

# Ordained Servant



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## ORDAINED SERVANT

### Statement Of Purpose

*Ordained Servant* exists to provide solid materials for the equipping of office-bearers to serve more faithfully. The goal of this journal is to assist the ordained servants of the church to become more fruitful in their particular ministry so that they in turn will be more capable to prepare God's people for works of service. To attain this goal *Ordained Servant* will include articles (both old and new) of a theoretical and practical nature with the emphasis tending toward practical articles wrestling with perennial and thorny problems encountered by office-bearers.

### Editorial Policy

1. *Ordained Servant* publishes articles inculcating biblical presbyterianism in accord with the constitution of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and helpful articles from collateral Reformed traditions; however, views expressed by the writers do not necessarily represent the position of *Ordained Servant* or of the Church.
2. *Ordained Servant* occasionally publishes articles on issues on which differing positions are taken by officers in good standing in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. *Ordained Servant* does not intend to take a partisan stand, but welcomes articles from various viewpoints in harmony with the constitution of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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In this issue of *Ordained Servant* we put the main focus on ecumenicity—a concern which has been very much alive in the OPC right from the beginning. We were part of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod (RES) for several decades, and of the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC) from its inception. In these organizations we have sought to be faithful to two main concerns: namely, the unity and the purity of the Church. It was this concern that also led to our reluctant departure from the RES in 1988 and our realignment with some of the former RES churches in the International Conference of Reformed Churches (ICRC).



In previous issues of *Ordained Servant* we reproduced a paper by Dr. James de Jong on the unity of the church. That paper was written from a Continental–Dutch Reformed—perspective. In this issue we reproduce the first part of another paper presented at the 2001 ICRC, written by an Irish Presbyterian. In doing so we want to draw attention to the degree of convergence that we see in these two papers. In the work of the late Professor John Murray (which will be highlighted in the second part of this paper) especially there is a clear recognition of the danger inherent in the Westminster formulation of the doctrine

of the Church that some people have taken to mean that there are two Churches: visible and invisible. We think Dr. MacKay’s interesting historical study of our own Presbyterian history can help us safeguarding against this danger.



We not only need a scriptural outlook on the wider denominational level that is true to the Bible. We also need it in the locality in which we live. It is to this sometimes difficult but also vital responsibility that Pastor Matthew Kingsbury directs our attention in his article entitled ‘All Ecclesiology is Local’ (Subtitled: The Pastoral Imperative for Reformed Ecumenicism). This is an example of the kind of articles that ought to be shared throughout the OPC. Perhaps you have written something that others need to ‘hear.’ We welcome submissions. And while we cannot promise in advance to use everything that comes our way, we certainly will give it a fair ‘hearing.’



Finally, we take a look at some of the statements on the subject of the unity of the church from both some of the historic Confessions and a few of the renowned theologians of the Reformed Churches. Real progress in the Christian Church is not found in all sorts of ill-considered innovation. It is rather found in the way of

careful building on the solid foundation of time-tested past achievements. Like everything else that is ‘traditional’ our own heritage must, of course, be tested—constantly—by the holy Scriptures. It is our hope that this issue of *Ordained Servant* will stimulate precisely this process.



**The fragmentation and consequent lack of fellowship, harmony, and co-operation which appear on the ecclesiastical scene are a patent contradiction of the unity exemplified in that to which Jesus referred when he said, ‘as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee’.**

The purpose stated in Jesus’ prayer—**‘that the world may believe that thou hast sent me’**—implies a manifestation observable by the world. Jesus prays for a visible unity that will bear witness to the world. The mysterious unity of believers with one another must come to visible expression so as to be instrumental in bringing conviction to the world.

*Collected Writings of John Murray, Vol. 1, p. 271*

# The Unity of the Church in the Westminster Tradition – Part 1

By

W. D. J. McKay



A Paper presented at the 2001 International Conference of Reformed Churches

## Introduction

It is clear from Scripture that the unity of the Church is both a fact and an aspiration. Thus the apostle Paul in I Corinthians 12:13 reminds his readers that “we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.” In similar vein he states in Gal. 3:27,28 that “all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” It is also most significant that in Romans 11 Paul speaks of only one olive tree, onto which Gentile branches are grafted.

At the same time, that unity is to be made visible to the world. That is the burden of Jesus’ prayer in John 17:21,23, “that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you...May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” The divisions in the church at Corinth were of deep concern to Paul: “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptised into the name of Paul?” (1 Cor. 1:13). Where unity exists it is to be treasured and protected: “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). Visible disunity cannot be a matter of indifference to the people of God.

Issues of ecclesiology have received considerable attention from Reformed churches within what may be termed the “Westminster” tradition, who trace their doctrine and polity back to the work of the Westminster Assembly in the middle years of the seventeenth century. In examining the unity of the Church as it has been viewed in the Westminster tradition, we will take a historical approach, having as a main focus the work of the Westminster Assembly and the contribution of the Commissioners from Scotland, a land where ecclesiology has been much debated. We will also consider some later discussions of the subject and note the diversity within this tradition.

### An early confession

It is interesting to consider at the outset of this study the earliest attempt in Scotland to give confessional expression to a Reformed doctrine of the Church. Up until the production of the *Scots Confession* in 1560 the official church of the nation had still been Roman Catholic, and Protestant believers had had

to meet in private houses or in the fields. As the Reformed cause grew these “privy kirks” (as they were known) became publicly organised congregations in a number of towns. Ultimately the Reformation became officially established in 1560 and a biblical basis for the existence of Reformed congregations was provided by “The Confession of the Faith and Doctrine, Believed

and professed by the Protestants of Scotland”, whose authors included John Knox.<sup>1</sup>

In Article XVI of the Confession (“Of the Kirk”) the

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<sup>1</sup> The text is available in *The Creeds of Christendom*, 6th edition, edited by Philip Schaff, revised by David S. Schaff (Grand Rapids, 1983), volume 3, 437-79. In quotations the spelling has been modernised by the present writer.

Church is defined as “one company and multitude of men chosen of God, who rightly worship and embrace him by true faith in Christ Jesus, who is the only head of the same Kirk, which also is the body and spouse of Christ Jesus, which Kirk is Catholic, that is, universal, because it contains the Elect of all ages, of all realms, nations and tongues, be they of the Jews, or be they of the Gentiles, who have communion and society with God the Father, and with his Son Christ Jesus, through the sanctification of his Holy Spirit”.

This is the universal Church, the body of those who have living fellowship with the triune God. This is the body designated “the Communion of Saints” and “citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem”, according to the Confession. Article XVI concludes, “This Kirk is invisible, known only to God, who alone knows whom he has chosen; and comprehends as well (as said is) the Elect that be departed, commonly called the Kirk Triumphant, and they that shall live and fight against sin and Satan who shall live hereafter.”

The other aspect of the Confession’s understanding of the Church is to be found in Article XVIII (“Of the notes, by which the true Kirk is discerned from the false, and who shall be judge of the doctrine”). After alluding to the deceptions and persecutions perpetrated by Satan, the Confession stresses the importance of being able to distinguish “the immaculate Spouse of Christ Jesus” from “the horrible harlot, the Kirk malignant”, and lists the three

“notes” (or marks) of the true Church as true preaching of the Word, right administration of the sacraments and ecclesiastical discipline rightly administered. These notes identify a true Church: not the universal Church of Article XVI but “particular, such as was in Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus and other places”. Alongside the universal Church consisting of all God’s people, there are “particular churches” in specific locations, such as, says the Confession, “we the inhabitants of the Realm of Scotland, professors of Christ Jesus, profess ourselves to have in our cities, towns and places reformed”. No reference is made here to a distinction between “visible” and “invisible” with regard to the Church, but it is clearly to the visible congregations that the test of the “notes” is to be applied.

Although Article XXV (“Of the gifts freely given to the Kirk”) recognises that some nonelect people may deceptively identify themselves with true churches, the definitions of the Church are not framed so as to allow for their presence. True particular churches together make up that part of the universal Church which is presently on earth.

When in 1560 the Reformed Church became the legally recognised national Church in Scotland, however, many clergy and members moved easily into the new structure without any real change in faith.<sup>2</sup> The

<sup>2</sup> This is outlined helpfully by Iain Murray in an unpublished paper, “*The Churches and Christian Unity in Scottish Presbyterian History*”, 24.

Church became almost coextensive with the nation and thus included many unregenerate. Something of this state of affairs may be reflected in the statement of *the Second Book of Discipline* (1578): “The kirk of God sometimes is largely taken for all them that profess the Evangel of Jesus Christ, and so it is a company and fellowship, not only of the godly, but also of hypocrites, professing always outwardly one true religion. Other times it is taken for the godly and elect only.”<sup>3</sup> It would appear that more allowance is being made for the mixed condition of the national Church than was the case in the 1560 Confession. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century Scottish Presbyterian divines were to respond to this problem with a thoroughgoing distinction between the invisible and the visible Church.

#### **The aspirations of the Solemn League and Covenant<sup>4</sup>**

In order to gain Scottish help in their civil war with King Charles I the English Parliament entered into a political and religious bond with the Scots in 1643. This *Solemn League and Covenant*, in addition to various political commitments, pledged the parties to “the preservation of the reformed religion in the Church of Scotland, in doctrine,

<sup>3</sup> *The Second Book of Discipline*, with Introduction and Commentary by James Kirk (Edinburgh, 1980), I.12. Spelling has been modernised by the present writer.

<sup>4</sup> The necessary historical background is provided by William M Hetherington, *History of the Westminster Assembly of Divines* (Edinburgh, 1878) and A F Mitchell, *The Westminster Assembly: Its History and Standards* (London, 1883).

worship, discipline, and government” and also to “the reformation of religion in the kingdoms of England and Ireland, in doctrine, worship, discipline, and government, according to the word of God, and the example of the best reformed Churches”. Of particular interest for our study is the *Covenant’s* binding the parties to “endeavour to bring the Churches of God in the three kingdoms to the nearest conjunction and uniformity in religion, confession of faith, form of church government, directory for worship and catechising”. The Westminster Assembly had already been meeting to provide for the reformation of the Church of England. With the signing of the *Covenant* it was given the task of promoting religious uniformity in the three kingdoms, with the advice of a number of Commissioners from the Church of Scotland.

*The Solernn League and Covenant* did not envisage a single Reformed Church covering the whole of the British Isles. Instead, each kingdom would have its own national church, thoroughly reformed in doctrine and practice, and uniform with the churches in the other two kingdoms. Each kingdom therefore would have a single national church, maintained by civil and ecclesiastical authority. In this sense there would be a single united ecclesiastical body in each nation, outside of which there would be no legal institutional expression of the Christian faith. As we know, historical events did not permit the realisation of this goal, but it is vital to understand what the

Westminster Assembly, within the provisions of the *Solemn League and Covenant*, was seeking to achieve.

### The perspective of the Scottish Commissioners

Apart from the English Independents, whose views were consistently voted down by the majority in the Westminster Assembly, those within that body who had thought most deeply about ecclesiological issues were undoubtedly the Commissioners from Scotland. Among their number were men like Samuel Rutherford and George Gillespie<sup>5</sup> who wrote some of the major seventeenth century defences of Presbyterianism. These were the voices that played the most significant role in formulating the Assembly’s position on the nature and government of the Church, although they did not always succeed in bringing the Assembly to their way of thinking.<sup>6</sup>

Basic to the Scots’ view of the Church was the conviction that, alongside the universal invisible Church made up of all

<sup>5</sup> For Gillespie’s views on some of these issues see: W D J McKay. *An Ecclesiastical Republic. Church Government in the Writings of George Gillespie* (Carlisle, 1997)

<sup>6</sup> The Scottish influence on the Assembly’s work is summarised by W D J McKay in “Scotland and the Westminster Assembly” in *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century*, edited by Ligon Duncan and Duncan Rankin (forthcoming). A fuller account is that of Wayne R Spear. *Covenanted Uniformity in Religion: the Influence of the Scottish Commissioners upon the Ecclesiology of the Westminster Assembly*, unpublished Ph D thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 1976

the elect, “there is a universal or catholic visible Church”.<sup>7</sup> In their view the visible Church is to be regarded as an integral whole, regardless of geographical boundaries. One historian of Scottish theology, James Walker, has used the illustration of an empire and its constituent parts. The universal visible Church is the empire. “The Churches of the various nationalities constitute the provinces of the empire; and though they are so far independent of each other, yet they are so one, that membership in one is membership in all, and separation from one is separation from all.” Thus a member moving from one country to another would expect to have his church membership recognised in the true church to which he went. The discipline of the Reformed Church in Scotland would be recognised by, say, the Reformed Church in the Netherlands.

The distinction between the invisible and the visible Church was of great importance to the Scots. The mixed nature of the post Reformation Church of Scotland may have forced consideration of this issue upon them, but they held to the validity of this distinction for what they believed were sound biblical reasons. The distinction is seen most clearly when we address the question of membership in the Church.

Membership in the invisible Church is said to be on the basis of invisible grace. In other words, only those who experience the saving grace of God and who

<sup>7</sup> Samuel Rutherford, *The Due right of Presbyteries* (London, 1644), 57.

## THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH IN THE WESTMINSTER TRADITION

thus have a living faith in Christ are members of the invisible Church. Thus Rutherford can argue that “the invisible and not the visible Church is the principal, prime and only proper subject, with whom the covenant of grace is made, to whom all the promises do belong, and to whom all Titles, Styles, Properties and privileges of special note, in the Mediator do belong.”<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, membership in the visible Church must be on the basis of that which is visible. The Scots rejected the view of the Independents that membership in the visible Church was only for those considered by the officers of the Church to be genuinely regenerate. The Independent belief that only those who credibly professed to be saved could be admitted to membership seemed to the Scots to be setting the church officers an impossible task. The Scots refused to define the visible Church as a company of true believers, those thought to be the objects of divine grace.

Since grace is invisible, the Scots argued, it cannot be the criterion of membership in the visible Church. All that church officers can deal with is a visible profession. As historian John Macpherson puts it, “A seen profession is the ground of admission to membership in the visible Church.”<sup>9</sup> The principle in question is stated thus by Macpherson: “Just because we cannot see God going before in

the bestowing of invisible grace, the ministers of the Church cannot here follow by adding such and only such to the Church”.<sup>10</sup>

We must note carefully what kind of “seen profession” is required. It is not a profession of saving faith in Christ or any claim to be regenerate. As Rutherford puts it, all were to be accepted “so they be known (1) To be Baptized. (2) That they be free of gross scandals. (3) And profess that they be willing hearers of the Doctrine of the Gospel.”<sup>11</sup> The “scandalously wicked” are to be excluded, those of “approved piety” are certainly to be accepted, but, argues Rutherford, “these of the middle sort are to be acknowledged members of the Church, though the Church have not a positive certainty of the judgment of charity, that they are regenerated”.<sup>12</sup> No profession of “sound conversion” is to be required of those who legitimately make up the membership of the visible Church. The logic of this position, which Rutherford did not shy away from, was that there could be a true congregation, a true “particular Church”, in which not one member was regenerate. It should perhaps be noted that later Reformed theologians, such as Thomas Boston, did not accept the view propounded by Rutherford and the men of his generation. Boston, in a discussion of the subject of the baptism of infants,<sup>13</sup> argued that only

those infants who have at least one parent a visible believer have a right to baptism. In a situation where cold formalism had spread to much of the Church of Scotland, Boston argued that the Church as it is visible is to be thought of as a company of visible believers. To define it otherwise was, in his view, to admit many to membership whose unregenerate condition was responsible for the low spiritual condition in which the Church of Scotland currently found itself.

The view of membership in the visible Church held by Rutherford and his contemporaries may be linked usefully with their understanding of the headship of Christ over his Church. Such headship is of course a vital factor in the unity of the Church. Again Rutherford may be taken as an example, since he considered these issues in great detail.

In *The Divine Right of Church Government* we find the unequivocal statement that, “Christ is the head and only head of the Church, for by what title Christ is before all things, he in whom all things consist, and is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, and hath the pre-eminence in all things, and he is only, solely and absolutely all these, by the same title he is the Head, and so the only Head of the Body the Church, Coloss. 1.17,18.”<sup>14</sup> Rutherford goes on to stress that this is true not only

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Rutherford, *op. cit.*, 244.

<sup>9</sup> John Macpherson, *The Doctrine of the Church in Scottish Theology* (Edinburgh, 1903), 64.

<sup>10</sup> John Macpherson, *op. cit.* 66.

<sup>11</sup> Samuel Rutherford, *op. cit.* 251.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Boston, *Miscellaneous Questions in Complete Works* (London,

1855), Volume VI, 125ff.

<sup>14</sup> Samuel Rutherford, *The Divine Right of Church Government and Excommunication* (London, 1646), 1314.

with reference to the invisible Church, the body of all believers, but also with the Church as a structured body on earth. Thus he says that, “[Christ] is the head of his Politic body, and so a head in all externals, as well as of mystical and invisible body [sic],”<sup>15</sup> and again, “Christ is the King, yea the only King of his own Kingdom, either as this Kingdom is mystical and invisible, or as it is Politic, external and visible on earth”.<sup>16</sup> In view of the stand which the Scottish Covenanters had to take against royal claims to authority over the Church, it is not surprising to find the unique headship of Christ emphasised in their writings. They contended for the crown rights of “the King of kings and Lord of lords, Jesus Christ, the only monarch of the church”.<sup>17</sup>

It is important to note, however, how Rutherford distinguishes the ways in which Christ is Head of the invisible Church and of the visible. He states in *The Due Right of Presbyteries*, “That Christ is the Head of the visible Church, as visible, is not in all the Word of God; he is the Head of the Church catholic and invisible, by influence of the Life and Spirit of Christ, Eph.1.22,23. Eph.4.16. Coloss.1.18, and in a large sense may be called the Head of the church visible, as visible, in regard of the influence of common graces for the Ministry, government and use of

the keys.”<sup>18</sup> The distinction would appear to be between a headship founded on a living salvific union with Christ and a headship based on the external governmental structures of a visible body to which members belong. The latter Rutherford terms “an union with Christ, as head, according to the influence of common gifts”.<sup>19</sup> It is this union alone which is required for membership of the visible Church. Rutherford rejects as false the view that “Christ is Head of the Church and the Spouse, redeemer and Saviour of the visible Church, as it is visible, which is the Arminian Doctrine of universal grace”.<sup>20</sup>

As far as the organisation of the visible Church is concerned, the Scots firmly believed that each nation should have a single Reformed Church, the one true Church in that particular geographical area. As historian James Walker puts it, “True Churches of Christ, side by side with one another, forming separate organizations, with separate governments, seemed to them utterly inadmissible, unless it might be in a very limited way, and for some reason of temporary expediency.”<sup>21</sup> One Church under one ecclesiastical government in each nation was for them the state of affairs to be maintained or sought where it did not exist. Thus James Durham states, “Yet it is impossible for those that

maintain that principle of the unity of the catholic visible church, to own a divided way of administrating government or other ordinances, but it will infer either that one party has no interest in the church, or that one church may be many, and so, that the unity thereof in its visible state is to no purpose. This then we take for granted.”<sup>22</sup> To maintain any other view was, they held, to allow that Christ could be divided. Such was their commitment to the unity of the Church that, as long as there was no error with regard to fundamental truths, they would not consider separating from the Church lest they be guilty of schism. As Walker sums it up, “In the case of a true Church, no separation in point of actual Church fellowship can be lawful, although you must certainly separate yourself from its errors in doctrine and worship”.<sup>23</sup>

As we have indicated above, the setting up or preserving of national Reformed churches was enshrined in the Solemn League and Covenant. The Scots were fully committed to the view that the civil rulers had the duty to enforce this state of affairs within their respective jurisdictions. This position is spelled out in detail in Rutherford’s treatise *A Free Disputation Against pretended Liberty of Conscience* (1649). In the twentysecond chapter, for example, Rutherford argues that diversity of belief, worship or church gov-

<sup>15</sup> Rutherford, *Divine Right*, 14.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> George Gillespie, *One Hundred and Eleven Propositions concerning the Ministry and Government of the Church* (Edinburgh, 1647), Proposition 100.

<sup>18</sup> Samuel Rutherford, *The Due Right of Presbyteries*, 2567.

<sup>19</sup> Rutherford, *Due Right*, 257.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> James Walker, *The Theology and Theologians of Scotland 1560-1750*, 1888 edition (Edinburgh, 1982) 9798.

<sup>22</sup> James Durham, *A Treatise Concerning Scandal*, a new edition based on the edition of 1680, edited by Christopher Caldwell (Dallas, 1990), Part 4, chapter 4, 262.

<sup>23</sup> James Walker, op. cit. 1089.



ernment is expressly ruled out by the Covenant. The parliament of each nation bound by the Covenant is obliged to ensure uniformity within the Reformed Church in its territory and so, at least in the Scots' understanding of the Covenant, there will be uniformity among the Reformed and Presbyterian Churches established in each of the "three kingdoms". The diversity for which the Independents contended was not to be permitted. As Rutherford says, "The pretended liberty is against the Articles, matter and ends of the Covenant".<sup>24</sup> The civil magistrate as "the Minister of God" was "to use the sword against false teachers who give liberty to all Religions".<sup>25</sup> When it became clear that the government of Oliver Cromwell (an Independent) in England would not enforce such uniformity, Rutherford and his compatriots were outraged. The depth of their feelings is evident in Rutherford's challenge to the Independents, "Confess and glorify God: you swore the Covenant in a Jesuitical reserved sense".<sup>26</sup>

The Scots put a high value on the fellowship that was possible between national Churches united in the same Reformed Faith. They were not narrowly nationalistic in their outlook, but rather cherished contact with Reformed Churches on the Continent, and indeed Holland was to provide a refuge for persecuted Covenanters in

the later years of the 17th century. Just as their presbyterian principles led them to a high view of the support that one congregation could give to another, so they believed that one national church could be of great help to another. This is how Rutherford states the matter: "Sister Churches keep a visible Churchcommunion together. (1) They hear the word, and partake of the Seals of the Covenant, occasionally with one another. (2) They eschew the same excommunicated heretic, as a common Churchenemy to all. (3) They exhort, rebuke, comfort, and edify one another, as members of one body visible. (4) If one sister Church fall away, they are to labour to gain her, and if she will not be gained... they tell it to many sister Churches; if she refuse to hear them, they forsake Communion with her."<sup>27</sup> Relations between sister churches were to serve the edification of the whole body of believers.

Some of the Scots even envisaged the possibility of holding what they termed an "Ecumenical Synod" which would be a powerful expression of the unity of the Church. George Gillespie believed that such a body would be acceptable "if so it be free and rightly constituted, and no other commissioners but orthodox churches be admitted".<sup>28</sup> Indeed in the circumstances of his day he believed that such a synod would be especially useful since "surely it is to be wished that, for defending the orthodox faith,

both against Popery and other heresies, as also for propagating it to those who are without, especially the Jews, a more strait and more firm consociation may be entered into. For the unanimity of all the churches, as in evil it is of all things most hurtful, so on the contrary side, in good it is most pleasant, most profitable, and most effectual".<sup>29</sup>

To an Ecumenical Synod would be referred *controversiae juris*—controversies of right. These would not be minor cases but only the most weighty issues of orthodox theology or the most difficult cases of conscience. Gillespie argues that controversies of fact, specific individual cases, were not generally suitable for the consideration of an Ecumenical Synod. In his view it is most reasonable that specific cases should end with the decision of a National Synod, "unless the thing itself be so hard and of so great moment, that the knot be thought worthy of a greater decider".<sup>30</sup> He does, however, hold that a National Synod is subordinate to "the universal and lawfully constituted synod" and that there is a right of appeal from a National to an Ecumenical Synod. Although such a body was never to be convened by the Reformed Churches, the Scots were convinced of the value of what Rutherford terms "The general and *Ecumenical Council* of Pastors, Doctors and Elders of the whole Catholic Church visible".<sup>31</sup>

### The Westminster Assembly's

<sup>24</sup> Samuel Rutherford, *A Free Disputation Against pretended Liberty of Conscience* (London, 1649), 267.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Rutherford, *A Free Disputation*, 262.

<sup>27</sup> Samuel Rutherford, *Due Right*, 56.

<sup>28</sup> George Gillespie, *op. cit.* Proposition 36.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> George Gillespie, *op. cit.* Proposition 38.

<sup>31</sup> Samuel Rutherford, *Due Right*, 332.

**Documents**

In pursuit of the vision for unity and uniformity set out in the *Solemn League and Covenant*, the Westminster Assembly produced documents relating to each of the four areas specifically mentioned. Thus *the Confession of Faith* addresses the area of doctrine, *The Form of Presbyterian Church Government* addresses polity, worship is considered in *The Directory for the Public Worship of God*, whilst catechising is provided for in the *Larger and Shorter Catechisms*.

The Westminster Divines' view of the Church is set out most clearly in Chapter 25 of the *Confession of Faith*.<sup>32</sup> The first paragraph states, "The catholic or universal church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all".

The second paragraph deals with the visible Church: "The visible church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel, (not confined to one nation, as before under the law,) consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children; and is the Kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which

there is no ordinary possibility of salvation". Although, as R. D. Anderson has shown, the idea of a catholic visible Church was not to the Independents' liking, that is the view that prevailed. The same position is expressed in *Larger Catechism* Q62: "The visible church is a society made up of all such as in all ages and places of the world do profess the true religion, and of their children". Similarly the *Form of Presbyterian Church Government* states, "There is one general church visible, held forth in the New Testament".

It is clear that, in harmony with the views of the Scots previously outlined, these documents see *profession* of faith as that which constitutes the visible Church. It is therefore interesting to note that among the "proof texts" cited in all three documents is 1 Cor. 12:12ff, which speaks of the many members being one body. Verse 13 reads, "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit" (AV). The reference here would seem quite clearly to be to those who have a saving experience of the working of the Holy Spirit, rather than to those who profess faith, whether genuinely or hypocritically. The Divines would appear to have some difficulty in deciding which texts refer to the invisible Church of the redeemed and the visible Church of those who profess faith. Even more striking perhaps is the citation of Revelation 7:9, "After this I beheld, and, lo a great multitude, which no man could number, of all

nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands". If there should be any doubt that those described are truly saved, verse 14 dispels it when one of the elders states, "These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb". All those in view clearly do more than profess the true religion: for every one of them it is a living reality.

As we would expect, *The Form of Presbyterian Church Government* envisages presbyterian churches being set up along national lines: "Synodical assemblies may lawfully be of several sorts, as provincial, national and ecumenical". Their wide vision for the unity of the visible Church, shared with the Scottish Commissioners as noted above, is reflected in the statements of the *Confession* regarding the communion of saints (Chapter 26). Having considered in the first paragraph the fellowship which all the redeemed, "united to Jesus Christ their head by his Spirit", have with their Saviour and with one another ("communion in each other's gifts and graces"), the Divines proceed in the second paragraph to that which holds true in the visible Church. "Saints, by profession, are bound to maintain an holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God, and in performing such other spiritual services as tend to their mutual edification; as also in relieving each other in outward things, according to their

<sup>32</sup> A helpful study of this subject is the article by Dutch theologian R D Anderson entitled "Of the Church. An Historical Overview of the Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 25" in *Westminster Theological Journal*, vol. 59, No 2, Fall 1997, 17799.

several abilities and necessities. Which communion, as God offereth opportunity, is to be extended to all those who in every place call upon the name of the Lord Jesus.” It is of course the case that only those indwelt by the Spirit of the Lord can fulfil such spiritual duties.

**Thomas McCrie: the bonds of unity**

The vision embodied in the *Solemn League and Covenant* was never realised in practice. The English Independents who gained power through the rise of Oliver Cromwell would not enforce a single presbyterian polity. In Scotland the unity of the Covenanters rapidly dissolved as different political allegiances fomented division. The united, covenanted Church of Scotland fractured at various points, giving rise to numerous presbyterian bodies in the following centuries.

Thomas McCrie (1772-1835) knew the sorrows brought by division from firsthand experience. In 1806, with three other ministers, he left the Antiburgher side of the Secession Synod to form the Constitutional Associate Presbytery. It is significant that in 1821 he published *Two Discourses on the Unity of the Church, Her Divisions, and Their Removal*,<sup>33</sup> a classic nineteenth century Scottish Presbyterian consideration of church unity. McCrie saw himself as standing firmly in the Covenanter and Secession tradition, including in

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<sup>33</sup> Republished as *The Unity of the Church* by Thomas McCrie (Dallas, 1989).

his book a vigorous defence of the Solemn League and Covenant.

McCrie takes as the theme for his study the words of Ezekiel 37:19, “They shall be one in mine hand”, which he interprets according to his postmillennial eschatology as a promise that God will indeed bring about the unity of the visible Church. It is not necessary to accept his eschatology to profit from what he says about the nature and importance of unity.

McCrie is in no doubt that the Church ought to be a united body. As he expresses it, “The unity of the Church is implied in the most general view that can be taken of its nature, as a society instituted for religious purposes. True religion is essentially one, even as God, its object, is one.”<sup>34</sup> The same fact is evident from a more specific definition of the Church as “a society consisting of men called out of the world lying in wickedness”.<sup>35</sup> This society, according to McCrie, is founded on a supernatural revelation, consisting of the promise of a Saviour and a divinely instituted worship. Unity flows from men’s profession of faith in the former and their observance of the latter. This holds true for the Church in the Old Testament just as much as in the New Testament.

Citing Ephesians 2:14-15, McCrie points out that by the death of Christ the traditional alienation between Jews and Gentiles has been removed as they are reconciled to God and united into one body. The fact

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<sup>34</sup> Thomas McCrie, op. cit. 9.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas McCrie, op. cit. 10.

that the Church has become diffused throughout the world as the gospel has been proclaimed to the nations in no way threatens its unity. The absence of a central sanctuary in Jerusalem, for example, makes no difference to unity. Instead, as McCrie puts it, “The unity of the Church, in profession, worship, and holy walking, was strikingly exemplified in the primitive age of Christianity”.<sup>36</sup> All believers in every place formed one sacred “brotherhood”.

McCrie then demonstrates the importance of unity by quoting some of the earnest apostolic injunctions to maintain unity, such as 1 Cor. 1:10 and Eph. 4:13. Unity is an attribute of the Church, whether considered as invisible or visible. Like his predecessors, McCrie stresses that this distinction does not imply that there are two Churches, but one, viewed from different points of view. Whilst some scriptural texts apply to the Church in its invisible aspect and some to it in its visible aspect, McCrie concludes that, “All genuine saints are invisibly and vitally united to Christ, and to one another, by the indissoluble bond of the Spirit and of the faith; and in virtue of this it is that they increase in love and holiness, and are at last made “perfect in one”.<sup>37</sup> McCrie does not comment on the presence of unsaved numbers within the bounds of the visible Church in this connection.

The unity of the catholic visible Church is not destroyed, although it is marred, by dis-

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<sup>36</sup> Thomas McCrie, op. cit. 1213.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas McCrie, op. cit. 1516.

unity or opposition among some of its constituent parts. The same may be said of the differing degrees of maturity found in particular churches and also of the adaptations due to the differing cultures and countries in which particular churches are found. Unity remains as long as there is “no denial or restriction of the supreme authority by which everything in religion is ruled; no open and allowed hostility to truth and godliness; and no such opposition of sentiments, or contrariety of practices, as may endanger the faith, or destroy the constitution and edification of churches, or as may imply, in different churches, or in different parts of the same church, a condemnation of one another.”<sup>38</sup>

Within the presbyterian structure which McCrie believed to be biblical, particular churches are to combine and cooperate as far as is possible for their mutual help and encouragement.

McCrie asks the question, “What is the bond of unity in the Church?” and gives the answer “true religion”. Within this general category he identifies five elements:

1. Having one Head and Lord. “All real believers are internally joined to the Lord and derive their spiritual life and growth from him; and in like manner must Christians, in their associated capacity, be in professed subjection to him, in his divine mediatorial authority, as the one Univers-

al Pastor, and sole Head of government.”<sup>39</sup>

2. The unity of the faith, understood as adherence to revealed truth.
3. “One baptism” and fellowship in the same acts of worship, including partaking of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.
4. Unity in respect of external government and discipline.
5. The bond of mutual charity and peace. McCrie condemns both a love which ignores truth and “a bare and cold agreement in the articles of a common faith and external uniformity in the acts of worship and discipline”.<sup>40</sup>

Thus he concludes, “Love must cement the union which faith has formed”.<sup>41</sup>

The rest of McCrie's treatise, which we do not have space to consider here, deals helpfully with the divisions which are found in the Church, and the biblical means by which divisions may be healed. He believes that mourning and humility are appropriate responses to the fragmented state of the Church, and concludes his study by listing several “dangerous extremes” to be avoided, namely indifference toward unity, unscriptural means for attaining unity, impatience respecting God's providence and incredulity regarding God's promises. On the basis of his understanding of Old

Testament prophecy, he looked for a great work of God that would restore the unity of all Christians at some point in the history of this present world. It is a noble and biblical vision, even if we conclude that its realisation awaits the new heaven and new earth

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<sup>38</sup> Thomas McCrie, op cit. 18.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas McCrie, op cit. 21,

<sup>40</sup> Thomas McCrie, op cit. 25.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas McCrie, op cit. 26.



## The Church Christ is Building

by

Larry Wilson

Our Lord Jesus Christ is building his church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it (Mt. 16:18). The word “church” (*ekklesia*) means “a gathering” or “an assembly” (cf. Acts 19:32, 39) and it has Old Testament roots (cf. Acts 7:38; Heb. 2:12). God *gathered* his people around himself at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:4-5). Later he called them to regularly *gather* around his dwelling place on Mount Zion. In the same way, Christ *gathers* his people around himself. The Good Shepherd effectually calls his sheep, both near and far, into one flock around himself (Jn. 10:16; Acts 2:39; Eph. 2:11-22).

Although it is organically one with it, the church that Christ is building differs from the Old Testament assembly of God’s people (Heb. 12:18-24). That assembly gathered around God on Mount Sinai. But Christ now assembles us by his Spirit at the heavenly Zion, “the church of the firstborn enrolled in heaven.” The church is gathered around Christ where he now is, in heaven. Our citizenship in the heavenly Zion is not a future hope. It is a present reality (“you *have* come...”). We are members of this church right now by grace through faith in Christ, gathered around our Lord Jesus in heaven (Heb. 12:22; Eph. 2:6; Col. 3:3).

This is the church we affirm by faith, “I believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church” (the Nicene Creed). She is *one* because the one Savior assembles her around himself by one Spirit in one place, in heaven. She is *holy*, because the living God consecrates her to himself and sanctifies her members. She is *catholic* because Christ gathers her “from every nation, and

of all tribes and peoples and languages” (Rev. 7:9). She is *apostolic* because he founded her on his apostles and their doctrine and sends her out with the gospel (Eph. 2:12; Rev. 21:14; Mt. 28:19-20). The heavenly church *is* one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. We embrace her by *faith*; she is not an object of sight.

She will not be an object of sight until the Second Coming. Then, when Jesus Christ appears the church Christ is building will appear too (Col. 3:4). We will be “gathered together” around him in the air (2 Thess. 2:1). Then we will see “the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (Rev. 21:2). And we will hear “a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God’” (Rev. 21:3).

In the meantime, our Lord Jesus keeps building his one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. He keeps gathering his elect through the preaching of the gospel. He keeps adding to the church daily those who are being saved (Acts 2:47). Thus, the heavenly church inevitably manifests herself in visible form. The Spirit of Christ keeps drawing the Lord’s people together to meet with Christ as his Word is ministered. This is why our Lord cautions us not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together (Heb. 10:25). Our churches visibly manifest the one heavenly church Christ is building. The church Christ is building becomes especially apparent in the world when congregations gather for

worship, and when believers fellowship with one another in love. As the indwelling Spirit of Christ powerfully works by and with the Word, love in the local church keeps growing until it spills over so that we love Christ’s sheep in other congregations, and in other groups of congregations. The church becomes visible in broadening circles. The world sits up and takes notice. It says “God is really among you” (1 Cor. 14:25) and “See how they love one another.”

Christ visibly manifests the church he is building for the sake both of evangelizing the world and edifying God’s redeemed children. Thus, it’s tragic when believers shun their brethren and stay away from the visible manifestation of the church Christ is building. It’s tragic when congregations neglect to practice concretely their broader connection with those to whom they are joined. It’s tragic when believers avoid opportunities to express observable unity with others for whom our Savior died, especially when they have a formal commitment of ecclesiastical fellowship. How can we help God’s people to experience and manifest in some measure, beyond the local level, a taste of the unbreakable unity of the church that our Lord Jesus Christ is building?

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## TRUE CHURCH UNITY: WHAT IT IS

by

Benjamin B. Warfield

There seems to be everywhere rising throughout the churches a newly aroused, or, at least, renewedly quickened, ardor in seeking to realize that oneness of the Church for which our Master prayed as he was about to be offered up. Certainly the heart of every Christian should burn within him as he addresses himself to do what in him lies to fulfil his Redeemer's dying wish. It would be sad were false steps made in so sacred a cause. Yet it would not be strange, if in the natural haste of even holy zeal, somewhat confused, if not erroneous notions should mingle with our aspirations, which we need to correct by bringing them searchingly to the test of the New Testament teaching.

Nothing can be clearer, of course, than that the conception of its unity enters fundamentally into the New Testament doctrine of the Church. It is involved in the very proclamation of the kingdom of God, for there cannot be two kingdoms any more than two gods. As God is one—the King and the Mediator is one—and the Spirit one who unites to the one Christ; so those who heard the great commission and went forth in its faith to conquer the world could entertain no conception of the Church they were to found which did not include its unity. Accordingly not only is its unity implied in all the figures used by our Lord to describe the Church—the vine, the spreading mustard tree, the leaven hidden in the mass until it leavens the whole; but the same is true of the whole warp of the apostolic teaching. The Church is the body of which Christ is the head, the building, of the foundation of which he is the cornerstone, the Bride, the Lamb's wife. The unity of the Church is even fundamental to the gospel itself, as the unity of the race is to the doctrine of sin: "As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive." It was for his people that Christ laid down his life; neither was any crucified for any man save Christ Jesus in whom alone can there be salvation.

It is equally obvious that this unity is in the New Testament, a visible unity. The kingdom of God was synonymous with doing the will of God, and the presence of the unifying Spirit was manifested in its fruit. The Christian light was not kindled to be hid under a bushel, and love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness and temperance were not such universal possessions of men that those who had them passed unnoticed in the throng. Nor were the miraculous charismata withheld, nor the testimony for Christ by word and work and martyr-death. Those in whose bosoms the new life stirred knew themselves to be, and were known of men to be a separated community. Between them and the society around them, in all the usages

of which idolatrous rites mingled, a great and ever widening cleft opened. About them and their fellow-Christians stronger and ever stronger bonds were forging. Travelling from city to city, Christians bore letters of commendation which admitted them everywhere to the society of their fellows. Strong churches sent now and again contributions to relieve the necessities of the weak. Sharers on the one hand in a common hope and life, and on the other in a common contempt and persecution; ministered to by a common apostolic body, professing a common faith, partakers in common spiritual gifts, practising a common peculiar morality, they exhibited to the world a visible unity that even deserved the name of an organized unity. They constituted *an imperium in imperio*

which trembled with a common life from one end of the empire to the other, offering everywhere not merely a like, but a united resistance to heathenism and heresy, and supplying from the resources of the whole the lack of every part.

It is important to observe, however, that this unity was not organic, in the special sense of that word which would imply that it was founded on the inclusion of the whole Church under one universal government. The absence of such an organization is obvious on the face of the New Testament record, nor do its pages contain any clear promise of or prominent provision for it for the future. The churches are all organized locally, but no external bonds bind them together,

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except as this was here and there supplied to certain groups of churches by the common authority over them of the same apostolical founders. No central authority ruled over the whole Church. It is perfectly obvious that Jerusalem exercised no domination over Antioch, Antioch none over the churches founded by its missionaries. Nor were the churches associated in a common dominion of the whole over all the parts. Even in the next generation the most powerful lever Rome could bring to bear on Corinth was entreaty and advice. The apostles went forth to evangelize the world, not to rule it; they divided the work among themselves, and did not seek to control it as a "college"; they delegated their individual authority to the local officers and founded no dynasty, whether individual or collegiate.

It is equally obvious that the visible unity of the Apostolic Church was not grounded in uniformity in organization, forms of worship, or even details of faith. There was, no doubt, a good degree of similarity in all these matters in all parts of the Church. A local form of government was imposed on the churches. Everywhere men observed the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, prayed with outstretched hands, sang psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, read the Scriptures and preached the gospel. But this general similarity fell far short of complete uniformity. Jerusalem had differentiated for itself a "bishop" out of its board of overseers, while as yet the separate pastoral office was unknown to the rest of the Church; and even after it had spread to Syria and Asia it was still lacking in Philippi. The temple-service was part of Christian worship in Jerusalem; and even the Apostle to the Gentiles kept Jewish feasts and customs. Everywhere Chris-

tian Jews obsened circumcision and the seventh day, while others were free from the Law. Christian worship was characterized everywhere by charismatic freedom, and resembled more our open prayer-meeting than our church service. Doctrinal and practical heresies were continuously springing up out of the fertile soil of Jewish and heathen superstition and habit, imported into the Church by those who, awakened to new life by the gospel, had not yet been able to put off from them all the grave clothes of their dead past. There were probably few churches in the Apostolic Age whose condition in knowledge and practice, or whose usages in church government and Christian worship would attract any modern denomination to seek to include them in its fellowship.

It is, if possible, even more clear that the unity of the Apostolic Church was not grounded in a claim to singleness of origin. The Church spread by the scattering abroad of Christians, taking their gospel with them. Nobody cared whence a church drew its origin, so only it existed. Who founded the Church of Rome? or of Alexandria? or of Antioch, the mother of churches? Paul resisted the demand for commendations and found the credentials of ambassadorship in the fruits of work (2 Cor. 3:1 f.). The church in Jerusalem with the apostles and elders hearkened to Paul and Barnabas when they rehearsed what signs and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them, and seeing that they had been entrusted with the gospel of the uncircumcision, gave them the right of fellowship (Acts 15:12; Gal. 2:7). The question of importance was not the media through which men obtained the call, but whether they had received it.

In a word, the unity of the apostolic churches was grounded

on the only thing they had in common—their common Christianity. Its bond was the common reception of the Holy Spirit, which exhibited itself in one calling, one faith, one baptism. And as the existence of no other foundation for unity is traceable in the history of the apostolic churches, so the duty of seeking no other mode of unity than would be built on this foundation is pressed on their consciences by either the Lord or his apostles. Our Lord does not declare, as the old version has it, that "there shall be one *fold* and one shepherd" (John 10:16); but, as the Revised Version corrects it, he speaks of his sheep as occupants of many folds, but as all so hearkening to his one voice that "they shall become one *flock*, one shepherd." Nor is the unity, for which he prayed in his High Priestly prayer, one grounded on external organization, but one grounded in communion in him; its norm is the mysterious unity of Father and Son in the Godhead; its mediating cause, common acceptance of the gospel; its effect, not the convincing of the world that the Church is one, but that "Thou didst send me, and lovedst them even as thou lovest me." Nowhere, however, is the New Testament conception of the Church brought to more complete expression than in the Epistle to the Ephesians, which may be justly called the Epistle of the Church, the body of Christ, as its companion letter, that to the Colossians, is the Epistle of Christ, the head of the Church. From its very beginning the Church is the Apostle's chief theme, what it is, and how it was framed and should comport itself. He tells us of its origin—in the selection by God before the foundation of the world, of a people in his beloved Son; how it was purchased to himself in time by the death of that Son of his love on the cross; how this redemption was applied to it and

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sealed to each of its true members by the Holy Spirit of promise; how it manifested itself in the ages gone by in those who hoped beforehand in Christ, and in these latter days by the calling of the Gentiles—for whom the middle wall of partition has been broken down that they too may have access by the same Spirit to the one God. In the fourth chapter he begins his appeal to his readers to fulfil the duties which sharing in these high privileges has entailed upon them; and among these duties he gives first place to unity. But it is a “unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” The ground of this appeal he develops in a remarkable enumeration (Eph. 4:4ff.) of the things which all Christ’s followers have in common, if they be his at all. The enumeration is arranged in an ascending triad: there is but one and can be but one body, one Lord, one God. If it be absurd to speak of more gods than one, and shameful to divide Christ, it is as absurd and as shameful to divide his body, which is his Church. The force of this is enhanced by the addition to each item of a further enumeration of the bond of attachment which unites us to the one body, the one Lord, the one God; and this is done in such a way as to adduce in each case both what may be called the vital and the instrumental bond—thus yielding a triad of triads. There is but one body; as, indeed, is necessary, since there is but one Spirit, by whose call we are united to that one body, and hence but one calling. There is but one Lord; and but one faith which binds us to him, and but one baptism by which we express our faith. There is but one God; but here the Apostle sacrifices symmetry of arrangement to grandeur of thought—“*but one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all,*” who is at once transcendent over, operative through, and immanent in all—

in a word, all relations to all creations. Interfused and interpenetrated and governed by the one God, united by one baptism, symbolizing one faith to the one Lord, called in one calling, by the one Spirit, into one body: here we have the Apostle’s conception of the Church’s unity and its ground, a unity consistent with any diversity of gifts—with diversity in everything, in fact, except true Christianity.

If this study of the nature and relations of the conception of Christian unity as it lies in the New Testament has any validity, we cannot but be aided by it in our search for unity now. It is clear, for instance, that:

1. We are not to seek it in *the inclusion of all Christians in one organization and under one government*. A story is told of a man who, wishing a swarm of bees, caught every bee that visited his flowers and enclosed them together in a box, only to find the difference between an aggregation and a hive. We cannot produce unity by building a great house over a divided family. Different denominations have a similar right to exist with separate congregations, and may be justified on like grounds.
2. Nor yet are we to seek it in *the assimilation of all organized bodies of Christians to one another* in forms of government or worship. A people is not unified by dressing all the citizens alike. The several tribes of naked savages do not constitute a more united body than the company of civilized nations of diverse costumes but one spirit. The keynote of the Bible is liberty: and beyond the very simple forms of organization, laid down chiefly in the Pastoral Epistles, and the general principles of

worship in spirit and in truth, the sanctified wisdom of every body of Christians is the only norm of its usages.

3. Still less are we to seek it in *a merely mechanical application of the rule of continuity* as if the continuance of Christ’s Church in the world depended on the “mere ligature of succession.” The life of a people is not suspended on the mere mode of investiture with its crown. England would not forever cease to be a nation if its king were not crowned at Westminster according to the customary forms.
4. Least of all are we to seek unity *by surrendering all public or organized testimony to all truth except that minimum which*—just because it is the minimum, less than which no man can believe and be a Christian—*all Christians of all names can unite in confessing*. Subjection to the tyranny of the unbeliever is no more essential to unity than subjection to the tyranny of the believer (say the Pope); and this course can mean nothing other than—“Let him that believes least among you be your lawgiver.” There is a sense, of course, in which the visible unity of the Church is based on the common belief and confession of the body of truth held alike by all who are Christians; but this is not the same as saying that it must be based on the repression of all organized testimony to truth not yet held by all alike. Unity in Christ is not founded on disloyalty to the truth that is in Christ.
5. But if we are to find the unity for which our Master prayed, *we are to seek it in our common relation as Christians to our one head*—our common



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Redeemer and King—as mediated by our common possession of the one Spirit. We are to remember that neither the center, basis nor instrument of unity is earthly, or to be discovered in any human thought, order or organization; but as Principal Gore admirably expresses it, “the instrument of unity is the Spirit; the basis of unity is Christ, the Mediator; the center of unity is in the heavens, where the Church’s exalted Head lives in eternal majesty—human yet glorified.” Every Christian, through whom flows the life of the Spirit imparted by the head, is of the body which is one. In a word, the Church is one, not by virtue of any efforts of ours to make it one, but by virtue of the divine life that binds it as his body to the one head. The true figure of the Church is the circle; every particle of the circumference is held in its relation to all other particles by the common relation of each to the center. And as we cannot create this unity, neither can we destroy it. Whoever is of God is of the Church: whoever is of Christ is of his body. Who can separate us from the love of Christ? To adopt—and we are sorry to be obliged to say also to adapt—the words of a typical high-churchman of the last generation: “The Church is one—not merely ought to be one, should strive to be one—but is one. The Church is one, not merely because it happens not to be more- than one, but because it cannot be more than one. *Ecclesia una est et dividi non potest*~ says St. Cyprian, “the Church is one and cannot be divided. It is one essentially, even as God is one.”<sup>1</sup> It is ours not to make

this unity, but in heart and life to realize it.

In all this there is, of course, nothing inconsistent with the frank admission that this unity of the Spirit may be more or less clearly realized by Christians, and hence more or less fully manifested to the world. Christians may even “bite and devour one another”; members of the same family may repudiate one another though they remain nevertheless members of the same family. All that is essential to the foundation of unity must be found in the church of every age—the very existence of the Church provides it: but its complete expression is dependent not on the existence of the Church but on its perfection; and it will, therefore, not be absolute until the Church is presented to the Bridegroom without spot or blemish or any such thing. Meanwhile, it is ours to advance toward this ideal, as it is God’s delight to be “daily smoothing the wrinkles and wiping the spots of his Church away.” And the importance of distinguishing between the foundation of unity and its expression lies just in this, that we may not advance along the wrong path. If the perfect expression of unity depends on the perfection of the Church, the path toward it is not to be found in yielding our organized testimony to what is best in government or worship or what is true in faith, but in enthusiastically pressing this testimony on the attention and acceptance of all whom we ought not be ashamed to call our brethren. The only organization which the whole should adopt is the perfect one, the only worship which all should use is the perfect one, the only creed which is fitted to be the form of sound words in which all

introduction by Bishop Whittingham.

God’s people express their faith is the perfect one—inclusive of all truth, exclusive of all error.

All that tends to perfect the Church or any branch of the Church in any department of Christian life or effort is, therefore, a step toward that perfect expression of unity for which we should all long. All that tends to obscure the necessity for a perfect order, form, faith under a spurious appearance of agreement, postpones the attainment. The true pathway seems, then, to lead us as our present duty to:

1. Hearty recognition of all Christians as members of the body of Christ, and of all denominations which preach the gospel of Christ as sections of this one body.
2. Hearty and unwavering testimony to all God’s truth known to us, as the truth of God to be confessed by all his people.
3. Cooperation in all good works as brethren.
4. Formal federation of denominations for prosecuting tasks common to the federated bodies, so far as such federation involves no sacrifice of principle or testimony.

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<sup>1</sup> George Hill of Scrivenham, *What is the Church of Christ?* Baltimore, 1844, p. 32. With a commendatory

# ALL ECCLESIOLOGY IS LOCAL

The Pastoral Imperative for Reformed Ecumenicism

by

Matthew W. Kingsbury



I pastor an OPC Church in Denver, Colorado. In the metropolitan area, we have a fair representation of most of the confessionally reformed ‘alphabet soup’ URC, Can/ARC, PCA, OPC and RPCNA (not to mention numerous EPC and CRC works). Our relationships are cordial, but contact is informal and infrequent. We don’t talk much across the denominations, and we certainly never bring up problems within our particular congregations.

As elders, our perspective can become quite restricted. We are in the same congregation, week in and week out, and so have little interest in what’s going on elsewhere, particularly in another denomination. Our people, by and large, do not share that perspective. If they have a principal ecclesiastical commitment, it is to being reformed, not to being OPC, PCA, or URC. We who are ordained may see the ecclesiastical differences as huge, but all our people see is Calvinism.

Thus, they have no problem moving from one denomination to another at will. There’s certainly a fairly free traffic between PCA and OPC around the country, even amongst ministers. On a local level, the same can also be seen between any two given confessionally reformed congregations. If someone isn’t happy with the way things are going at their OPC Church, they just visit, and eventually join, the URC across town.

This creates a pastoral problem. Our Churches are not accountable to each other; no formal mechanism for checking up on sheep who wander across denominational boundaries exists. You know how it goes: a family is less frequent in their attendance, then you get a letter from a nearby consistency requesting a transfer of membership. You send off the letter, but you’ve never discussed this family with their pastor or elders. The best chance for these conversations is the “professional courtesy” which exists between pastors. However, the pressure on pastors to fatten the rolls creates a powerful disincentive against digging into an attractive young family’s ecclesiastical past. From the other side, who wants to look like a spurned lover in front of other elders by trying to pursue fleeing sheep? These issues are exacerbated by denominational divisions. How often do you quash latent guilt over sheep-stealing by comforting yourself with the conviction that your denomination is better than their old one?

No doubt, you are familiar with the result. It happens in Denver, and it happens across the country in most communities with more than one reformed Church. Because people can so easily drift in and out of our congregations, they get into the habit of leaving whenever things become unpleasant. Maybe they get happy feet because the new pastor in town sounds more interesting

than the man they’ve been listening to for the last five years. Or perhaps they’re tired of trying to browbeat the congregation into their way of thinking. Let’s be honest: folks almost never have an entirely “innocent” reason to transfer their membership when they’re not also changing their home address. There’s a problem, and most of the time, it’s the same problem that caused them to leave their last Church and join yours.

And so we end up with de facto Church splits as congregants migrate across town. Sure, we’re all members of NAPARC, but we view those people with suspicion. They were obnoxious when they were with us, and if that congregation welcomed them, then everyone there must be equally suspect. Outwardly, we send fraternal delegates to each other’s presbytery meetings, but inwardly consider our confessionally reformed brethren less orthodox than ourselves.

Even where these failures of charity don’t occur, a basic and grievous problem remains: souls are not cared for. Serious spiritual problems which prompt people to leave are not addressed by either the dismissing or the receiving Church. Often, we let the sheep go with a sigh of relief, thinking, “If those elders want to deal with this family, then they’re welcome to them!” Our zeal for *their* sanctification takes second place to a desire for calm session meetings.

## All Ecclesiology is Local

In order to properly care for reformed Christians in our city, pastors and sessions must learn to communicate openly across denominational lines. We need to help one another to minister. When grumblers find no safe harbor, they may finally try to solve their problems instead of running away from them. Such cooperation would have positive implications as well: when pastors are not in competition with each other, they can speak charitably about one another. I've even gone so far as to advise a visitor to our congregation to consider the American Reformed Church which meets much closer to his home. Despite our organizational divisions, we must pastor as though we were all part of one denomi-

nation, as though we were obliged to care for the sheep of other sessions as our own.

Most, reading this essay, will agree this is the way things ought to be. If so, then consider: why are we organizationally divided when we can whole-heartedly support the ministries of other denominations? Moreover, why do we allow division to continue when we all acknowledge that it hinders pastoral care? We ought to be talking about reformed ecumenicism as pastors, yet one almost never hears these concerns raised. Instead, we focus on relatively minute differences in polity or confessional standard, and never ask how we can better minister to our people.

The arguments for remaining divided have a certain appeal when we consider our Churches as national entities. However, ministry takes place locally, and broader concerns over maintenance of tradition are *prima facie* secondary to our pastoral charge. If we act as one locally, then we should be united nationally.

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The 'Golden Rule' Comity Agreement was adopted by all of the NAPARC (North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council) in 1985. That agreement says:

“Comity has meant different things to different people. We representatives of the home missions agencies and committees or boards of our denominations resist territorial statements on comity in light of the social and cultural complexity of North American society and the great spiritual need of our many countrymen who are apart from Jesus Christ. Out of a concern to build a Church of Jesus Christ rather than our own denominations and to avoid the appearance of competition, we affirm the following courteous code of behavior to guide our church planting ministries in North America:

1. We will be sensitive to the presence of existing churches and mission ministries of other NAPARC churches and will refrain from enlisting members and take great care in receiving members of those existing ministries.
2. We will communicate with the equivalent or appropriate agency (denominational missions committee or board, presbytery missions or church extension committee, or session) before initiating church planting activities in a community where NAPARC churches or missions exist.
3. We will provide information on at least an annual basis describing progress in our ministries and future plans.
4. We will encourage our regional home missions leadership to develop good working relationships.”

## THE LORD'S SUPPER CELEBRATION WITH CALVIN

by

T. Brienens

According to Calvin's deeply held conviction the Reformed church service is only then complete, when the Lord's Supper is part of it. All his life Calvin, therefore, championed a weekly Lord's Supper<sup>1</sup> celebration. This belonged to the primary matters of his reform activities. It seems, therefore, good to me to say something about the frequency of the Lord's Supper celebration.

The Mass was celebrated daily in the medieval church, but for all intent and purposes only the clergy took part in it. The people celebrated the mass rarely more than once a year, and then at Easter. At times the "laity" were also present at the mass at Christmas, but attending the mass twice a year was certainly the maximum.<sup>2</sup> This yearly celebration Calvin utterly abhorred. In his Institution of 1536 he writes:

*It must always be so that no meeting of the congregation takes place without the proclamation of the Word, prayers, the distribution of the Lord's Supper and the collection of alms. It was not instituted to be received a few times a year and not casually as is now the general practice, but to be used often by all Christians, so*

<sup>1</sup>See: T. Brienens, *De liturgie bij Johannes Calvijn* (Kampen, 1987), sub. 1.1 and 1.2.4; compare E. Doumergue, *Jean Calvin, les hommes et les choses de son temps* (Lausanne-Neuilley, 1899-1910), p. 409.

<sup>2</sup>See: A. F. N. Lekkerkerker, *De tafel des Heren* (Baarn, 1961), p. 107ff.

*that by it they would often recall the suffering of Christ, and by the anamnesis support and strengthen their faith, spur each other on to confess God's praise in singing, proclaim his goodness and, finally, by it feed the mutual love and express it to each other that which was displayed to them in the unity of the body of Christ.*<sup>3</sup>

Even in the final edition of his Institutes he still fights for a weekly Lord's Supper celebration. He writes: "Plainly this custom which enjoins us to take communion once a year is a veritable invention of the devil, whoever was instrumental in introducing it...It should have been done far differently: the Lord's Table should have been spread at least once a week for the assembly of Christians..."<sup>4</sup> Calvin wished to restore the original practice, namely the weekly celebration. He saw it as the most appropriate service of the Lord, especially on his day(!), and on this matter referred to the ancient church, the Councils of Antioch (341) and Toledo (400), and Chrysostom (c. 347-407).<sup>5</sup>

This is Calvin's view even before he comes to Geneva for the first time and he holds fast to this concept in his activities in this city, even when it appears that he is prepared to accept a temporary compromise, and this with serious

<sup>3</sup>Corpus Reformatorum, 1 k.139-140.

<sup>4</sup>Institutes IV.XVII.46

<sup>5</sup>See: W. Balke, "Het avondmaal bij Calvijn" in *Bij Brood en Beker* (Kampen, 1980), p. 219f.

reservations. The draft of the "Articles concerning the organization of the church and the worship service at Geneva," which he together with G. Farel presents, on behalf of the Genevan ministers, to the Lesser Council (1536), regulates the celebration of the Lord's Supper as follows:

*It is very much to be desired that the distribution of the holy Supper of Jesus Christ takes place at least each Sunday, when the congregation comes together in great numbers...and, indeed, it is not instituted by Jesus to be made use of only two or three times a year, but for a continual exercise of our faith and of our love, of which the congregation of Christians must make use, when they would meet, as we see it written in Acts 2...But because the weakness of the people is still so great, the danger would be there, that this holy and excellent mystery would be scorned, when it is celebrated too often. In view of this, it seems good to us, in the anticipation that the people, which are still somewhat weak, will become more secure, that this Holy Supper will be used once a month on one of the three places, where the proclamations now take place... each time will be prepared not for one district of the city, but for the whole congregation.*<sup>6</sup>

The Lesser Council, however, does not adopt this proposal, but advises the Greater Council that there be only four celebration per

<sup>6</sup>See: T. Brienens, op. cit., sub. 1.2.4.

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year in keeping with the custom of the church at Bern. In doing so, it takes over the view that had originated in Zurich. E. Pfisterer, therefore, correctly writes: "The quarterly celebration of the Lord's Supper does not come Calvin but from Zwingli."<sup>7</sup> This aspect comes very strongly to the fore, when on January 16, 1537 the ministers, in order to break the impasse, propose to the magistrate of large council that the article in question should read: "It is desirable that the Supper of Jesus Christ takes place on all Sundays which is now the custom." The magistrate nevertheless decides in favor of a quarterly celebration.

Partially due to Calvin's permanent opposition to this decision by the civil authorities, he is exiled from Geneva, since, in spite of Council's decision, Calvin intends to continue the weekly celebrations.

In Strasbourg the Magistrate allowed Calvin to hold monthly celebrations in his French refugee congregation, as was the case in the villages and surrounding areas of the city, while in the German churches in the city itself a weekly celebration was customary. Calvin, however, accepted this regulation.

After his return to Geneva in 1541, Calvin again raises the question of a monthly celebration. In the original of the "Project d'ordonnances" (1541) it reads as follows: "It will, therefore, be good that it (the holy Supper) will be administered once a month in the city..."<sup>8</sup> with the addition, that

on feast days the Supper will be administered in all three churches."<sup>9</sup> The Magistrate, however, this time as well, insists on four celebrations only. This saddened Calvin all his life. He writes to the Magistrate in Bern in 1555:

*It is a difference but not a new one, that we use the Lord's Supper four times a year and you three times. Yet it pleases God, My Lords, that you and we would use it more frequently. For one sees with St. Luke, in the book Acts, that people in the early church kept it very often. And this custom continued for a long time in the ancient Church, until, inspired by Satan, the abomination, called the mass, was instituted. It became the reason for only receiving the Supper once or twice a year, and we will have to confess, that we are in error by not following the example of the apostles.*<sup>10</sup>

And Article 73 of "Les Ordonnances Ecclesiastiques" of 1561 still states:

*Ever since the Lord's Supper was instituted by our Lord for us, it was used very frequently, so it was also maintained in the ancient Church, until the devil changed it by replacing it by the Mass; it is an error that must be corrected. For the time being, however, we advise and regulate that it be prepared four times a year, to wit on the first Sunday following Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, and the first Sunday in September in the Fall.*<sup>11</sup>

The question may be raised: Why does Calvin on this point not stick to his guns? Does this issue, after all, not concern a mandate of the Lord himself? Let him answer the question himself. On August 12, 1561 he says:

*I am in favor of a monthly Lord's Supper administration; but seeing that I cannot convince the people of Geneva in general of this, it seems to me that it is more correct to meet the weakness of the people, rather than stubbornly fight for it. Yet, I have made sure that in the official acts (the church order) it is stated that our custom is in error. With it I wish to make it easier for my successors to make improvements and to show them the way... Truly, we [the Genevan ministers] would very much like to celebrate it each month, if only to prevent that by a more frequent use of the Supper it would be held in low opinion. For as long as the largest part of the congregation abstains from the Supper, it certainly tears the congregation apart.*<sup>12</sup>

From all of this Pfisterer concludes that

There can, indeed, be no doubt, that Calvin sees the monthly celebration of the Lord's Supper as serving the congregation the best. So the Palatinate Church Order of 1563 and the decisions of the Herborn General Synod of 1586—in both instances Olivetan participated—made Calvin's view their own, while the Church Order of J'lich und Berg, which prescribed the quarterly reception, appealed to the Genevan

<sup>7</sup>E. Pfisterer, "Calvins Ansicht über die H%ufigkeit der Abendmahlsfeiern und über das Krankenabendmahl" in Reformierte Kirchenzeitung, 92 (1951), p. 247.

<sup>8</sup>Corp. Reform. O.O.X.1,25.

<sup>9</sup>Compare Pfisterer, op. cit., p. 247.

<sup>10</sup>Corp. Reform. O. O. XV, p. 538, compare X, p. 213.

<sup>11</sup>W. Niesel, Bekenntnisschriften und Kirchenordnungen der nach Gottes Wort reformierte Kirchen (Zürich, 1938), p.

51, compare G. J van der Poll, Martin Bucer's liturgical ideas (Assen, 1954).

<sup>12</sup>Corp. Reform.O.O.Xa, p. 213.

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Church Order, but not to Calvin.<sup>13</sup>

Before mentioning a few things about the manner, in which the Lord's Supper was celebrated with Calvin, we must first note that Calvin did not have a 'special' preparation service for the Lord's Supper as is often the case today. The celebration was simply announced a week in advance so that everyone had the opportunity to prepare himself for receiving the sacrament in a worthy manner. Strangers in the city could also come forward during that week in order to receive the necessary instruction for participating of the Table of the Lord. In Strasbourg, during this week, such a person had to report to Calvin for a conversation/examination. In Geneva it followed a set procedure as outlined in a letter (Nov. 25, 1560) of Calvin to Olivetan:

*No one can come to the Lord's Supper who has not made his faith known. For that reason there will be four examinations each year, at which the children are questioned and progress is ascertained. Even then, while they are attending Catechism instruction each Sunday and make confession of sin, they still should not participate in the Lord's Supper until it has been determined that in the opinion of the pastor the child has advanced enough in the*

*main content of faith. As far as the adults are concerned, a yearly inspection of the family will be conducted. For that purpose, we have divided the Quarters among us, so that each district can be visited in turn; the pastor is accompanied by one of the elders; during such a visit new converts are to be examined. For those who have already been accepted this is left out and the inquiry is only about whether or not things at home are done orderly and in harmony; whether or not there are quarrels with the neighbor or evidence of drunkenness; or whether they incorrect or lax in their church attendance.<sup>14</sup>*

At the celebration of the Lord's Supper Calvin followed the ancient custom of having the people come forward and having them take the Holy Communion standing. The faithful received the bread at one end of the table and the wine at the other (the *communio ambulatoria*).<sup>15</sup> He was against receiving the elements while kneeling, because it was a reminder of the Roman superstition in the mass. For the rest he writes:

*In regards to the external form of the ordinance, whether or not believers are to take into their hands and divide among themselves, or each is to eat what is given to him; whether they are to return*

*the cup to the deacon or hand it to their neighbor; whether the bread is to be leavened or unleavened and the wine is red or white, is of no consequence. These things are indifferent, and left free to the Church, although it was the custom for all to receive into their hand. And Christ did say, "Take this, and divide it among yourselves."<sup>16</sup>*

All thoughts of a sacrifice, and all traces of the transubstantiation doctrine had been removed from the Lord's Supper celebration that here and now were administered. Calvin, without diminishing the mystery and symbolism, taught a real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, but then a spiritual one (*realis presentia pneumatica*): Christ with all his salvation in the promises of the gospel are signed and sealed by bread and wine and He wants, that we accept Him in faith and trust, and so eat and drink Him, that is participate in the community of his Spirit!

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Translated and printed with permission from *De liturgie bij Johannes Calvijn* (Kampen, 1987), pp. 214-218. (Taken from *Diakonia*).

<sup>13</sup>Pfisterer, op. cit., p. 247; compare J. M. Barkley, *Worship of the Reformed Church* (London, 1967), p. 20; M. Jenny, *Die Einheit des Abendmahlsgottesdienstes bei den elsässischen und schweizerischen Reformatoren* (Zürich, 1968), p. 134ff; J. H. Nichols, "The intent of the calvinistic liturgy" in *The Heritage of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids, 1973), p. 103; A. F. N. Lekkerkerker, *Kanttekeningen bij het Hervormde Dienstboek*, Vol. III, p. 201.

<sup>14</sup>R. Schwarz, *Johannes Calvins Lebenswerk in seinen Briefen Vol III* (Neukirchen, 1961/62), p. 1092; compare Brienens, op. cit., sub. 1.4.4 and 1.3.2c; E. Stricker, *Johannes Calvin as erster Pfarrer der reformierten Gemeinde zu Straszburg* (Straszburg, 1890), p. 16; S. B. Nagy, *A Reformtus isztentisztelet K. lvin felfogása szerint* (Debrecen, 1937), p. 103f.

<sup>15</sup>See Nichols, op. cit. p. 106. Zwingli had the people stay in the pews and the deacons brought them the bread and wine.

<sup>16</sup>Institutes IV. xvii. 43.

## ON THE UNITY AND DIVERSITY OF THE CHURCH

From “Our Reasonable Faith”

by

Herman Bavinck

In Acts 2:47, 5:11, 8:1, and 11:22 the name church is applied to the local gatherings of believers at Jerusalem. At the time the church at Jerusalem was virtually the only one. Very probably there were some disciples living here and there also, in Judaea, Samaria and Galilee, and who later, when the persecution had broken out in Jerusalem and the disciples were dispersed, constituted a point of contact for the mission work among the Jews. But a gathering of believers, a church, existed at first in Jerusalem only. When, however, such gatherings also took place elsewhere through the preaching of the Word by the disciples, the term church was also applied to these local groups. The church at Jerusalem was not an organization which formed branches of itself elsewhere; rather, there grew up alongside of this church other gatherings of believers also called churches.

Thus, for example, there is mention made of the church at Antioch (Acts 11:26 and 13:1), and of churches at Lystra, Derbe, and the surrounding country (Acts 14:23). Paul continually applies the name of church to each of the gatherings of believers in Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, Colosse, and elsewhere, and he also in accordance with this practice speaks in the plural of the churches that are in the territory of Galatia (Gal. 1:2) and Judaea (Gal. 1:22). Nor is that all. The believers living in a particular locality soon began to meet regularly, sometimes daily (Acts 2:46), but regularly in time on Sunday.<sup>1</sup> But they did not have

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. 16:2; Acts 20:7; and Rev. 1:10.

their own church building—presumably the word *assembly* in James 2:2 is the first New Testament instance of a reference to a particular place; hence they had to come together in some house of a brother or sister which was suitable for the purpose.

In Jerusalem they first gathered for some time still in the temple,<sup>2</sup> but in addition to this they also had special meetings (Acts 1:14 and 2:42) in the homes of some of their fellows (Acts 2:46 and 5:42). So it happened that at first the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark (Acts 12:12) and later that of James (Acts 21:18) became the center of the ecclesiastical life of Jerusalem. Because the church was large, it divided into groups and came together in the same house at different times, or in different houses at the same time. This practice was followed also in other places, in Thessalonica (Acts 17:11), Troas (Acts 20:8), Ephesus (Acts 20:20), Corinth (1 Cor. 16:19), Colosse (Philemon 2), Laodicea (Col. 4:15), and Rome (Rom. 16:5, 14 and 15). It is remarkable that all of these various home-churches or house-churches were definitely given the name of church.<sup>3</sup> The one was not subordinated to another but each of them was independent having the same rights as the others.

Nevertheless they were all one. Jesus had spoken of all of his disciples taken together as his church (Matt. 16:18 and 18:17), and the apostles talk in the same way of the body of

<sup>2</sup> Acts 2:1, 46; 3:11; 5:12, 20, and 42.

<sup>3</sup> Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; and Philemon 2.

believers, Paul especially doing so. The church taken in its entirety is the body of Christ, and he is their head.<sup>4</sup> The church is the bride of the Lamb adorned for her husband,<sup>5</sup> the house and the temple of God built by the apostles on the foundation of Christ (1 Cor. 3:10-16), or, according to another application of the same figure, built up on the foundation of the prophets and apostles, Christ himself being the cornerstone and the believers the living stones.<sup>6</sup> The church is a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people, called to show forth the praises of him who has called it out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Peter 2 :9).

With an eye to the glorious virtues which the apostles ascribe to the church some observers have wanted to make a distinction between the empirical and the ideal church. But such a Western distinction is foreign to the New Testament. When the apostles—following the example of Christ—speak so gloriously, especially in John 14-17, of the church, they are not thinking of something which exists in the abstract or in thought only, nor of an ideal which we are to follow after and which we will probably never attain. They always have in mind, rather, the whole and the actual church, that body of which the gatherings of believers in the various localities and countries and the various times are the particular revelations. Those revelations, it is

<sup>4</sup> Eph. 1:22-23; 4:15; and Col. 1:18, 24.

<sup>5</sup> Eph. 5:32; 2 Cor. 11 2; and Rev. 21:2.

<sup>6</sup> Eph. 2:20-22; 1 Tim. 3:15; 1 Peter 2 5; and Rev. 21:3.

## Herman Bavinck on Church Unity

true, are all of them very defective still—and to this the apostles in all their letters testify—but they are revelations nevertheless of a reality lying beyond them, actualizations of a counsel of God carrying itself out from generation to generation.

In that counsel or decree God sees the whole church of Christ before him in its perfection; in Christ who purchased it with his blood, the church lies contained as the fruit in the seed. In the holy Spirit, who takes everything from Christ, lies the root of its existence and the guarantee of its fulfillment. The church is therefore not an idea or an ideal, but a reality which is becoming something and will become something because it is

already something. Thus it is that the church continues in constant change; it was being gathered from the beginning of the world, and it will be gathered until the end of the world. Daily there depart from it some who have fought the fight, kept the faith, earned the crown of righteousness, and who constitute the church triumphant, the church of the firstborn and the spirits of just men made perfect (Heb. 12:23). And daily new members are added to the church on earth, to the militant church here below; they are born in the church itself or are brought in by the work of missions.

These two parts of the church belong together. They are the

vanguard and rearguard of the great army of Christ. Those who have preceded now form round about us a great cloud of witnesses; during their lives they made their confession of faith and thus admonished us to faithfulness and patience. Without us they could not become perfect, and without them we could not be perfect (Heb. 11:40). Only all the saints together can fully grasp the greatness of the love of Christ and be filled with all the fulness of God (Eph. 3:18-19). History will continue, therefore, until we all have come to the oneness of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ (Eph. 4:13).

**Furthermore we teach, that it is carefully to be marked, wherein especially the truth and unity of the Church consisteth, lest that we either rashly breed or nourish schisms in the Church. It consisteth not in outward rites and ceremonies, but rather in the truth and unity of the Catholic faith. This Catholic faith is not taught us by the ordinances or laws of men, but by the holy Scriptures; a compendious and short sum whereof is the Apostles' Creed. And therefore we read in the ancient writers, that there were manifold diversities of ceremonies, but that those were always free; neither did any man think that the unity of the Church was thereby broken or dissolved. We say then, that the true unity of the Church doth consist in several points of doctrine, in the true and uniform preaching of the Gospel, and in such rites as the Lord himself hath expressly set down: and here we urge that saying of the Apostle very earnestly, "As many of us therefore as are perfect, let us be thus minded. If any man think otherwise, the Lord shall reveal the same unto him. And yet in that whereunto we have attained, let us follow one direction, and all of us be like affected one towards another." Phil. 3:15, 18.**

— Second Helvetic Confession, Article XVII, Section 15

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