

Church Boundaries: Keeping Christ Whole!

Rev. Dr. R. D. Anderson (30 January 2020)

The question of church boundaries has kept a few churches in the federation busy the last few months. In my humble opinion this is a matter which, perhaps, has not always had the consideration it deserves by all of us. Allow me then to just touch on some of the basics here. Let's start with a picture ...



No, its not a representation of two war veterans being led away by a Martian. It's a picture of what happens when the geographical boundaries of Christ's churches are neglected. In 1 Corinthians 12 the apostle Paul describes the local church of Christ as *the body of Christ*. Each member, with the unique gifts which the Spirit has given him, forms a different part of that body. Let's listen to the way the apostle Paul puts it:

¹² For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. ¹³ For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body— whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. ¹⁴ For in fact the body is not one member but many. ¹⁵ If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body,” is it therefore not of the body? ¹⁶ And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body,” is it therefore not of the body? ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling? ¹⁸ But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. ¹⁹ And if they were all one member, where would the body be? (1 Cor.12:12-19 NKJ)

Each local church of Christ constitutes his body. He has equipped it with office bearers and he ensures that all the members have their own gifts, which are to be used for the edification of *that* body. The New Testament never speaks of modality churches (local churches of different flavours). We only read of churches in such-and-such a place. Titus, for example, must appoint elders *in all cities* (Titus 1:5), not in family clans, social classes, groups of friends or groups of people with the same age. When this principle is ignored, and the various body-parts are free to join whichever body they like the best, we get monstrosities such as depicted above. The one body might end up with many eyes (since the eyes all get on well together), while other bodies go blind. *The biblical image of the local church as a body presupposes clearly defined boundaries.*

This is also what we confess in the Belgic Confession art. 28.

We believe, since this holy assembly and congregation is the assembly of the redeemed and there is no salvation outside of it, that no one ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself, no matter what his status or standing may be. But all and everyone are obliged to join it and unite with it, maintaining the unity of the church. They must submit themselves to its instruction and discipline,

bend their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ, and *serve the edification of the brothers and sisters, according to the talents which God has given them as members of the same body.*

To observe this more effectively, it is the duty of all believers, according to the Word of God, to separate from those who do not belong to the church and *to join this assembly wherever God has established it.* They should do so even though the rulers and edicts of princes were against it, and death or physical punishment might follow.

All therefore who draw away from the church or fail to join it act contrary to the ordinance of God.

We are to separate from assemblies which are *not* the church and join ourselves to the church (the body) “wherever God has established it”, that is to say we are bound to join Christ’s church in *that* place where we live. We are not told to *pick out* a church somewhere in our vicinity, but to join *the church* in our locale. We confess that there ought only to be one true church in any one locality. And that is *the church* which we ought to join. If there is more than one church of Christ in any locality, that is a result of sin and we ought to strive to unite and to restore the unity of Christ’s church.

Church boundaries are a confessional issue. Perforations, other than for serious pastoral reasons agreed upon by the mutual consent of both churches concerned (that of the locality of the person concerned and that where he registers as member), are a matter for church discipline.¹ There can be no excuse for someone deliberately and without serious pastoral reasons ignoring Christ’s body in the place where he lives and attending a different church instead. This is an offence to Christ himself.

For this reason we as Australian churches (in line with the Synod of Dort) have regulated the matter of church boundaries in our church order. Articles 38 and 39 read:

ARTICLE 38 - Constitution of a consistory

If a consistory is to be constituted for the first time or anew, the advice of classis shall be sought.

ARTICLE 39 - Places without a consistory

Places where as yet no consistory can be constituted shall be assigned by classis to the care of a neighbouring consistory.

It is particularly in article 39 that we see that it belongs to the classis to determine the boundaries for the various local churches. Churches are held to be responsible for *places*. They have a *parish* to care for and to evangelize. In fact, at the beginning of their history, the synods of the Free Reformed Churches instituted and maintained a set of boundaries that made individual churches responsible for all areas of Australia. The Reformed parish system goes all the way back to John Calvin. After Calvin had been banished from Geneva, during mediation, he wrote that he would be prepared to return to Geneva upon certain conditions.² 1) That he would receive opportunity to defend himself against wrongful accusations, 2) that a number of things would be done to ensure the effective use of church discipline. First on the list of these items to ensure effective church discipline was that the city be divided into parishes. And indeed, later under his direction Geneva was in fact divided into parishes. The term “parish” was also used by Petrus Dathenus in his proposal for the church order of a public Reformed church federation, supported by many Reformed exiles, prepared at Wesel in 1568. Here it is stated that it is the task of the elders to visit everyone in their “parish” (that is, not just church members, but everyone living within the parish boundaries!).³ In a similar fashion the

1 Van Dellen and Monsma (335) write: “In case a member moves to distant parts and fails to request certification the Consistory should write to him, if need be, often. If one of our Churches is found in the place of his new residence, the Consistory of that Church should be informed and asked to call on the negligent member, urging him to request certification, etc. If nothing avails, then the membership of such a one would ultimately lapse. A Consistory would be compelled at long last to announce to the Church that the party or parties in question had by their indifference and negligence, notwithstanding frequent admonitions, nullified their membership, and that consequently the Consistory had declared their rights and privileges void and their names removed from the roll.” Van Dellen and Monsma clearly presuppose that a Consistory may not and cannot retain a member on their roll who lives outside their boundary without the consent of the Consistory where the person resides. Their sentiment was already clearly foreshadowed by the Particular Synod of Leiden in 1600 which spoke of those who estrange themselves completely from the church by moving into another boundary without requesting an attestation. This synod treats such a case as an automatic withdrawal from the church. See *Acta der Provinciale en Particuliere Synoden*, vol.3, p.150 (art.30).

2 Letter d.d. 1 May 1538 to the consistory of Zurich, cited in Luttkhuis, 3.3.2.

3 *Acta van de Nederlandsche Synoden der zestiende eeuw*, “Wezelsche Artikelen”, cap. 4.2, p.22. On this document see now J.

Provincial Synod of Zeeland in 1610, (chapt. 3, art. 15)⁴ ordered the ministers of the local churches to be sure to admonish, not only members of the church, but all who live in their boundaries of their duty to join the church. Particular mention is made of those who arrive to live in the town. The fact that Christ's churches are parishes, defined also in terms of their boundaries, has a weighty spiritual dimension. The church is responsible for bringing the Gospel of Christ to all the inhabitants within those boundaries. This is their field in which they must sow the Gospel.

Later in the seventeenth century the great church political expert, Gijsbertus Voetius, wrote specifically about the problem of members attempting to belong to a church outside of the boundaries where they live.⁵ He argued: "It should therefore not be approved, if without just cause citizens, for example of our city, passing by their local church should be registered in a church of another nearby town or from the neighbouring district and vice versa." He goes on to state that, should there be urgent reasons, it may be permitted for someone to be enrolled in a church different to where he lives, or, (if he has moved house) to remain enrolled in his old church. But this can only occur with the consultation and consent of both churches concerned.

More concretely, the twentieth century church political expert Dr. F. L. Rutgers gave the following advice:

On biblical grounds the Reformed churches have always accepted that each church must have its own clearly determined boundaries, so that every member living within those boundaries belongs to that church. With the Union of 1892 an exception was made with respect to members who at that time already belonged to another of the uniting churches, which already had a certain right to those members. But this exception was only made upon this ground, and therefore it was also specifically determined that no other exceptions could be permitted; not even with respect to the children of such members.

This rule must be firmly held to, firstly because it is in accord with Scripture, but also because principally all ecclesiastical order would otherwise be relinquished and the door would be opened to arbitrariness and to all kinds of difficulties and disagreements.

The boundaries of a church can certainly be changed. All sorts of local circumstances could provide an inducement for this. But this is wholly different from permitting a family which lives within the boundaries of church x to become a member of church y; as would happen in the situation you describe. This can never be permitted. If the house of that family is so nearby that they would be better off belonging to the church of x than to the church of y, let a proposal be brought to change the boundaries of the two churches to suit. Two consistories can discuss the matter and consult the family concerned, and the classis will decide, always with the possibility of appeal to the particular Synod.⁶

Although in our day, serious pastoral considerations may lead to an exception being made, our church order still requires that boundaries be determined by the classis. These boundaries must be respected by the consistory. For this reason article 59 of the church order states:

ARTICLE 59 - Attestations for communicant members

Communicant members who move to another congregation shall be given, following appropriate announcements to the congregation, an attestation regarding their doctrine and conduct, signed on behalf of the consistory by two authorised office-bearers. This attestation shall also record their children who have not yet made public profession of faith. The consistory of the congregation concerned shall be notified in due time.

The provision of attestations for members which move outside of their boundaries is not optional. These attestations "*shall be given*". Any church retaining or accepting members who live outside of their

Spohnholz, *The Convent of Wesel: The Event that Never was and the Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: University Press, 2017).

4 *Acta der Provinciale en Particuliere Synoden*, vol.5, p.101.

5 Voetius, *Politica Ecclesiastica*, Pars I, Liber I, Cap.IV, 2 *quaestio vii*. My translation.

6 Rutgers, *Kerkelijke Adviezen*, # 350. My translation.

boundaries without the consent of the church in whose boundaries the members actually live, is lording it over that church. They have in an unwarranted manner *stolen* that member from the body of Christ to which he ought to belong. They thereby preclude the elders of the church where he lives from conducting their God-given oversight of their parish. As Australian churches we too need to uphold article 80 of our church order also in this respect:

ARTICLE 80 - No lording over others

No church shall in any way lord it over other churches, no office-bearer over other office-bearers.

Of course Reformed churches do not form a national church, but a federated body of local churches. For this reason membership is not automatically transferred, but an attestation is given which must be received by the local church into which a person comes to reside. It has always been the case in Reformed church polity that even when an attestation has been given, the person remains a member of his original church until that attestation has been accepted by the new church in his locale. However, although one's membership may still be in the church of origin, because the person now resides within the boundaries of a new church, it becomes that new church's responsibility to admonish him to join himself to the church in his locale. He resides in their parish. Allow me to illustrate this historically. Let us take the case of Petrus Bertius of the city of Leiden.⁷ In 1618 Bertius left Leiden to reside in Paris. He did not notify the consistory of his move and therefore did not receive an attestation. He was duly admonished by the Reformed church of Paris who wrote to the church of Leiden about him. In 1620 Bertius became a member of the Roman Catholic church in Paris. The Provincial Synod of South Holland, at the request of the classis in the region of Leiden, wrote to the Reformed church of Paris requesting that he be admonished to repent. Bertius was given three months, after which the church of Leiden was to excommunicate him. Bertius did not repent and his excommunication in Leiden followed. The fact that Bertius lived in Paris, made it the responsibility of the church in Paris to admonish him. The fact that Bertius never handed over an attestation from the church in Leiden, made it the responsibility of the church in Leiden to excommunicate him.⁸

In fact already in 1600 the Particular Synod of South Holland held in Leiden spoke in art. 30 of cases where people move residence without an attestation and reside in a new place.⁹ The ministers of the church from which they originally came are instructed to take note of this and to write to the church in their new place of residence, instructing the consistory there to admonish them. The point is, once again, that the place where a person resides gives the consistory in that place the responsibility of admonishment. If the person neglected to advise of his departure and therefore did not receive an attestation, this must be made good. If the person was refused an attestation because he had been excommunicated, the church of his new place of residence must not admit him to membership until reconciliation has taken place.

Obviously a consistory can only give an attestation to someone if they realise that the person is leaving their boundaries. This fact is made clear in the Acts of the Provincial Synod of Zeeland, 1591 art. 76.¹⁰ There, what is our art. 59, is stated, namely, that to those who leave, an attestation "bij advijse des kerkenraets" shall be given. I interpret this to mean that the consistory needs to be advised that the person in question is leaving, otherwise no attestation could be given and the person would leave without one.

Let us together learn to respect the fact that every local church must form a complete body of Jesus Christ and, as difficult as it may sometimes be, work for the edification of our brothers and sisters in the place

7 For more information see the 'Appendix' to my *Reformed Church Polity concerning Withdrawal of Church Membership* to be found on my internet page.

8 *Acta der Provinciale en Particuliere Synoden*, vol.3, pp.420-21. H. Bouwman (*Kerkelijke Tucht*, 156) mentions a similar example. A certain H. Sioerdt had left Molkwerum for Amsterdam with an attestation, but joined the Roman Catholic Church there. When he finally returned to Molkwerum in 1699 (without an attestation) the consistory decided "to excommunicate this Heringh Sioerdt given that he is a dead member." This consistory (with the consent of classis) thus excommunicated a member long after he had left the village with an attestation. Once again we see that one was considered to be a member of the local church until his attestation had been officially accepted by a sister church elsewhere. Because Sioerdt had never handed in his attestation anywhere he was still, formally speaking, a member of the church at Molkwerum. On this aspect of Reformed church polity in the seventeenth century see further A. Th. Van Deursen, *Bavianen en Slijgeuzen: Kerk en kerkvolk ten tijde van Maurits en Oldenbarneveldt* (Franeker: Van Wijnen, 1974), 155-56.

9 *Acta der Provinciale en Particuliere Synoden*, vol.3, p.150.

10 *Acta der Provinciale en Particuliere Synoden*, vol.5, p.31.

where we live. And let us learn to respect the necessity of adherence to church boundaries. Already in 1941 Van Dellen and Monsma,¹¹ could lament that the Christian Reformed Churches (in North America) had “almost entirely erased all boundary lines between … particular churches”. They add, however, that this fact “is much to be regretted” and give a number of reasons in a footnote. Their considerations are worth quoting in full:

1. Believers should manifest the body of Christ in the place of their providentially determined residence.
2. It is against the intent of Article 82 [our art. 59].
3. It fosters the overgrowth of some Churches and the undergrowth of others.
4. It promotes “floating”.
5. It promotes a onesided development. (Birds of a feather flock together.)
6. It stimulates unholy competition.
7. It promotes slothfulness in catechism attendance.
8. It promotes needless Sunday travel.
9. It constitutes a practical denial of the communion of saints.

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11 *The Church Order Commentary*, 338

Map of the Church Boundaries

