin, it is well-known that the Reformer of Geneva had a lifelong struggle with the State regarding the rights of the church. Calvin stressed very much the *spiritual* character of Church Polity. He often used the term *disciplina*, not only for what we call church discipline, but also for the care for the souls. In this matter not only the office-bearers are involved, but also all the members of the congregation. Calvin never argued in a formal, let alone, a formalistic way, so that, for instance, because of faults in the procedure a whole matter of “disciplina” could be blocked. He always stressed the matter of the care for the souls. The specific nature of Church Polity is then that discipline is to be executed. “It is something else than the law of nature, civil law, law of societies or whatever.”

It is interesting to quote Calvin’s introduction on church discipline:

Necessity and nature of church discipline

The discipline of the church, the discussion of which we have deferred to this place, must be treated briefly, that we may thereafter pass to the remaining topics. Discipline depends for the most part upon the power of the keys and upon *spiritual jurisdiction*. To understand it better, let us divide the church into two chief orders: clergy and people. I call by the usual name “clergy” those who perform the public ministry in the church. We shall first speak of common discipline, to which all ought to submit; then we shall come to the clergy, who, besides the common discipline, have their own.

But because some persons, in their hatred of discipline, recoil from its very name, let them understand this: if no society, indeed, no house which has even a small family can be kept in proper condition without discipline, it is much more

necessary in the church, whose condition should be as ordered as possible. Accordingly, *as the saving doctrine of Christ is the soul of the church, so does discipline serve as its sinews, through which the members of the body hold together, each in its own place.* Therefore, all who desire to remove discipline or to hinder its restoration — whether they do this deliberately or out of ignorance — are surely contributing to the ultimate dissolution of the church. For what will happen if each is allowed to do what he pleases? Yet that would happen, if to the preaching of doctrine there were not added private admonitions, corrections, and other aids of the sort that sustain doctrine and do not let it remain idle. Therefore, discipline is like a bridle to restrain and tame those who rage against the doctrine of Christ; or like a spur to arouse those of little inclination; and also sometimes like a father's rod to chastise mildly and with the gentleness of Christ's Spirit those who have more seriously lapsed. When, therefore, we discern frightful devastation beginning to threaten the church because there is no concern and no means of restraining the people, necessity itself cries out that a remedy is needed. Now, this is the sole remedy that Christ has enjoined and the one that has always been used among the godly [Italics added, K.D.] (Calvin, *Institutes*, IV, 12, 1).

Calvin speaks about a *spiritual* jurisdiction. For him the ecclesiastical law has its own nature. That has to do with the "Spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in His Word," according to what we confess in Article 30 of the Belgic Confession. The French text gives, "*selon la police spirituelle,*" and the Latin text: "*spirituali illa politia.*"

Service

In this way Reformed Church Polity was set up as a spiritual order. It was stated already in Emden, 1571, and confirmed at Dort, 1618/19, in the presbyterial Church Order. "The church is the subordinate of its Personal Head, the living and present Jesus Christ. The presbyterial church government is then, according to the principles of the Church Order of Dort, the ministration of the *one* supremacy of the *one* Head, Jesus Christ, in His church as *one* body" (Van der Walt, 1976:170ff.).

There is one keyword in the whole matter of church government, namely, *service*. The office-bearers, and also the members of the church have to serve Jesus Christ, the only King of the church, and they have to serve each other. This is what Christ Himself taught His disciples and also the church of all ages: "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves (Luke 22:24 ff.). Christ Himself gave the great example: ". . . I am among you as one who serves" (verse 27).

No Church Polity?

So Church Polity (and also the Church Order) has a *spiritual* character, because the church of God is a spiritual body. Not the light of nature, but the light of God's Word must guide the church, also in this respect.

But there are people who say that actually church and law form an impossible combination and that the church must therefore get rid of the whole idea of Church Polity.

A representative of this idea was Rudolph Sohm, who was a Lutheran professor of law in several places, but by the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century taught at Leipzig in Germany. He said: If then the church has a spiritual character, why was Church Polity introduced? The term is actually contradictory. The date that

it was introduced was the date the church fell into sin. Sohm had three arguments in support of this view:

1. Law as such is formal, but in Christ's church the matter upon which everything depends is whether or not there is agreement with God's Word and will.
2. Law as such implies the obligation that everyone has to bow before it. It also compels those who are unwilling; but in Christ's church free obedience, which arises from love and which does not even have the slightest idea of compulsion, alone is important.
3. Law as such belongs to the world, to what is destined for earthly life; but the church of Christ is spiritual and the complete structure of the church is in accordance with it (cf. Oldenhuis, 1977:10ff.).

Already in 1894, at the occasion of the transfer of his rectorate at the Free University of Amsterdam, the "father" of the Church Polity of the Doleantie, F.L. Rutgers, disproved these arguments.

Rutgers' response can be summarized by saying that he argued in the first place that law in its original quality is not in conflict with the nature of the church. In the beginning there was a perfect harmony between church and law. The visible church on earth consists of believers who want to live on the basis of the Word of God alone. These believers are not perfect, but afflicted with many failures, just like all mankind. The brokenness of life made Church Polity indispensable for the well-being of the earthly church. The peculiarity of Church Polity is that it is explicitly subordinate to the nature of the church. Although Church Polity as such is not in conflict with the nature of the church, and it is even impossible for the church to exist without it, nevertheless Sohm's criticism on several hierarchical and collegial systems of Church Polity are of value. *If Church Polity loses its serving function, it becomes a disturbing factor which deforms and disorders the church* [italics added, K.D.] (Rutgers, 1894:37).

Principles of the Scriptures for Church Polity

Later, in the struggle of the church around the "vrijmaking" S. Greijdanus also argued in the line of F.L. Rutgers. Church Polity is possible, indeed, but we have to bear in mind that Christ alone is the Head of the church. The church is the Lord's particular possession. We have to regulate all our ecclesiastical actions according to the revealed will of God. Christ is the chief Shepherd. Men can only be shepherds if they remain in Him. But, all ecclesiastical action of office-bearers or assemblies should be tested by the Word of God. The church is a *spiritual* unity under Christ the Head. Apart from the apostles, the Lord did not give general, regional, provincial, national or ecumenical office-bearers. The local church has received office-bearers from God Himself, not by common consent. They are servants of the Lord, and they may serve also God's people.

S. Greijdanus elaborated on some principles, especially with respect to the relation between consistories and major assemblies, and he wrote at the end, "The Lord knows the desire for hierarchy and for tyranny, also among those who are His, also under religious attire, also among the guides of the Church, even among His apostles. But He condemned it and He forbade His disciples to yield to it. 'But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brethren' (Matt. 23:8)" (Greijdanus, n.d.:41).

No legalism

To stress the spiritual character of Church Polity also means that we may not go

the way of *legalism*. W.G. de Vries pointed especially to that danger in a second article in *De Reformatie* about "Church Order and Jurisprudence." I quote, ". . . when we would receive in our Church Order all kinds of water-tight formulations, with exact description of rights and competences and exceptions, then the danger of legalism comes up, according to my opinion." In connection with this, he quotes F.L. Rutgers again, who wrote in another brochure about the federation of the churches in the beginning of the 17th century in the struggle with the Arminians: "The federation of Churches was upheld by maintaining the common confession of the Churches; but it was thrown out of action, where it was necessary to preserve the pure confession; it was broken, where deviation from the confession had already undone it" (De Vries, 1989:447).

Juridical view?

In a third article in *De Reformatie*, W.G. de Vries paid special attention to what he called a *juridical view* on the Church Order. He points to a danger in this respect. He wrote that the Church Order is there "in order to protect the confession. Therefore, the Church Order does not need to deliver all kinds of water-tight descriptions. After all, also the Reformed confession does not know juridical systematics. . . ." (De Vries, 1989:470).

De Vries added that it is precisely an advantage that neither the confession nor the Church Order delivers juridical views. He gave the example of question and answer 74 of the Heidelberg Catechism. "Lord's Day 27 says that the infants are grafted into the Christian church 'by baptism.' One who reasons in a juridical way would say: 'so, before baptism they were not members of the church.' However, the baptismal questions to the parents demands from them the confession that our children are sanctified in Christ and *thus* as members of His Church ought to be baptized. So, baptism seals that what was present already. Besides, Lord's Day 27 starts with the statement that 'infants as well as adults belong to God's covenant and congregation' and that therefore they should be baptized too. No juridical systematics, but warm words of the covenant concerning membership of the Church."

I would like to add to that that the same happens in connection with the membership of adults who are baptized. The third question which is to be answered by the adult is in the second part: "Believing in Him, do you confess that you receive the remission of sins in His blood and that by the power of the Holy Spirit you have become a member of Jesus Christ and His Church?" He who reasons in a juridical way would say: apparently the person concerned *was* already a member of the church; hence the church must in this case be the invisible church. That is a reasoning just the other way around than in the case of baptism of infants. I even once heard someone build upon this matter a whole theory about the church. But again, we hear here warm words of God's covenant about the whole matter of membership of the church. The brother or sister who is to be baptized as an adult is not considered in a formal, legalistic way, but is considered as belonging to Christ's church. The consistory had contact with the brother or sister concerned and allowed him or her to make profession of faith and to be baptized.

Our conclusion is that we must not read the Church Order or the liturgical forms in a juridical, but in a pastoral way, and that we must not mix up Church Polity and Civil Law. If we would do that, it would become a very dangerous situation for the church.

Church before the court

Last time I warned against mixing Church Polity and Civil Law. I promised to point to a concrete case in which these two were indeed mixed up. It happened in the Netherlands this year. *Nederlands Dagblad (ND)* of Feb. 11, 1989, reported that a 27-year-old man took the consistory of the “Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk” at Ede to court in Arnhem. In his accusation he complained that he had been wronged by the consistory. He was a baptized member of the church and he had wanted to withdraw from the church. His reproach was that the consistory had not struck out his name from the membership rolls, immediately when he had requested that. After that he had asked the consistory to give him his attestation. The consistory did not comply with this request, but acted according to the rules of the Church Order. Afterwards the consistory let him know that the man could receive a declaration in which it could be mentioned that his name had been removed as a baptized member of the congregation. Indeed, this declaration was provided. The following Sunday the withdrawal was announced to the congregation and the matter was also mentioned in prayer. Shortly after that the man threatened to bring the matter before the court. He enlisted a lawyer’s services and demanded corrections in the prayer and in the letter written by the consistory to him personally in connection with his choice. As far as that letter is concerned, he especially took offence at the passage which said that withdrawal was not only a matter of administration, but that it involves contempt of baptism as a sign of God’s covenant. Actually three parties were summoned before the court: the congregation, the consistory, and the minister of the church.

Encroachment?

The *ND* of Feb. 17, 1989, reported on the court session held at Arnhem the day before. The plaintiff’s lawyer was of the opinion that no condition could be made in the case of withdrawal. He also stated that the prayer of the minister in which the man had been committed to God, was an encroachment on the personal sphere of life and on the right of privacy. The church’s lawyer, however, claimed that this was not a civil dispute and that therefore the civil judge was not allowed to pass judgment. In this case, the internal ecclesiastical law is applicable. The defendant’s lawyer also said that actually the plaintiff wanted to silence the church. He wanted to forbid the church to say that withdrawal from the church is to be put on a par with disparaging baptism. As far as the prayer in the church is concerned, a civil judge may not pass sentence on that. It is a different matter to have an opinion about it. But prayer has its own place. It is spoken to God. The church may never be forbidden to pray for someone’s conversion, repentance, and return to the church.

Sentence

The *ND* of Feb. 25, 1989, published the sentence of the court of Arnhem. The day before, the judge had condemned the “Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk” at Ede and had ordered the church to place a correction in the church bulletin, because the interests of the baptized member who withdrew himself were not adequately taken into account. The judge did not deem it necessary that the correction of the prayer be announced in a public worship service because of the disturbing effect this would have on the whole of the worship service. But the prayer had to be corrected in the church bulletin. According to the judge, a misleading picture was given by the minister in his prayer. The consistory should have mentioned besides its own point of view also the

point of view of the baptized member. This correction in the bulletin had to be made because it was practically impossible for this man to put forward his opinion. If the church did not place the correction, a penalty of 10,000 guilders was to be paid. The defendant also had to pay a sum of 1,500 guilders to the plaintiff as compensation for “immaterially” suffered damage, and finally, both parties had to pay their own costs.

Freedom of religion

What are we to say about this? In the first place: the relation between the church and its members is regulated by ecclesiastical laws, of which the matter of church discipline is a part. Church polity is beyond civil law. That is the consequence of freedom of religion. Those who are not members of the church have nothing to do with church polity. Over against them the church has to stick to the rules of civil law. A withdrawal from the church is a matter of transition from the one situation to the other. But the judge has to acknowledge that in that situation the matter of freedom of religion has still a strong impact.

But the judge came to a different conclusion. He based himself with respect to this on the letter, written at the moment that the man was still a member of the church. The consistory, however, rightly said that the service of God is not to be separated from membership of the church. Therefore the minister could pray for his conversion in connection with the announcement of withdrawal. This minister did not go too far. His office of supervision and discipline implies also his coming to his own conclusion on the basis of someone's confession and conduct. Neither that conclusion of the minister nor the consistory, nor the declaration of the member about himself lends itself to examination by an outsider, in this case the secular judge. In a comment entitled “Pulpit-prayer” the editor of *ND*, Dr. J.P. de Vries wrote: “The opinion of the consistory about someone's confession and conduct is usually not mentioned in public. The only firm exception is the execution of church discipline in the last phases. He who withdraws himself from the church, himself commits a public deed, about which the church may give its opinion, also in public. The fact that for such a person concrete intercession is made, belongs to the calling of the church. If a judge is going to judge that prayer on the point whether or not justice is done to the person mentioned in it, then he steps into affairs which do not belong to his competence. The question whether a misleading image was given of the motives of the former baptized member, is a confessional matter and the judge may not judge that. If somebody is of the opinion that he is wronged in a pulpit prayer, then the federation of churches has its own ways of appeal. As long as they are still open, the worldly judge should declare himself incompetent. Only if the federation would declare the complaint inadmissible because he is not a member of the church any more, he can go to the civil judge. But that possibility was not even investigated in this case” (*ND*, Feb. 25, 1989).

Appeal

What was the consistory of the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk at Ede to do now? Did it have to give in and place a correction in the bulletin of the church? Or did it have to appeal? A very important matter is here at stake. The court presumed to give an opinion in an ecclesiastical case, a matter of Church Polity. I am of the opinion that the court's judgment was very arrogant and overbearing. It involved itself with prayers, addressed to God Himself. This would create a precedent, and in this way the church could be hindered by the state in all kinds of affairs. This is what the consistory at Ede also considered. It took several hours before the consistory made a decision.

The minister of the church declared to *ND*: "It was not easy to make a decision. What would best serve the honour of the LORD and the coming of His kingdom? We had to consider that question time and again" (*ND*, March 11, 1989). The care for the souls, for the whole congregation stood in the forefront. The consistory considered this a primary responsibility. It may be that a consistory suffers injustice because of it. This consideration was completely in agreement with the attitude of the consistory over against the baptized member and the pulpit prayer. On the other hand, the consistory understood very well that the acceptance of this sentence could have consequences for the future. The whole matter of a precedent is very important. So finally the consistory decided to appeal. It will take some time before this appeal to the higher court of Arnhem leads to a sentence.

Very dangerous

I hoped wholeheartedly that the sentence of Arnhem's court will be nullified. Imagine what can happen if this sentence functions as a precedent for other cases. A very dangerous situation could come up. Imagine that a member of the church committed abortion or euthanasia, and that the consistory of the church censures such a person. Then that person would be able to bring the consistory before the court and complain that he or she was wronged and discriminated against. The church still says: this was against the law of the LORD, you shall not kill. But it was allowed by the civil law! Now the church could be condemned and could be forced to stop church discipline and even be compelled to give corrections, because of the supposed discrimination. But unfortunately, the *Nederlands Dagblad* of June 17, 1989, reported that the appeal of both parties in the case of a former non-communicant member of the "Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk" of Ede was cancelled. Pending the appeal the consistory did not have to correct the pulpit prayer in which was said that the non-communicant member had turned his back to the church. Now both parties reached an understanding of compromise. According to a special *Act*, however, both parties maintain in an unbridged way their points of view and their convictions. The agreement means that no correction will be made from the side of the consistory. But judicially the requirement for correction is maintained, although the former non-communicant member no longer demands the execution of the sentence. In a letter to the members of the congregation the consistory hopes and prays that this agreement may lead to peace and unity in the congregation. In the decision the interests of the congregation had been given priority by the consistory.

I think this decision is unsatisfactory. The sentence of the judge is still maintained. Although it is just one sentence of a judge of a lower court, nevertheless it can have consequences. Especially this question is at stake: can secular judges pass sentence on matters concerning the worship services of the church? Now a precedent is not excluded and the whole matter as such is not solved. We have to maintain: Church Polity and Civil Law are two different matters, not to be mixed up!

TRUE ECUMENICITY

Ecumene

The word *ecumene* is used about fifteen times in the New Testament and means "the whole world." Some examples are ". . . *all the world* should be enrolled" (Luke 2:1); the devil showed Jesus Christ "*all the kingdoms of the world*" (Luke 4:5), accord-

ing to the Acts of the Apostles, Artemis was worshiped by “all Asia and the *world*” (Acts 19:27); in Revelation 12:9 Satan is called “the deceiver of the *whole world*.” Striking are the examples of the connection between mission and ecumene, as Matthew 24:14, “. . . this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the *whole world*,” and Romans 10:18, “Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the end of the *world*.” Again and again for “world” or “the whole world” the word *ecumene* is used. The root of this word is *oikos*, which means *house*. So *ecumene* actually means “the inhabited world, the world where people are living.”

Thinking ecumenically should not be left to the world or to apostate communities, for it is a matter which no less concerns the true church. The church has a mandate which concerns the whole world, the whole inhabited world, for the whole world is the church's mission field. In fact, we speak this ecumenical language each and every Sunday in our public worship services. The late Prof. Dr. K. Schilder pointed to this fact in a speech addressed in 1951 to the League of Young Women's Societies in the Netherlands:

All of you speak “ecumenical language,” every Sunday. Then you confess, with the church of all places: I believe a holy, catholic, Christian church. And “catholic” has the same meaning as “ecumenical.” The “ecumene” means “the entire inhabited world”; therefore “ecumenical” means: “pertaining to the entire cultural world” or “concerning the entire human race.” In your *Book of Praise* you can find an ecumenical heirloom, the Nicene Creed, which dates back to the so-called first Ecumenical Council of 325. There the Arians were condemned as well as the Cathari (or Novatians); who could, so it says, not join the ecumenical church if they did not agree with the dogmas — that's what it says — of the universal and catholic church. Stipulations were also made concerning the so-called baptism of heretics. We, too, speak an ecumenical language. But that means also that we have to keep in mind “the entire inhabited world” as far as the church is concerned, and to strive for unity with those who have the same faith as we have.

Striving for unity

Is striving for unity good? It definitely is. Christ Himself prayed in His moving high-priestly prayer, “I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in Me through their word, that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me” (John 17:20, 21). Paul, in his epistle to the Ephesians, which sometimes is called “the epistle of the church,” exhorts his readers to be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 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 4:3-6).

Unity of faith

Whoever seeks the unity of the church and strives for unity among God's people, desires a good thing.

However, what character does this unity bear and what is meant by it?

When Christ spoke about unity in His high-priestly prayer He did not only mean an outward unity, but He founded that unity in the unity which exists between the Father and the Son: the closest and firmest communion that there is.

When Paul wrote to the Ephesians that they should be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, he also pointed to the one Lord and the one faith

that bound them together. When the Heidelberg Catechism speaks about the one holy catholic church, we read that the Son of God gathers for Himself a church in the unity of the true faith, and that bond is expressed in the creeds, which are also called the “ecumenical symbols,” and in the Reformed confessions.

Reality and caricature

So the point is to clearly and plainly separate reality from caricature. Like the true ecumene in essence has nothing to do with today’s ecumenical movement, the true unity is equally far remote from the false striving for unity that is pursued today.

The present-day ecumenical movement wants to force a unity which is not founded in the unity of faith, but which shows, with a minimum of foundation, a maximum of joining hands. But sooner or later such a building must fall. He who pays hardly any attention to the foundation, but who wants to let a colossal skyscraper arise, should not be astonished when it appears after a short time that such a building cannot possibly last.

Then one does not get the reality, but a caricature. And a caricature is an exaggeration or magnification of some most characteristic forms, traits or qualities. But these characteristics of ecumenism are exactly its weaknesses. Whoever reads the last book of the Bible sees Satan, in the figure of anti-Christ, busy in creating the anti-church, through which the great mass is fascinated, says Revelation chapter 13. Does not Paul say that Christ will slay the man of sin with the breath of His mouth? (2 Thessalonians 2:8)

In this light we should therefore look at present-day ecumenism. We should judge this striving and this movement by the Scriptures. That also means: we should not become introverted and strange. But we should propagate antithetically the true ecumene and the true unity, and in this distinguish clearly between reality and caricature.

Antithesis

It is very important, therefore, to maintain the scriptural idea of *antithesis* when we are thinking about the ecumene. I quote again the speech of Dr. K. Schilder:

No wonder that the Bible is full of the ecumenical proclamation of the Great Ecumenical drama. Ecumenical is not a new term but a very old one. The Jews already had transcribed the Greek word “oikoumene” in their rabbinical scriptures untranslated, in Hebrew letters. Luke starts the Christmas message with the ecumene: Caesar Augustus wants the ecumene registered for the Roman Empire, the Beast of Daniel, and of Revelation; but from a stable in Bethlehem, at that very moment the Great Son of David starts to “register” the ecumene for himself, and for the God-of-David.

Ecumene is then the inhabited world, viewed as the operative area of world politics. The Beast grasps at the latter: but the Spirit has been ahead of him for centuries, when He had David anointed as king of the birthplace of theocracy, i.e., as king of Israel’s ecumenically directed community, keeping the ecumenical seas of the world pure. Jesse’s living-room, where David was anointed, and the stable of Bethlehem, from where the Son of David starts His world regiment, are the stages of God’s ecumenical Movement, a movement as old as the world ruled by God’s Covenant. Emperor Nero, who in the Revelation of John is an image of the ecumenical anti-Christ, is called Ecumenical Daemon in Greek emperor’s titles, just as Emperor Claudius is called Ecumenical Benefactor, or Saviour.

“Ecumenical” here has become a matter of world politics and world culture. Therefore Scripture commands ecumenical preaching (Matt. 24:14). Over against the Satanical temptation of ecumenical world power, Christ places the “it is written”; He wants to become the Ecumenical Saviour-Judge only through obedience (Luke 4:5). Christ predicts an ecumenical temptation in the last days (Rev. 3:10), and catastrophe (Luke 21:26); and thus the prophet Agabus predicts an ecumenical famine (Acts 11:28). In that, he is an ally of John on Patmos who, at the opening of the third seal, sees the black horse of famine dash across the world (Rev. 8:5,6). All this is the beginning of the ecumenical judgement (Acts 17:31).

In short: the Bible continually, from Genesis to Revelation, speaks about the one great ecumenical Drama. On the one side is the ecumenical preaching (Rom. 10:18, Ps. 19:4); on the other side is the ecumenical error, the ecumenical temptation under leadership of the anti-Christ, God’s great adversary, with his “catholic,” i.e., universal, propaganda service, with his ecumenical contraspeech against the Speech of God and against all his sayings. . . .

That is why the church will find her first task forever in the proclaiming of that centuries-old antithesis. She does not tolerate a break-through with false slogans of unity between those parties who have believed the biblical antithesis, or at least have acknowledge it, but she wants a breakthrough, with the sharp weapon of that biblical antithesis, among all groups and all movements, also the ecumenical church movement without creeds, also the ecumenical youth movement, which have denied and ridiculed the biblical idea of antithesis, and cursed it as the greatest folly and fragmenting force.

God’s Word is the norm

It is very clear that God’s Word is the norm for our ecumenical thinking and acting. We agree completely with what was written by the Dutch Committee for Churches Abroad:

Speaking of ecumenical calling we are dealing with a calling which, as coming from God, is obeyed only in the way of paying close attention to the divine rules prescribed for its execution. It is this norm which shapes its course and defines the limits which must be observed in the pursuit of its goal. Any other way of dealing with this calling is self-willed and fraught with danger to the church of Christ.

So we are left with the question: what is this norm?

A significant indication with regard to the nature of true ecumenicity is to be found in the truth that ecumenicity deals with and aims at unity in Christ. It is this unity which is both its starting point and its goal. Ecumenical endeavour is not what it claims to be if it does not engage in making visible the relationship which exists in Christ between such as believe in Him. According to Scripture the unity in Christ is primarily a given unity. It is the gift of the exalted Saviour to the people which the Lord has made Himself to a peculiar treasure.

This unity is a spiritual unity, given with and in the calling with which they, who have been given to Christ by the Father, are called. However, they who have been brought together in Him must also obediently come together in Him. They should endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, for there is one body and one Spirit. The fact that the unity in Christ is a given one does not exclude that there is a command to strive for it. The gift is at the same time an order.

Furthermore, the very fact, that the unity of the believers is a given unity, is an indication of the norm which must be observed in dealing with the ecumenical

calling. Christ is the life, but He is also the way and the truth. In being the life He is the source and power of the bond which links all believers to Him and at the same time interlinks them one to another. In Him, being the way, the true believers find the way to their unity in Him. In addition to all this the unity in Christ is a unity in Him as the truth. So it is quite evident from Scripture that the unity in Christ is made manifest in a unanimous and faithful confession of the truth.

Not all unity is scriptural

The conclusion is evident that not all unity of churches is scriptural. I quote again the brochure *For the Sake of True Ecumenicity*.

He, who in the name of unity wishes to maintain the teacher of error in the congregation, violates the unity in Christ. Likewise he, who exerts himself to reach unity with teachers of false doctrine, is making efforts for a unity which is not agreeable to the Lord, though he may do so claiming devotedness to ecumenical vocation. An unfaithful teacher proclaims another gospel, which is no gospel, and the apostle Paul writes concerning such a man: "let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:6-9; 5:10).

Essentially we find here the same as what is said with regard to the high priest Eli and the curse he brought upon his own house and upon Israel, when with words only he tried to correct his ungodly sons, Hophni and Phinehas, but did not take measures to purify the service of the tabernacle from what defiled it. Did not the Lord say then: "Wherefore honourest thou thy sons above Me?" And also: "Those that honour Me I will honour, and they that despise Me shall be lightly esteemed"! (1 Sam. 2:29, 30).

All Christians, however, who exert themselves to attain the binding of all to the truth of Christ, strive for the true unity in Him. They indeed build upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, of which Christ Himself is the chief cornerstone. In the light of all this scriptural evidence the rule for complying with the ecumenical calling is the biblical mandate of unanimous and honest acceptance of the Lord's holy and infallible Word (Eph. 2:20).

Confessional standards

We have to say also that the confessions of the church are very important in connection with true ecumenicity. Prof. K. Schilder pointed already to the "ecumenical creeds." In the brochure of the Dutch Committee we read about the confessional standards:

In the continuing struggle to keep their congregations in the unity of Christ the Reformed churches of various countries have obtained their confessional standards. They have received these standards as a gift from the hand of God, for it was He, who enlightened them through the working of the Holy Spirit to recapitulate in thankfulness and obedience what they first had found in Scripture. Subsequently these standards served them as an agreement of fellowship in the Lord and Saviour.

These Reformed churches continued to accept and defend their standards as being fully in conformity with the truth revealed unto us by God in His word.

This attitude toward their confessional writings will strongly influence the manner in which Reformed churches meet the ecumenical calling. They are not permitted to forget their allegiance to their standards when contacts are made with churches abroad. If, more or less, they would forget, then not only no justice is done

to what in their own congregations is maintained as divine truth, but also, sooner or later within these churches the loyalty to their standards will be endangered.

Any confessional standard, which is no longer always and everywhere dealt with in all seriousness, is by that very fact undermined and drained of its vitality and power of being a binding consensus.

It is for this reason that ecumenical fellowship is possible only when cooperating churches can honestly declare with regard to each other's confessional standards, that they are in conformity with the Word of God. In no other way can form be given to the obedience to the first rule of true ecumenicity, that it shall serve unity in truth.

There is, however, more to be said here. The churches, cooperating in ecumenical fellowship, must also have the mutual confidence that they all sincerely maintain their standards and live up to them. In all these churches there must be an unreserved and reliable subscription to the standards. They have to make sure that in all these churches there is faithful doctrinal discipline, in order that the unity of faith be maintained against error and also that the flock of Christ be protected.

From all these considerations it follows that if any of the cooperating churches might become deficient with regard to doctrine or doctrinal discipline the other churches shall give attention to their first obligation: to induce this church to return immediately to the first love and the first works. No partiality shall be shown in doing so. It is not important whether or not the church concerned has a large membership or a glorious and impressive past. The only thing that matters is that the unfaithful church stands in the need of correction and reformation.

If such a destitute church then does not return to sound doctrine and the use of doctrinal discipline, the other churches shall see to it that is done what they are bound to do. They shall not yield but remove that church from their fellowship. Sound doctrine is always incompatible with a lying tongue. Where falsehood in doctrine is tolerated the Lord of all truth is dishonoured and the congregation is destroyed. What communion has light with darkness? (2 Cor. 6:14).

“Let the church be one”

Not only in the Scriptures and in the confessions of the church is true ecumenicity apparent, but it is also stressed in the course of the history of the church.

In the *Didachè* or “The teaching of the Lord through the twelve apostles to the gentiles,” a very old document already known to the church fathers and at least going back to the second century, this prayer is found in connection with the Lord's Supper: “As this piece (of bread) was scattered over the hills and then was brought together and made one, so let your Church be brought together from the ends of the earth into your Kingdom. For yours is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ forever.”

We have a rhymed version of this part of the *Didachè* in our *Book of Praise*, namely, in Hymn 46:

“As grain, once scattered on the hillsides,
Was in the broken bread made one,
So from all lands Thy church be gathered
Into Thy kingdom by Thy Son.”

Reformation times

From the very beginning the Reformers of the 16th century emphasized the unity of the church. Already in 1518 Luther spoke in favour of a general council of the

church, with the one principle that the Holy Scriptures would be the decisive norm. He asked for such a “free, general, Christian council.” By “free” he meant independent of papal control, and by “Christian” he understood that judgments were to be based on the principle of the Scriptures alone and that laymen were to be enfranchised. In 1520, after the ban of the pope, he renewed his appeal for a general council. But when finally a general council was held, starting in 1545 at Trent, it was only a papal council. . . .

Also Calvin was in favour of a general council, but he strongly stressed the difference between true and false councils. The condition for a true general council is that Christ would be presiding it:

Now it is Christ's right to preside over all councils and to have no man share His dignity. But I say that He presides only when the whole assembly is governed by His Word and Spirit.

In the following paragraph Calvin continues:

Christ will be in the midst of a council only if it is gathered together in His name. As a consequence, it will benefit our adversaries but little to mention councils of bishops a thousand times over; nor will they persuade us to believe what they contend — that councils are governed by the Holy Spirit — before they convince us that these have been gathered in Christ's name. Ungodly and evil bishops can just as much conspire against Christ as good and honest ones can come together in His name. We have clear proof of this fact in a great many decrees that have come forth from such councils. . . .

I now reply with but one word: Christ promises nothing except to those who are gathered in His name. Let us therefore define what that means. I deny that they are gathered in His name who, casting aside God's commandment that forbids anything to be added or taken away from His Word (Deut. 4:2; cf. Deut. 12:32; Prov. 30:6; Rev. 22:18-19), ordain anything according to their own decision; who, not content with the oracles of Scripture, that is, the sole rule of perfect wisdom, concoct some novelty out of their own heads. Surely, since Christ promised that He would be present not in all councils whatsoever but laid down a special mark by which a true and lawful one might be distinguished from the rest, it behooves us never to neglect this distinction. This is the covenant which God of old made with the Levitical priests, that they should teach from His own lips (Mal. 2:7). He required this always of the prophets; we see that this rule was also imposed upon the apostles. Those who violate this covenant God deems worthy neither of the honor of the priesthood nor of any authority.

Calvin strived for the unity of the church with all his power. In a letter to Thomas Cranmer he wrote in 1552:

. . . would that it were attainable to bring together into some place, from various Churches, men eminent for their learning, and that after having carefully discussed the main points of belief one by one, they should, from their united judgments, hand down to posterity the true doctrine of Scripture. This other thing also is to be ranked among the chief evils of our time, viz., that the Churches are so divided, that human fellowship is scarcely now in any repute amongst us, far less that Christian intercourse which all make a profession of, but few sincerely practise. If men of learning conduct themselves with more reserve than is seemly, the very heaviest blame attaches to the leaders themselves, who, either engrossed in their own sinful pursuits, are indifferent to the safety and entire piety of the church, or who, individually satisfied with their own private peace, have no regard for others. Thus it is that the members of the Church being severed, the body lies bleeding.

So much does this concern me, that, could I be of any service, I would not grudge to cross even ten seas, if need were, on account of it.

More than once Calvin wrote movingly about the divisions of the church. He called them the “horrible mutilations of Christ’s body,” and the Geneva Catechism made it quite plain that this body ought to be “one.”

In 1560 the well-known Catharina de Medici undertook the initiative towards a kind of national council in France. It was called “The Colloquy of Poissy” and Theodore de Bèze delivered an excellent defense of the Reformed faith, but the result was disappointing and not long afterwards the Romish caused a massacre among the Reformed.

Besides the attempt of Thomas Cranmer in the same year that Calvin wrote his letter to him (1552), three other attempts for an international, ecumenical synod were made. H.H. Kuyper pointed to these attempts in his farewell lecture in 1937, entitled *De Katholiceit der Gereformeerde Kerken (the Catholicity of the Reformed Churches)*. There was in the first place the attempts of Queen Elisabeth in 1577, and, in connection with it, the Convention of Frankfurt with as its fruit the *Harmonia Confessionum* (mainly the work of de Bèze). In the second place H.H. Kuyper mentioned the design of Pierre du Moulin, who raised the matter at the Synod of Tonneins in 1614 and who visited England with a view to promoting the unity of the churches. He was appointed as one of the delegates of the French Reformed churches to the Synod of Dort 1618/’19. However, the delegates from France could not attend this synod in Holland, because the French king prohibited them to leave France. Nevertheless, the Synod of Alais, 1620, accepted the Canons of Dort.

Ecumenical Synod of Dort 1618/’19

This brings us to the Synod of Dort 1618/’19. This synod is called a national synod, but the actual work of drawing up and finishing the Canons of Dort bore an international character. There were twenty-six delegates from abroad: delegates from England (among them even a bishop) and from Germany and Switzerland; from the Palatinate, Hessen, Basel, Bern, Emden, Nassau, Bremen, Schaffhausen, Zürich, and Geneva. These foreign delegates did not function as ornaments, but had a great influence in the deliberations and upon the formulation of the decisions. They participated in the synod no less than the delegates from the Netherlands. Therefore, in this respect the Synod of Dort can be called international and ecumenical. The background of these delegates was not the same; they did not all have the same confessions, although they were of a Reformed-Presbyterian character. Nevertheless, they all worked together in the formulation of our third form of unity!

Presbyterian Scotland

After the Synod of Dort 1618/’19 a period of silence followed; no national synods were held in the Netherlands, let alone international synods. However, the Presbyterian churches of Scotland, England, and Ireland paid attention to the matter of international and ecumenical synods or councils. This had already been done in the *Scots Confession of Faith of 1560*. In Article 20 this confession says that “generall counsalls” are to be revered and embraced, unless they “pretend to forge unto us new artikles of our faith, . . . or to make constitutionis repugning to the worde of God.” This was also done in the *Second Book of Discipline*, drawn up by Andrew Melville, in which an ecumenical synod was mentioned in so many words. Also the Westminster Assembly paid attention to it in the *Form of Presbyterial Church Government of 1645*.

In the nineteenth century it was again Scotland which took up the matter. The

Presbyterians hoped to present an alliance of *churches* in the *Evangelical Alliance* of 1846. But that alliance had a different, more personal character. Besides, they were much involved in the *Alliance of Reformed and Presbyterian Churches* which met also with the approval of the Secedued Churches of the Netherlands. So, in the 19th century as well the Free Church of Scotland had a worldwide view!

Secession churches

Scotland saw the Disruption of 1843 (the beginning of the Free Church of Scotland), while nine years earlier the Secession started in the Netherlands.

The churches of the Secession of 1834 had the same worldwide view. The act of Secession of 1834 showed the true ecumenical intention by saying that "the undersigned want to unite themselves with any assembly based on God's infallible Word in whatever place God has established it." The people of the Secession were not narrow-minded; they had good insight into true ecumenicity. I quote what J. Faber said in his speech *The Significance of the Secession of 1834 in the light of our confession of the Holy Catholic Church*:

In the beginning period before the establishing of the school in Kampen they sent young men to Geneva to attend lectures of Merel d'Aubigné and Malan, men of the Swiss Reveil. The Synod of Leiden, 1857, sought ecclesiastical fellowship with the Free Church of Scotland and with the Reformed confessors in the Republic of Transvaal. And who does not know that in 1858 the Rev. Dirk Postma was sent to South Africa to be instrumental in the reformation of the church in that part of the world? The existence and the life of the so-called Dopper churches in South Africa, the Dutch Reformed Church, is connected with the Secession of 1834. Deputies of the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland visited Kampen, and Brummelkamp and Van Velzen were delegated to Scotland. Already at the Synod of Hoogeveen in 1860 the churches of the Secession received official delegates of the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland. Brummelkamp Jr. writes that the seceded church of the Netherlands then and later owed much to its correspondence with the Scottish brethren who already possessed a rich experience.

In 1868 three Christelijke Gereformeerde ministers attended the International Theological Conference in Wezel. In 1877 Brummelkamp and Van Velzen participated in the Pan Presbyterian Council. This Council intended to establish a communion or fellowship between Presbyterian churches.

In 1875 Lucas Lindeboom wrote a brochure entitled *The Christian Reformed Church: something about its situation, calling and future*. Lindeboom, later professor in Kampen, was still minister in Zaandam. He wrote about contact with other churches. The Synod of Groningen had expressed sympathy with the Reformed Church in France. Lindeboom now urged that more fellowship should be entertained with the churches in Scotland, South Africa and America (cf. Faber, 1986:14ff.). It is remarkable that especially in the circles of the Secession which stressed the sharp distinction between true and false church, true ecumenicity was discovered and experienced!

World Council of Churches (W.C.C.)

In 1948 the World Council of Churches (W.C.C.) started. The character of the W.C.C. is described in its Constitution as follows: "The World Council is a fellowship of churches, which accept Jesus Christ our Lord as God and Saviour." In an official declaration the W.C.C. added to this Constitution the clause that it "does not concern itself

with the manner in which the Churches will interpret the foundation." In other words, when becoming a member of the W.C.C. a "denomination" must agree with the foundation, at least officially, but how it reads and explains that foundation is up to that "denomination" itself. The W.C.C. does not want to concern itself with the "interpretation." Not many words need to be wasted on the completely ambiguous, and therefore unbiblical character of this foundation, which, because of the arbitrariness of its interpretation, can be subscribed to by even the most liberal and sectarian group. This, in fact is done. It would be difficult to be more unbiblical for an organization which claims to be a community of faith. It can hardly be more misleading. In the course of time the W.C.C. continued in its liberal direction of modern theology in which Jesus Christ is no more than a good example of solidarity.

International Council of Christian Churches (I.C.C.C.)

In the same year 1948 the "opponent" of the W.C.C. was born, the International Council of Christian Churches (I.C.C.C.). The foundation seems to appeal to us very much: the plenary Divine inspiration of the Scriptures in the original languages, their consequent inerrancy and infallibility, and, as the Word of God, the supreme and final authority in faith and life; the holiness and love of the one and Triune sovereign God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; the essential, absolute, eternal Deity and the real and proper but sinless humanity of our Lord Jesus Christ; corruption of man; salvation of the redeemed and the everlasting suffering of the lost; those are just some doctrinal points from the Constitution of the I.C.C.C.

But however solid the foundation seems to be: concerning the criteria of being a church, it is silent in three languages. The whole church problem is obviated. They think in terms of a spiritual unity across the church walls: the Baptist can remain Baptist, the Methodist can remain Methodist, etc. So that means that neither the sacraments nor church discipline is mentioned.

Not only the Baptists were admitted, which reject God's covenant with us and our children, but they also admitted member churches, which, Arminian in creed, deny election.

In this I.C.C.C. they speak about the acceptance of the "fundamental truths of Scripture" and in fact they reduce that foundation to the Apostles' Creed. As if infant baptism, the covenant of grace, election, the conversion of man who is powerless in himself, the three marks of the true church, all would be peripheral. As if these matters should not belong to the fundamental doctrine of Scripture. To the I.C.C.C. the church seems to have one enemy only, namely communism. As if liberalism and other forms of humanism are not equally mortal enemies to the church of Christ.

Reformed Ecumenical Synod (R.E.S.)

After World War II also the "Reformed Ecumenical Synod" (R.E.S.) started.

In 1949 its first meeting was convened in Amsterdam at the initiative of the synodical churches. These churches did not participate in the W.C.C. Delegates from several Reformed and Presbyterian churches from all over the world were present. Already in 1946 a constitutional meeting of this "synod" was held in Grand Rapids, Michigan, prepared by the Christian Reformed Church in the U.S.A. The churches accepted as basis "the Holy Scripture, as interpreted in the Forms of Unity of the respective Churches who participate in this assembly." The goal was

to seek what is most subservient to the general building up of the participating churches and to give a common testimony of the faith, which was once for all

delivered to the saints, and to assist each other in the maintenance of the purity of the doctrine and the reformation of life.

The synod of the (Liberated) Reformed Churches in the Netherlands of Amersfoort 1948 decided to decline the invitation to participation. Participation was considered unacceptable, because the synod had objections against the basis: the several confessions, mentioned in the basis were contradictory, according to the judgment of the synod (Art. 75, 3,A).

Another reason to decline the invitation had to do with the goal of the R.E.S. . . . The Synod of Amersfoort considered that reaching the goal of the R.E.S., "namely, 'maintaining the purity and the reformation of doctrine and life,' depends first of all on the obedient and faithful proclamation of God's Word in the local churches, wherever in the world they are," but that "the churches which invited us have deviated from this obedient and faithful proclamation" (Art. 75,3,E).

The committee which delivered a report to the Synod of Groningen-South 1978 concerning contact with churches abroad added a consideration regarding basis and goal of the R.E.S. This committee pointed to the fact that the synodical churches had publicly deviated from the Reformed confessions, and were now also a member of the W.C.C. (the synodical churches had decided at the Synod of Sneek 1969/'70 to ask for membership of the W.C.C.). These W.C.C. churches contribute to funds supporting revolutionary movements. It is therefore impossible to sit at one international "synod" table together with churches which involve themselves in revolutionary activities.

At the Synod of the Reformed Churches held in Groningen-South in 1978 it was also pointed out how bad the influence could be of churches who tolerate modernism: "This evil influence by means of papers of the R.E.S. in the Christian Reformed Church is extensively shown by the deputies of the Canadian sister churches in their last appeal to the Christian Reformed Church regarding the doctrine of the Scripture" (published in 1977; see Synod of Coaldale, *Acts*, p. 102ff. [Appendix VII]).

Not only by the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, but also by churches participating in the R.E.S., objections were raised against developments in the synodical churches. The Kosin Presbyterian Churches of Korea left the R.E.S. In 1981 the Free Church of Scotland broke with it. Objections were voiced not only against a liberal view regarding Scripture, but also against the fact that in the synodical churches homosexuals were admitted to the Lord's Table. A number of member churches of the R.E.S. asked that the membership of the synodical churches be rejected. Finally it came to a crisis at the meeting of R.E.S. in 1988 at Harare. There it was decided to maintain the membership of the synodical churches. The consequence of it was that four groups of churches suspended or cancelled their membership: the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the Reformed Churches of New Zealand, the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk (the Netherlands), and the Gereformeerde Kerken (South Africa). The conclusion must be that the R.E.S. is not the solution as the way to counter the ecumenism of the W.C.C.

International Conference of Reformed Churches (I.C.R.C.)

But is there, then, no possibility for true Reformed ecumenical activity? There is! The initiative came from the deputies of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia. They asked for

an ecumenical synod, or a session of a general synod, at which all the churches could be represented: from Africa, Australia, Canada, the Netherlands and Korea.

We are of the opinion that it is of great importance to have a conference together and to have oral contact as churches who stand on the same basis.

This proposal was submitted to the Synod of Groningen-South 1978. The deputies for churches abroad were of the opinion that here a matter was broached which had to be considered seriously. They were convinced of its great importance and gave some reasons for that. In this way a penetrating testimony could be given of the unity of the Reformed Churches in all five continents, over against contemporary religious leagues of churches. Besides, it could be an encouragement for the small and/or young churches abroad, who live very much isolated: to know and to recognize each other could promote the bond between the churches. There could also be cooperation in matters which the member churches have in common, such as the development of a Reformed strategy of mission over against modern liberal mission theories and practices.

The Synod of Groningen-South decided to give a mandate to new deputies for churches abroad, namely, to deliberate with the sister churches and prepare an international meeting of churches. The Synod of Arnhem 1981 made the decision that the sister churches abroad and also the churches with which contact was practised, would be invited to a constitutional meeting for the convocation of a Reformed international conference. This constitutional meeting was held in Groningen-South in 1982. The meeting adopted the name *International Conference of Reformed Churches* (I.C.R.C.). The following basis was accepted: "the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testament, as confessed in the Three Forms of Unity and in the Westminster Standards." The I.C.R.C. will meet every four years. The Synod of Cloverdale 1983 decided that the Canadian Reformed Churches would join the I.C.R.C. The first conference was in Edinburgh 1985.

The first meeting of the International Conference of Reformed Churches took place in Edinburgh 3-10 September, 1985, and brought together *ten member* churches and observers from nine other churches. The participants came from many different countries, representative of all continents.

This being a first meeting, the discussions were largely of a theological nature, homing in on the concept of the church and the covenant in the Reformed Confessions.

While there was evident agreement on the bases of Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th centuries, underpinning unanimous affirmation with regard, e.g. to the Bible as the inspired and infallible Word of God and the only rule of faith and life; the Lord Jesus Christ as God and King of this world to whom all people and governments must give account: there was also recognition of difference of perspective on matters of less importance.

Conference recognized the Christian duty of securing the closest possible unity of Reformed Churches on the practical level. With this in mind, and having regard to the fact that Christ gathers His one catholic church out of all tribes, nations and peoples, there was set up a committee on Missions with a directive to investigate areas of mutual helpfulness in missions and in the training of those called to leadership in missions. Conference also appointed a committee to study the text of the three ecumenical creeds, in order to come to a common text that can be recommended to the member churches."

At the I.C.R.C. conference at Langley, British Columbia, 1989, reports concerning mission work and the text of the three ecumenical creeds were discussed. Papers were presented on the following topics: *Contextualization in Mission, Apartheid, Hermeneutics and the Gift of the Spirit, The Elder as Preserver of Life in the Covenant, Christology, and Nehemiah the Reformer*. In the I.C.R.C. we have a truly Reformed ecumenical organization over against its caricatures in other larger bodies. The I.C.R.C.

is not aiming for competition. It seeks to be a group of churches which want to be and to remain Reformed, churches which want to maintain the infallibility of the Word of God and to be faithful to the Reformed confessions, based upon that Word.

Are there differences between the member churches? Certainly there are. The confessions are not exactly the same. Let us not neglect that fact. There is a different historical background which is not to be denied. But let us not over-state the differences as if the one member is Reformed and the other one is not. Exaggeration is wrong. However, the differences in confession and also in church polity are to remain a matter of discussion. If there is the strong will to be and to remain Reformed churches, over against all kinds of false ecumenicity, and if we together have the strong desire to bow before the infallible Word of God, the blessing of the LORD can be expected.

Finally

True ecumenicity — is it possible? In many ecumenical organizations the antithesis is forgotten and humanism (in a new form) has taken its place. Criticism of the Bible and falsification of the Scripture mark much of today's ecumenism in an alarming way. In antithesis with the Babylon of false ecumenism, the appeal is still there: "Come out of her, My people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues" (Rev. 18:4). Churches who want to stand for the unabridged maintenance of God's Word and the confessions based upon it, see it as their remaining calling to be church of the living God, "the pillar and bulwark of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). They also see it as their calling to help and support each other in the fulfillment of this calling.

In dependence on and with confidence in the mighty Kurios, who bought His people with His precious blood, we are able indeed to fulfil this ecumenical calling. We can do so if guided by Word and Spirit, in the unity of the true faith, looking forward to the great multitude which no man can number, "singing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb, saying, 'Great and wonderful are Thy deeds, O Lord God the Almighty!' " (Rev. 7:9, 15:3).