



## What does it mean to be a federation of churches?

Many today wonder why we unite in a federation of churches. Especially today, "community churches," or independent churches are popular. Many think that a federation of congregations shackles the local church. Meanwhile, others are reaching for hierarchical churches. Some are returning back to the Roman Catholic Church, or the Anglican/Episcopal church. The question may well be asked: what does it mean to be a federation of churches?

### The New Testament

The New Testament uses the word "church" to designate either a local congregation or a unity among various local churches, for example, in a certain region. Thus, on the one hand, we can regard the local congregation as a manifestation of the body of Christ. Christ Himself is present there with the fullness of His grace and power. It is there under the preaching of the Gospel that sins are forgiven and sinners are convicted, converted, and comforted. It is there that God's people grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and are led by the Holy Spirit.

On the other hand, we can say that local congregations need each other. To be sure, the salvation of the Lord is experienced in each local congregation, but each congregation does not have this salvation all by itself independently from others. That is a matter of "all the saints." We therefore believe it is right for Christian congregations to associate and unite under a common government.

This tension between the local congregation and the churches in federation is the same dynamic that exists in the life of every Christian: in Christ there is perfection for every believer, but that same perfection is the purpose for which he keeps in striving. That is how it is with the church. In a local congregation the Lord Jesus Christ is present with His full salvation. And yet it is there still only in part, seeing they do not yet enjoy salvation with all saints. This is connected with the "in part" that Paul writes about in 1 Corinthians 13:9. One day this "in part" "shall be done away with" (1 Corinthians 13:10). Then also the tension between "church" and "churches" shall be done away with. Then everything will be reduced to the simplicity of the things that comes with perfection.

### The pendulum movement

Till that time there will continue to be a tension between the local congregation and the federation of churches in more than one way. I wish to point to one facet of that, because this tension sometimes is resolved in a sort of pendulum movement, as is evident from church history. The one side of the pendulum is the artificial unity that comes by way of denominational government from the top. It is imposed from the top of the church structure, and is not founded on confessional unity. The other side of the pendulum is local independence at the expense of the federation of churches. In some church federations the local churches practise the so-called right of ratification. That is, a synod may take a certain decision, but the consistories can only know themselves bound by it, if they themselves ratify such a decision. With that, in fact, every decision of a broader assembly is disputable.

To be sure, independentism as an overreaction to denominationalism is understandable. It reacts against the usurpation of power by a denominational 'higher body' and swings to the right of ratification. And a denominational 'higher body' reacts against the swing toward the

independentistic right of ratification. Sometimes certain churches that secede from a denomination with a powerful influence from a synod and synodical standing committees swing to the point rejecting church orders and broader assemblies.

## **A middle way**

Independentism is that trend in history that places the full weight on the autonomy of the local church. The local church functions independently of a church federation. The congregation is fully autonomous. It may have a relationship with a fellowship of churches, but that relationship is not an essential part of it being a church. Nevertheless, independentism is more than that. It does not only concern the relationship between the church and the churches, but also the relationship between the congregation and the consistory. The congregation can also take a stand independently of the consistory. Independentism represents a certain view on the authority in church. It lies in the assembly of the believers.

Hierarchy does precisely the opposite. It is the tendency that surfaced repeatedly throughout history where persons place themselves above the heritage of the Lord. That is the case in the Roman Catholic Church. An inner, inherent authority distinguishes the clergy from the laity. That is why the clergy has authority over the heritage of the Lord, which it cannot lose. In a clear and definite way the Reformation rejected this hierarchy. But has this leaven been cleansed out altogether? Cannot a synod display hierarchical tendencies or cannot — take note! — a consistory lord it over the heritage of the Lord?

Is the Reformed point of view then simply some sort of safe middle path in-between hierarchism and independentism? No. Those who take a middle path run the real risk of being so occupied with one's own position that one will never reach the goal of the pathway. Middle path-takers run the real risk of ending up in an ecclesiastically neurotic position. No, the Reformed view of church and federation of churches is not a safe middle path position. Rather, it is the pathway of the Word.

In both independentism and hierarchy somehow the authority is tied to man or to men together, to men who are assembled in church or to men who are assembled at synod. And that is precisely what the Reformed view rejects. It rejects all authority of men and desires to bow fully under the authority of the Word, that is, under the authority of Him who speaks that Word through His Spirit. He sifts King of His church. And in His Word He says what is His will.

That is why Reformed church government seeks to keep the way open to the Word of God. That is a kingly way. It is a way that is distinctly different from the middle path. It is a wholesome way. It is the only way. There where the Word of the King is, there is the reign of the King. Everyone who fears God will want to bow under the obedience of that Word. And that makes one free.

*"The truth shall make you free."*

(John 8:32)

## **The way of the Holy Spirit**

It is because the Reformed relationship between churches is the way of the Word that it also is the way of the Holy Spirit. That is so fundamentally Reformed that anyone who forgets this, falls back into despotism. This viewpoint evokes courage. One person by himself can stand up to a consistory, and if need be, to a synod. The reformation is unthinkable apart from this starting-point. The courage of Luther is rooted in this. Likewise, Calvin's immovable stand was rooted in this. God's Word makes a person a courageous person.

This viewpoint does not only make a person courageous, however, but also particularly humble. The Holy Spirit does not give only to one person to understand His will. Rather, He gives His gifts to everyone. And the Lord makes His way known in the way of consulting with one another, together prayerfully seeking the way of the Word. The root of what Reformed persons said in the days of the Reformation about the authority of synods lies in this peculiar light that is shed on the work of the Holy Spirit. One can also say: It lies in faith in the presence of Christ Himself. It is

remarkable that this is a significant motif in the synodical letters of invitation that have been preserved from the days of the Reformation. Where two or three are gathered together in the Name of Christ, there the Lord Himself is present (cf. Matthew 18:20), and there we together may pray for His guidance, and He will not leave Himself without witness.

Thus the pluriformity of the gifts of the Holy Spirit has significant theological implications for churches gathering together also in broader assemblies.

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