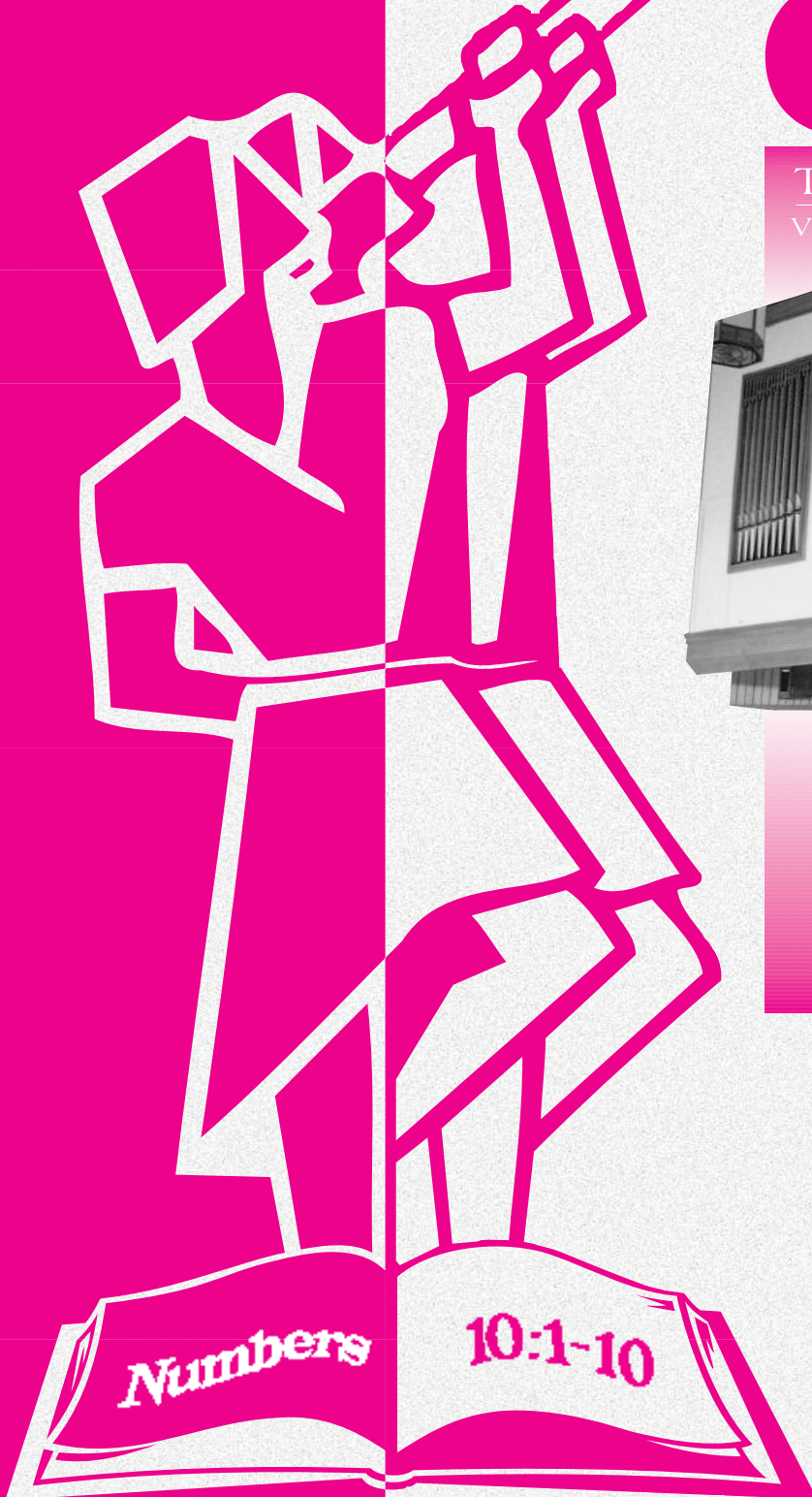


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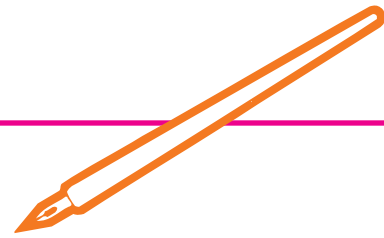
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To the Praise of His Glory



By G. Ph. van Popta



Influencing Community Standards

Most likely the reader will have heard of Dr. Abraham Kuyper's famous statement: "There is no thumb's breadth of life that Jesus Christ does not claim as his own." Sharing this world view, many of us were, in the past, involved in societies concerned about public justice and morals. We even had many local Association(s) for Reformed Political Action (ARPA). It seems, however, that today we are not as active and vocal in our communities as we once were. There are notable exceptions. Among our members are a few brothers and sisters who serve as mayors, reeves and councillors. Others serve on hospital committees and are involved in local volunteer work. Recently we published an article by Mrs. Alice Veenman of Orangeville who wrote about her involvement in local politics and about the many

possibilities for us to have a positive impact on our communities (Vol. 48, No. 12). Many individual church members are influencing for good local public affairs. We need to support them, and pray the Lord will bless, strengthen and encourage them in their work. May they serve as good examples for the rest of us!

The question I would ask is whether we as congregations are working to influence positively our communities on a political and social level. Of course, in a very important sense, we do, simply by living and working in our communities. We speak to colleagues and neighbours about the Lord and demonstrate a better way to live. That can have a powerful impact on our neighbours and communities. But we also ought to address social and political issues – local, provincial, and federal – in a more united way.

Some time ago most congregations had an ARPA. Rev. J. De Gelder recently concluded that, as far as he knew, there is only one left – and it is fast asleep ("Hiliter," Vol. 48, No. 12). ARPA was a great idea; however, it may be that they were reaching a little too far. I was in my teens when they had their heyday, but I recall that much effort was expended upon developing papers and formal positions on issues. Perhaps too much time was spent in local meetings and not enough on letting the distinctively Reformed voice be heard in the political and social spheres. Perhaps some were disappointed that ARPA never became a springboard into provincial and federal politics. Perhaps the movement of many towards the

Christian Heritage Party help speed the demise of ARPA. Whatever the reasons, the ARPA movement has fizzled out. That is too bad, for in addition to the personal responsibility we each have to let the Word of God shine there where we live, we also have a collective responsibility.

Admittedly, the speed of society's moral decay makes one despair and cynical about the usefulness of trying to influence it for good. The success of the homosexual agenda over the past two decades highlights this decay. In 1977, Quebec became the first province to ban discrimination on the basis of "sexual orientation" in its Charter of Rights. In 1989, a federal penitentiary was ordered to grant a homosexual inmate conjugal visits with his partner. Two years later a court ruled that British Columbia's Medical Services


Act discriminated against gays because it denied them medical coverage as couples while granting it to common-law heterosexual couples. Court after court has stripped away the moral fabric of Canadian life in their advocacy of the homosexual agenda until the recent May 20th Supreme Court of Canada decision that declared unconstitutional Section 29 of Ontario's family law because it excluded gays and lesbians from seeking alimony. That latter decision must be cold comfort for homosexuals. While it is another step towards the full inclusion of the homosexual lifestyle in society, there will be many wealthy gays today nervous about alimony suits from alienated former lovers.

The success of the homosexual agenda in dunning down society's abhorrence of homosexuality and lesbianism is only one symptom of civilization's latter day decay. Many more signs could be marked. It is tempting for us to

withdraw, turn our backs on society, and concentrate on building a parallel culture – to let contemporary society head off to destruction, as seems its wish. In a sense, we are constructing such a parallel culture. An example would be our Christian schools. Although, perhaps our schools are not so much the epitome of a parallel culture as a powerful force in present culture. We are teaching our children how to live as Christians with a Reformed world- and life-view in a pagan culture.

We are called to speak to society and to comment on cultural trends wherever God has placed us. It happens often

We need to address social and political issues – local, provincial, and federal in a united way.

that you might want to address something happening in your community, province, or country, but you do not know whom to contact or what format to use. To facilitate our collective task in speaking out, it would be good for every congregation to have a small informal committee that would alert the brothers and sisters to impending decisions or important events to which we, as Christians, ought to speak. (Rev. J. Visscher recently pleaded for this in his local bulletin; I would simply underline his plea.) A formal association with a constitution is not necessary for this. All that is needed is a few people who are perhaps a little more tuned in than the rest to what is happening in culture; who are interested in such things; who are adept at getting hold of addresses, phone numbers, fax numbers, and e-mail addresses; and who are efficient in getting word out quickly to the congregation via the local bulletin and able to give a few pointers on what ought to be said to whom. Call it the public affairs or community impact committee, or something like that. A few issues back (Vol. 48, No. 8) Rev. R. Aasman wrote about the Canada Family Action Coalition. To get started, it would be good for a local committee to take up contact with this coalition and to subscribe to its newsletters. Let us show that we are concerned about community standards. Let us speak the Word of God in our culture and society, and so speak up for the Kingship of Christ. 

What's inside?

Once again, we feature a number of Unity Committee Reports. These are papers that served to focus the discussions of unity committees of the United Reformed Churches in North America and of the Canadian Reformed Churches. With thanks to the Lord Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, we note the unanimity that exists between the brothers on the doctrines of the church and of the covenant.

Perhaps these papers can serve as discussion material in local talks between United Reformed and Canadian Reformed Churches. It is great that the brothers on the two committees have found each other on these matters. Even more important is that we find one another and reach unanimity in our cities, towns and villages. The brothers have served us exceedingly well with their presentations. Let us use their work that they have now given to us to work for unity in our local situations.

Marriage is a wonderful gift of God. It is a great blessing to receive from the Lord a godly wife or husband. It is so important to stand together on the common basis of the Word of God. Rev. R. Schouten contributes another article about marriage. This time he addresses the matter of like-mindedness in courtship and marriage.

Mrs. Ravensbergen serves us with another "Ray of Sunshine," reflecting on the ever-present power and goodness of our God.

In addition to these items, you will find, as always, an editorial and a meditation. Best wishes!

GvP



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IN THIS ISSUE

Editorial – Influencing Community Standards — G. Ph. van Popta	366
Treasures, New and Old – Unity — G. Ph. van Popta	368
Unity Committee Reports – The Doctrine of the Church — J.A. Bouwers.....	369
Unity Committee Reports – Theses concerning the Doctrine of the Church as Confessed by the Canadian Reformed Churches in Articles 27-32 of the Belgic Confession — J. De Jong	373
Unity Committee Reports – Contours of God's Covenant – An Unofficial Exposition of the United Reformed Churches in North America — R. Stienstra	375
Unity Committee Reports – The View of the Covenant — J. De Jong	378
Unity Committee Reports – Points of Agreement Between Canadian Reformed and United Reformed Representatives	379
Ray of Sunshine — Mrs. R. Ravensbergen	380
Like-mindedness in Courtship and Marriage — R. Schouten	381
An Evening of Praise – Featuring the new Pipe Organ — Diane Kampen	383

By G. Ph. van Popta

Unity

“... members together of one body ...” Ephesians 3:6

If any of the New Testament letters proclaims the unity we have in Christ with God and with one another, it is the letter to the Ephesians. The theme of unity runs throughout it. This letter both *proclaims* unity and *calls* us to unity – unity with each other for the sake of Jesus Christ.

The Lord Jesus Christ is the unifying agent of all things. Everything in heaven and on earth will be brought together under the headship of Christ. God placed all things under his feet and made Him to be head over everything. He is the centre of God’s plan. In Christ do we find our election, our calling, our redemption.

Believing Jews first were brought to God the Father in Christ, but Gentiles were also included when they heard and believed the word of truth, the gospel of their salvation. Both Jews and Gentiles were marked with the Holy Spirit and set apart to be God’s own possession. All the saints share in the one inheritance. In Christ do we find our unity.

Once we belonged to the devil and the world, said Paul. But then God reconciled us to himself. Once we Gentiles were separate from all the blessings of God. We were far away, but now we have been brought near. Christ has made one body of believing Jews and believing Gentiles. He has broken down the wall of hostility and made one new man out of the two. Early Christians liked to talk about “the Third Race.” There were the Jews, the Gentiles, and the Church. The Church of Christ was the Third Race made up of both believing Jews and Gentiles. Together they were built into Christ and upon the apostolic foundation. Members of one body, they shared in the promise in Christ Jesus. In Christ we have one Father. The Church is unified – united in Christ.

These are the kinds of things Paul said in the first three chapters of this letter. In the last three chapters, he

worked out what the unity of the Church means for the day to day life of the members of the congregation. It means that we will be humble and gentle, patient with each other, bearing with one another in love. Paul put it very powerfully when he said:

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

In order to preserve and enhance the unity of the Church, Christ gave preachers and elders “... to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith. ...” Together we must grow up into Christ.

**There is one body
and one Spirit ... one hope
... one Lord, one faith, one
baptism; one God and
Father of all, who is over
all and through all
and in all.**

In the latter part of chapter 4, Paul became very specific about how God’s people must act to preserve unity. We must treat each other well and speak truthfully and graciously to each other. And if we ever have a fight, we must make up before the sun goes down and forgive each other as God in Christ forgave us. For the sake of the unity of the Church, we must love each other. Love is a command.


From telling us how we as members of the Church are to treat each other Paul went on to write about how husbands and wives, parents and children are to interact. Husbands must love their wives as Christ loved the

Church. Wives must submit to their husbands as the Church submits to Christ. For the sake of the unity of the Church – the unity bought with the precious blood of Christ – we must reflect the relationship Christ has with the Church. If husbands do not love their wives with a giving, self-sacrificing Christ-like love, the unity of the Church is at stake. If wives do not submit to their husbands in a Church-like way, then the unity of the Church is in danger.

Similarly in the parent-child relationship. The unity of the Church is at stake in how parents and children interact. Paul commanded the children of the congregation to obey their parents. The fathers must not exasperate their children but bring them up in the knowledge and discipline of the Lord. This preserves unity – the unity of the covenant and of the Church. Alienation arises when children disobey their parents and fathers exasperate their children, and alienation is the opposite of unity.

Even slaves and masters in the early Church were to be good to each other and for each other for the sake of the unity of the Church – the internal body unity and the unity the whole body has with God in Christ.

This unity can only be maintained by using the Word of God as a powerful weapon against the devil who only wants to bring about disunity – schism within the congregation, disunity between churches, alienation from God. As we remain under the Word we remain united. And we must pray. Paul’s closing exhortation in this letter that proclaims unity has to do with prayer. We must pray in the Spirit and keep on praying for all the saints.

We find everything in Christ. Unity with God the Father. Unity within the congregation. Unity in our marriages and in our families. Unity with other faithful churches of Christ. Let us work for unity and pray for unity. 

The Doctrine of the Church¹

The United Reformed Churches, in their short history, have never made any dogmatical pronouncements concerning the doctrine of the Church, otherwise referred to as the locus of Ecclesiology. This is arguably a good thing. It does, however, make the assignment of putting to paper the understanding of the doctrine of the Church, by these Churches, a rather difficult one. Nevertheless, in the context of our ecumenical discussions, it is apparent that for the progress of these relations, a discussion of this topic is necessary. Besides, we do, as Churches, cheerfully bind ourselves to the Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions, or Three Forms of Unity, which have significant things to say regarding the matter. By the light of Scripture, then, seeking to be guided also by its reflection in the Confessions, we present the following five points for discussion.

The identity of the church

What is the Church?

The Greek word that most often stands behind the word "Church" in our English Bibles is *ekklesia*. The basic meaning of this term from the New Testament Greek could be summarized as: a gathering of people for a specific purpose. Of course this concept cannot be properly understood without taking into consideration the Old Testament background. The Old Testament Hebrew term *qahal* is regularly translated in the Septuagint as *ekklesia*. Comparison of instances of this word's contextual use in places like Deuteronomy 9:10, 10:4 and 18:16 reveals that the assembly in question is the covenant people gathered before their God.

Scripture consistently speaks of the Church as the people of God. The New Testament references simply repeat, reiterate and apply the language already used in the Old. In 1 Peter 2:9,10 it is said of the Church – *you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but now are the people of*

God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy. This, it must be appreciated, is a passage rich with allusions to the Old Testament, with most particular reference to the words spoken by God to His people assembled at Sinai in Exodus 19:5,6. In Acts 7:38, Stephen refers back to this assembly as the *ekklesia* in the wilderness.

It is the Church, therefore, that receives the covenant promise: *I will be your God and you shall be my people.* It is the Church that comes by the work of God's grace through faith to live by, and enjoy, this promise, as well as to expect its ultimate fulfilment. (cf. for example – Lev 26:12, Jer 31:33, 2 Cor 6:16, Rev 21:3).

Fundamentally, we conclude that the Church is the covenant people of God comprised of believers of both the Old and New Testament administrations.

Our Confessions faithfully reflect this temporal universality of the Church of Jesus Christ. For instance, in QA 54 of the Heidelberg Catechism we confess concerning the "Holy Catholic Church" that Christ is gathering a community from out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end.

In this respect, when we speak of the catholicity of the Church (catholic meaning literally "according to the whole") we confess, by faith, that according to its universal dimensions, the Church is comprised of every true believer that ever lived, lives, or is yet to live. *We believe and profess one catholic or universal Church, which is a holy congregation of true Christian believers, all expecting their salvation in Jesus Christ, being washed by His blood, sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit* (BC 27). The translation of this article being used by the Canadian Reformed Churches, speaks even more definitively of "the" true Christian believers. The Latin is more emphatic still, speaking of *omnium fidelium*, which could be translated as "all believers." The Heidelberg Catechism goes on to speak in the same all-encompassing fashion when it says in QA 55 about "the Communion of Saints"

that believers one and all, as members of this community, share in Christ and in all His treasures and gifts.

In the broadest sense the Church as communion of saints is comprised of all who name the name of Jesus. We are reminded, for instance, of the Apostle Paul's words *to the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours.* (1 Cor 1:2). Clearly our confessions seek nothing more than to echo the teaching of Scripture. When Christ speaks of building His Church, against which the gates of hell shall not prevail (Matthew 16:18), or when in the epistle to the Ephesians we read that God gave Christ to be head over all things to the Church (Eph 1:22), or, of His being head of the Church (Eph 5:23), and, of His having so loved the Church, that He gave Himself up for it (Eph 5:25), in each instance the Church is portrayed in its universal dimensions in keeping with the fullness of the intent and accomplishment of Christ's atonement. (Cf. Acts 20:28, John 10:15). These universal dimensions are further reflected, for instance, in Ephesians 4:4,5 where we are told of *one Body and one Spirit . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism.*

Calvin, in this connection, has spoken of this aspect of the Church as "visible to the eyes of God alone" (*Institutes* IV.i.7), this has also been referred to as the Church as God sees it. Nevertheless, this reality should not simply be viewed eschatologically, and certainly not supratemporally. Our general confessional starting point speaks of a concrete reality *not confined, bound or limited to a certain place or to certain persons, but spread and dispersed over the whole world . . . joined and united with heart and will, by the power of faith, in one and the same Spirit* (BC 27).

Furthermore, whereas, as a result of some of the Reformers' speaking about the Church, some have spoken of this dimension of the Church as the invisible Church, we find this terminology potentially misleading. Indeed, there are

ARTICLE 27

THE CATHOLIC CHRISTIAN CHURCH

We believe and profess one catholic or universal church,¹ which is a holy congregation and assembly² of the true Christian believers, who expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ,³ are washed by His blood, and are sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit.⁴

This church has existed from the beginning of the world and will be to the end, for Christ is an eternal King who cannot be without subjects.⁵ This holy church is preserved by God against the fury of the whole world,⁶ although for a while it may look very small and as extinct in the eyes of man.⁷ Thus during the perilous reign of Ahab, the Lord kept for Himself seven thousand persons who had not bowed their knees to Baal.⁸

Moreover, this holy church is not confined or limited to one particular place or to certain persons, but is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world.⁹ However, it is joined and united with heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith.¹⁰

¹ Gen 22:18; Is 49:6; Eph 2:17-19.

² Ps 111:1; Jn 10:14, 16; Eph 4:3-6; Heb 12:22, 23.

³ Joel 2:32; Acts 2:21.

⁴ Eph 1:13; Eph 4:30.

⁵ 2 Sam 7:16; Ps 89:36; Ps 110:4; Mt 28:18, 20; Lk 1:32.

⁶ Ps 46:5; Mt 16:18.

⁷ Is 1:9; 1 Pet 3:20; Rev 11:7.

⁸ 1 Kings 19:18; Rom 11:4.

⁹ Mt 23:8; Jn 4:21-23; Rom 10:12, 13.

¹⁰ Ps 119:63; Acts 4:32; Eph 4:4.

aspects of the reality of the Church of Christ that are unsurvivable or unoverseeable to the human eye (the Church is always first of all a confession of faith) but this inability to see is owing to man's limitations, it does not belong to the essential character of the Church. Furthermore, when taken in abstraction, this terminology of the invisible Church has led many to be sinfully unconcerned with fellowship in the Church on an individual(istic) level or about the sorry state of affairs in the Churches on an ecumenical level. We will touch on these matters further *infra*.

Indeed, focusing only on the universal dimension of the Church would be unbalanced and will lead to error. The Confessions, reflecting Scripture don't do that either. Nevertheless, this general starting point of the confessions is very significant given the historical context in which they were written. The Roman Catholic Church had institutionalized the concept of catholicity, thereby denying it to the Reformers. It is in light of this that the Reformers, including the framers of our confessions, argued for a more dynamic view. In their day, the view of the Roman Church concerning catholicity had degenerated to the point where it could be characterized by the expression: "where the Pope is, there is the Church." To this the response of the Reformers was – "where Christ is, there is the Church." The Reformers and their disciples insisted that they were not separating themselves from Christ's Church.

While this recognition provided for great liberty for the Reformers, it did not lead to license.

The visibility of the church

Where is the Church?

The confession about the Church Universal must never be made in abstraction from the concrete reality and responsibility of the local Church. None of the New Testament references to the Church in the universal sense, as we've considered them above, can be understood in isolation from the concrete manifestations of the body of Christ. If we've said already that the Church is where Christ is, there is a sense in which it should also be said that Christ is where the Church is. Christ is the head over all things to the Church (Ephesians 1:22). When the Belgic Confession basically quotes Cyprian's

dictum extra ecclesiam nulla salus, in article 28, it is essentially saying that there can be no salvation outside of Christ (cf. John 14:6, Acts 4:12), and further, that one can have no confidence of knowing Christ outside of the Church as it is manifested locally.

The reality of communion with Christ must necessarily come to concrete expression in communities of the saints. Scripture tells us that Christians are those who are, for example, to serve one another (Gal 5:13), bear one another's burdens (Gal 6:2), submit to one another (Eph 5:21), comfort one another (1 Thess 4:18), and exhort one another (Heb 3:13). As the Heidelberg Catechism summarizes in QA 55, those who are united to Christ are duty bound to use their gifts for the service and enrichment of the other members. The Belgic Confession uses similar language in article 28. All of these commands presuppose an institutional reality and an organizational structure. Otherwise, commands such as those found in Hebrews 13:17 – *Obey those who rule over you and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls* – are rendered meaningless.

The Church, as God is pleased to establish it, and as we are called to recognize it, is the place where believers are gathered together in Christ's Name, or, in accordance with His institution. Obviously it is by the local Church that the Great Commission is carried out, the sacraments are administered and the organizational ordinances are followed. It is the local Church that bows its neck under the yoke of Jesus Christ (BC 28). Being joined to the Church in a concrete local setting is an act of obedience. Those who do not do so *act contrary to the will of God*.

The local Church and the universal Church are not two different Churches, however. They are, rather, two different dimensions of Christ's one Church. Distinction is not separation. There can be no separation, then, between the catholic or universal Church of BC article 27 and the true Church that man is duty bound to join in article 28. This point is highlighted by the fact that when the transition is made from article 27 to 28, the Confession connects the two by continuing to speak of "this" holy congregation.

Nevertheless the distinction is of great importance. Making an absolute identification of the perspectives of articles 27 and 28 will lead to either of two untenable abstractions. On the one hand, those who are inclined to emphasize the reality of the universal and interpret the concrete local situation in the light of it, will be inclined to a view that allows for a sinful pluriformity of the Church, as well as the conclusion that various and sundry Churches and denominations are all really part of the one Church of Christ in their own right. This approach makes void the duty summarized for us in our confession *that we ought diligently and circumspectly to discern from the Word of God which is the true Church* (BC 29). This approach also fails to take seriously the reality our Confession speaks of when it goes on to warn – *all sects which are in the world assume to themselves the name of the Church*.

On the other hand, the opposite danger exists when it is posited that all that is said about the catholic or universal church is to be re-interpreted in light of what the Confession says about the local manifestation of the Church in article 28. The result of this approach can be a lack of appreciation for the work of God throughout the earth and a rather narrow and sinful sectarianism. For instance, we are convinced that the United Reformed Churches in North America are true Churches of Christ. That is not the same, however, as saying the true Churches of Christ are the United Reformed

Churches in North America. It needs to be understood, rather, that the Confession, in article 29, also challenges existing Churches to self-examination regarding their faithfulness, that they might be able to say with a clear conscience, “we are a true Church of Christ,” but in no way does the confession press for the conclusion that “we are ‘the’ true Church in an exclusivistic sense.” Such an approach would be a return to the error of the Roman Church which viewed everything institutionally. The Reformers and the framers of our Confessions refused to identify the Church exclusively with any particular ecclesiastical organization.

It is important that both dimensions of Christ’s Church as universal and local each be understood in light of the other – without identification or separation. In this way the Confession steers clear of the Scylla of pluriformity and the Charybdis of sectarianism.

It is, furthermore, a sad fact of reality that the Church of Jesus Christ, as it is found in the world today, does manifest a certain pluriformity of existence. Here it is important that we distinguish between “what is” and “what ought (not) to be,” between the indicative and the imperative. For example, according to “what is” we have in many of our respective communities faithful Churches that exhibit the marks of the true Church. These Churches are living in close proximity with similar Churches that are also faithful, holding to identical Confessions. Yet, these Churches do not recognize one another or have fellowship with one another. This ought not to be. It is sin.

The unity of the church

According to article 28 of the Belgic Confession it is every man’s duty, having been joined to the true Church, to maintain its unity. Certainly this applies primarily in the context of the local church of which he is a member, but the implications of this demand extend also to the level of relations between local Churches.

This is particularly evident from the words of our Saviour in His high priestly prayer of John 17. Christ pleads with His Father *for those you have given Me . . . 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* (John 17:21,23). The demands of this prayer cannot either be spiritualized or simply relegated to an eschatological hope. What He prays for is a matter of

the Church’s witness before the world, therefore we must conclude that visible, concrete unity between His people is in view.

Yet this must be true unity, that is to say, unity in truth. There must be no false ecumenicity. Neither is it proper to speak of a sort of “lowest-common denominator” kind of unity. *Sanctify them by Your truth, Your Word is truth*, our Saviour has prayed (John 17:17). Also, according to Ephesians 4:13, the unity that we are to endeavor to protect and promote among all those that are Christ’s is the unity of *the true faith (fides quae)*. This faith is of an objective character, *the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints* (Jude 3), or, *the whole counsel of God* (Acts 20:27). In any movement toward unity it must always be kept in mind that the catholicity of the Church, as it is called to come to expression, must include a commitment to the “whole” truth. We’re reminded of how the Athanasian Creed speaks of *the Catholic* faith. Through the centuries the true Church has witnessed to this faith by way of her Creeds and Confessions. True unity, therefore, can be based on nothing less. Any temptation to silence portions of the confession of the Churches for the purpose of a broader ecumenicity must necessarily be false. Not only would this be a harmful regression, it would also be a dishonour to the Holy Spirit who has guided the Church through history.

Churches may recognize one another and pursue the Lord’s demand for unity on the basis of what the Nicene Creed has termed the “apostolicity” of the Church. This apostolicity is to be found not in a succession of persons or in a line of history, but rather where Churches of potentially diverse backgrounds recognize in each other’s confession a common commitment to the apostles’ doctrine (Acts 2:42, Eph 2:20), having believed in Christ through their (the apostles’) word (John 17:20).

The activity of the church

Judging by the marks by which the true Church is to be known (BC 29), it is evident that the Church has a particular task in the world. Fundamentally the activity of the Church consists of preaching the gospel, administering the sacraments and shepherding the flock. God’s people have a task in the world also and it is the Church’s task to equip her members for that task (Eph 4:12).

A theological distinction will often be introduced between Church as insti-

tute and Church as organism. As with more distinctions not found in the Bible or the Confessions, however, this one, too, can be potentially misleading. Indeed, the Church has an organic, living character, think of the Catechism’s insistence in QA 54 that we be living members thereof. But, scripturally, it must also be said that institutional organization belongs to the Church’s essence. It is the institutional life of the Church that provides for its organic growth. Neither is it proper to designate every aspect of the Christian life and kingdom service as “the Church,” even though these endeavors can only be carried out by those who are living members of it. We are not called to ecclesiasticize all of life. It is ironic that often those who (out of concern for the Church) wish to equate kingdom service with the Church as *organism* end up disparaging the institutional Church and its central role in the advancement of the kingdom (cf. Heidelberg Catechism, LD 48).

The polity of the church

In article 30 of the Belgic Confession we confess *that this true Church must be governed by that spiritual polity which the Lord has taught us in His Word; namely, that there must be ministers or pastors . . . also elders and deacons who together with the pastors form the council of the Church*. Here we see that the government of the Church is essentially local. In our tradition, as a reflection of this, we speak about the autonomy of the local Church. Nevertheless, the Church’s catholic obligation and the implications of believer’s responsibilities over against one another as communion of saints are such that congregations cannot remain independent of one another. Churches of the like faith and confession federate together with a Church Order specifying the details and responsibilities in that union.

The United Reformed Churches are federated around an adaptation of the Church Order of Dort (1618/19). In our previous denominational connection in the CRC we were living together under a significant revision of the Church Order that was put into place in 1965. Many have pointed to this Church Order as a contributing factor toward the growing hierarchicalism in CRC circles. While it may be true that the 1965 document itself need not be read hierarchically, history has shown that it could be, and was. Already in the 1960s there were those pleading that the revision should be accompanied by a study

of the foundational principles of Reformed Church government. With a desire to prevent the rise of similar abuses in the new federation it was felt that an attempt should be made to have such principles consciously undergird and accompany our adoption of the Church Order. The following Appendix

includes our federation's effort to articulate those principles.

*For the Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity of the URCNA,
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¹Discussion Paper of the Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity of the United Reformed Churches in North America in correspondence with the Committee for the Promotion of Ecclesiastical Unity of the Canadian and American Reformed Churches.

Appendix: Foundational Principles of Reformed Church Government

(From the Church Order of the United Reformed Churches in North America)

1. The church is the possession of Christ, who is the Mediator of the New Covenant.
Acts 20:28; Ephesians 5:25-27
2. As Mediator of the New Covenant, Christ is the Head of the church.
Ephesians 1:22-23; 5:23-24; Colossians 1:18
3. Because the church is Christ's possession and He is its Head, the principles governing the church are not a matter of human preference, but of divine revelation.
Matthew 28:18-20; Colossians 1:18
4. The universal church possess a spirit unity in Christ and in the Holy Scriptures.
Matthew 18:18; Ephesians 2:20;
I Timothy 3:15; II John 9
5. The Lord gave no permanent universal, national or regional offices to His church. The office of elder (presbyter/episkopos) is clearly local in authority and function; thus Reformed church government is presbyterial, since the church is governed by elders, not by broader assemblies.
Acts 14:23; 20:17,28; Titus 1:5
6. In its subjection to its heavenly Head, the local church is governed by Christ from heaven, by means of His Word and Spirit, with the keys of the kingdom which He has given it for that purpose; and it is not subject to rule by sister churches who, with it, are subject to the one Christ.
Matthew 18:19; Acts 20:2-32; Titus 1:5
7. Federative relationships do not belong to the essence or being of the church; rather, they serve the well-being of the church. However, even though churches stand distinctly next to one another, they do not thereby stand disconnectedly alongside one another. Entrance into and departure from a federative relationship is strictly a voluntary matter.
Acts 15:1-35; Romans 15:2-27; Colossians 4:16;
Titus 1:5; Revelation 1:11,20
8. The exercise of a federative relationship is possible only on the basis of unity in faith and in confession.
I Corinthians 10:14-22; Galatians 1:8-9;
Ephesians 4:16-17
9. Member churches meet together in consultation to guard against human imperfections and to benefit from the wisdom of a multitude of counselors. In the broader assemblies. The decisions of such assemblies derive their authority from their conformity to the Word of God.
Proverbs 11:14; Acts 15:1-35;
I Corinthians 13:9-10; II Timothy 3:18-17
10. In order to manifest our spiritual unity, local churches should seek the broadest possible contacts with other like-minded churches for their mutual edification and as an effective witness to the world.
John 17:21-23; Ephesians 4:1-6
11. The church is mandated to exercise its ministry of reconciliation by proclaiming the gospel to the ends of the earth.
Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 1:6;
II Corinthians 5:18-21
12. Christ cares for His church through the office-bearers whom He chooses.
Acts 6:2-3; Timothy 3:1,8; 5:17
13. The Scriptures encourage a thorough theological training for the ministers of the Word.
I Timothy 4:18; II Timothy 2:14-16; 3:14; 4:1-5
14. Being the people of God, chosen and redeemed, the church, under the supervision of the elders, is called to worship Him according to the Scriptural principles governing worship.
Leviticus 10:1-3; Deuteronomy 12:29-32;
Psalm 95:1,2,6; Psalm 100:4; John 4:24;
1 Peter 2:9
15. Since the church is the pillar and ground of the truth, it is called through the teaching ministry to build up the people of God in faith.
Deuteronomy 11:19; Ephesians 4:11-16;
1 Timothy 4:6-11; 2 Timothy 2:2; 3:1-17
16. Christian discipline, arising from God's love for His people, is exercised in the church to correct and strengthen the people of God, maintain the unity and the purity of the church of Christ, and thereby bring honor and glory to God's name.
I Timothy 5:20; Titus 1:13;
Hebrews 12:7-11
17. The exercise of Christian discipline is first of all a personal duty of every child of God, but when discipline by the church becomes necessary it must be exercised by the elders of the church, the bearers of the keys of the kingdom.
Matthew 18:15-20; Acts 20:28;
I Corinthians 5:13; I Peter 5:14



Theses concerning the Doctrine of the Church

as Confessed by the Canadian Reformed Churches in Articles 27-32 of the Belgic Confession

These theses should not be seen as a supplement to what the churches confess in Articles 27 to 32 of the Belgic Confession. Neither should they be seen as a commentary on the text of this part of the confession. They are drafted with the specific purpose of providing further elucidation of the confession in the context of discussions on ecclesiastical unity. Hence aspects and features of the confession are highlighted with this specific concern in mind.

Article 27

1. While this confession is made at a certain point in history, it views the church from the perspective of its ultimate completion in Jesus Christ. However, it takes this view without discounting the real historical moments of the church's existence every step along the way.
2. This article confesses a definite historical continuity of the church, which enjoins all believers to consciously articulate their faith in the historical continuity of the church as they experience it in their past and also perceive it unfold in their present. Christ is an eternal king who is never without subjects, and therefore at any given point in history the church must be seen as a *living* reality.
3. While the church is not limited to particular places and certain persons it is distinctly made up of "certain persons" in "particular places." For our confession stresses not the invisibility of the church, but the universality of the church. Therefore we cannot lose sight of its concreteness in terms of real bodies in specific locations (local churches).

Church at
Kerwood,
Ontario.



Willoughby
Heights
Church at
Langley, BC

Article 28

4. The two lines of Article 27 reappear in the first words of Article 28. The eschatological motif is represented in the phrase "holy assembly and congregation" since this views the church from the aspect of its completion. However, it is called an "assembly", which reintroduces the notion of distinct gatherings at any given point on the historical continuum. Here "redeemed" does not mean that each person in the assembly is *de facto* elect, but that believers with their seed are in the company of the faithful, always

however maintaining the provision of the gospel, namely, that all are called to repent and believe.

5. The duty of true believers is two fold: to join with the church and to unite with it, maintaining the unity of the church. This incorporates the notions of repentance and public confession of faith, as well as merger on the national level, and cooperation and support on the international level.
6. The duty to separate from those who do not belong to the church and to gather with those who belong to it is confessed as an ordinance of God.

Such an ordinance can be clearly found in Ephesians 4: 1-16 where believers are called to maintain the unity of the church, and called to join together in one body.

Article 29

7. The confession exhibits an increasing movement from the notion of the church universal to the church local. By the time the marks are introduced in Article 29, we are thinking of specific local churches. The confession makes clear that the church is viewed as a concrete and visible reality. For it speaks distinctly about the "body and the communion" of the church. Believers themselves may be more pure and less pure (referring to stages of sanctification) but the church should scarcely be addressed this way since it has a clearly definable and discernable "body and communion." There cannot be more or less pure "bodies and communions", although one can have more or less pure fellowships in the one body and communion of the true church. Therefore we need to avoid adopting a specific theory either defending or promoting the pluriformity of the church. One body and communion means one divinely enjoined "form."
8. The confession concerning the marks of Christians is a further elaboration of what constitutes the marks of the true church. For the phrase "those who are of the church" (Art 29 parag. 3) refers back to those who, in distinction from the hypocrites are a "part of the church" (Art. 29 parag. 1). So we are speaking of Christians who are in the true church, and maintain its unity. There is no credal reference to believers who are outside the true church, since these believers "act contrary to the ordinance of God."
9. The two churches, true and false are easily distinguished from each other. The original Dutch term here is "lichtelijk", which literally means: "brightly" or "clearly." In other words, it comes to light in the course of time whether a church is true or false, and in the process of coming to light, it can always be seen whether a church is authentic or not. Jesus said "You will recognize them by their fruit" (Matt 7:16,20 NIV).

Article 30

10. The movement to the local church comes to full turn at this point in the confession. This means that the confession expresses the autonomy of the local church, and indicates that the essential right of government is entrusted to the elders and deacons as council of the church. Here deacons are seen as helpers in broader aspects of church government, adding to the weight of the elders with their own input, and so together forming a governing 'senate'. Specific pastoral and disciplinary concerns fall in the province of the ministers and elders.
11. Although the essential task of the officers of the church is limited to the members of the congregation, the confession should not be read in an exclusive way. In other words, the work of the officers also impacts upon the surrounding community, and the role of all the officers for the surrounding community is implicitly included in the language of Article 30.
12. The confession clearly intimates that the offices are restricted to faithful men in the congregation. There is freedom in the way they are chosen. However, following the rule that "Paul gave to Timothy" would require that all choosing does include the approbation of the congregation, (1 Tim 3:1-13).

LORD'S DAY 21

54. Q. What do you believe concerning the *holy catholic Christian church*?

A. I believe that the Son of God,¹ out of the whole human race,² from the beginning of the world to its end,³ gathers, defends, and preserves for Himself,⁴ by His Spirit and Word,⁵ in the unity of the true faith,⁶ a church chosen to everlasting life.⁷ And I believe that I am⁸ and forever shall remain a living member of it.⁹

¹ Jn 10:11; Acts 20:28; Eph 4:11-13; Col 1:18.

² Gen 26:4; Rev 5:9.

³ Is 59:21; 1 Cor 11:26.

⁴ Ps 129:1-5; Mt 16:18; Jn 10:28-30.

⁵ Rom 1:16; 10:14-17; Eph 5:26.

⁶ Acts 2:42-47; Eph 4:1-6.

⁷ Rom 8:29; Eph 1:3-14.

⁸ 1 Jn 3:14, 19-21.


⁹ Ps 23:6; Jn 10:27, 28; 1 Cor 1:4-9; 1 Pet 1:3-5.

Article 31

13. The offices should also be seen and confessed as connected with local churches. While there can be exceptions to the rule, the picture given in the confession is that ministers as well as elders and deacons are specifically bound to local churches.
14. The confession especially takes pains to underscore the equality of the ministers of the word in whatever place they are, accenting the fact that although they may have varying tasks or commissions, there is no sense of ranking (*ordo*) among them.
15. What explicitly applies to the ministers applies implicitly to all officers of the local churches. There can be no lording of any one officer over another in the presbyterial system.

Article 32

16. We believe and confess that there is a divine ordinance with regard to the government of the church, and that all aspects of church government may not be transferred to the realm of human regulations or "indifferent matters." In the view of the confession, the things that Christ our Master has commanded are also exactly those commands specifically enjoined by the apostle Paul (1 Tim 3:15).
17. While there is also a human element in the drafting of church law and church ordinances, this human component may never bind the conscience. In a Reformed church there is never any institutional instance that can stand between the believer and his Creator and Redeemer.
18. The confession surmises that human regulations should be kept to a minimum, serve to promote harmony and concord, and should have as their essential focus the discipline and supervision of the lives of the believers. The equitable regulation of church discipline remains the primary object of all church ordinances.

For the Committee for the Promotion of Ecclesiastical Unity of the CanRC, Dr. J. De Jong professor at the Theological College and convener of the Committee. 

Contours of God's Covenant

An Unofficial Exposition of the United Reformed Churches in North America

In seeking to be faithful to God's Word, the Reformed churches have steadfastly confessed the unity of the Scriptures. That unity comprises the Old and the New Testaments as the one revelation of God's mighty deeds in history. The Bible reveals two themes that run throughout its pages, God's kingdom and His covenant, both closely related to each other.

This article sets forth the views concerning God's covenant as generally held in the United Reformed Churches. It is not the intent to be definitive nor polemic, but general and informative. We follow a simple division of the material, focusing on the nature of the covenant, the relationship between the church and the covenant, and finally the place of the sacraments in the covenant.

The nature of the Covenant

The very heart of religion is covenant, for the service of man the creature rendered to God the Creator is only possible if there is a divinely designed and implemented relationship. With this observation it is clear that God's covenant is not and cannot be made with unreasoning creatures or with things. Thus we hold that when Scripture reveals on occasion that God uses the terminology of covenant and applies it to animals, birds, the earth and the sky, it is symbolic and analogical. Hosea 2 is an illustration of such a usage.

Much has been written about the covenant in the Bible, especially as to its nature and provisions, and perhaps its origins, in terms of the treaties between sovereign rulers and their vassals. We understand God's covenant to be much more profound in its nature and design. Certainly, the holy Being of God is incomprehensible. Yet the Bible reveals the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as the three divine Persons, "the Unity in Trinity and the Trinity in Unity," the Church confesses in the

Athanasian Creed. We believe that God's covenant relationship with His people reflects in some way the holy and mysterious relationship between the divine Persons.

Thus in creating Adam in His own image, God placed the covenant relationship in the very creation itself. It is abstract and unscriptural to consider the covenant as an ingredient God introduced after man's fall and when sin entered the world. As surely as the kingdom of God involves the very creation,



so surely also is the covenant of God part of creation and re-creation. Thus as the all-wise Creator fashioned and structured His world after His own design, as revealed in Genesis 1, the very next chapter is about how He relates to that creation, especially to man. The contours of the covenant may be seen in this revelation. Profound are the words, "the LORD God . . . breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and

the man became a living soul" (Gen 2:7). Equally profound is God's revelation to the church in Corinth by adding to those words, ". . . the last Adam is a life-giving Spirit" (1 Cor 15:45).

We read that God ". . . works out everything according to the purpose of His will" (Eph 1:11). The nature and function of God's covenant is within His eternal will and decree. To call God's counsel of peace the covenant of redemption, and introduce the concept and word covenant into the sovereign God's "internal" works, is not helpful nor clarifying. To apply God's sovereign election of sinners integrally to His covenant introduces difficulties in understanding the nature of that covenant, we believe. Although the covenant is an eternal covenant, Scripture tells us in various places, that God reveals His covenant with sinners to be essentially temporal, and with His people on this earth.

By its very nature the covenant requires two parties. Sometimes it is said that the essence of God's covenant is an *agreement* between two parties. We hold that such wording is inadequate and misleading. The sovereign Creator designed the nature and the requirements of the relationship which He desired in His own wisdom, and implemented them when and with whom He wished. The Old Testament Hebrew uses *berith* to designate God's covenant, while the New Testament Greek employs *diatheke*, both of which intimate a one sided origin which includes a second party.

Frequently the Reformed churches have used the wording "the covenant of works" as applying before man's fall into sin, and "the covenant of grace" referring to God's gracious and just deeds and promises after and in response to the fall. This bi-focused view of God's relationship with His creature man is questionable. The use of the former in particular has limitations as to



its usefulness, since the Bible does not suggest nor employ the wording. We believe that the simple designation "God's covenant" is preferable.

The Scriptures teach that in His covenant the Creator establishes a relationship of friendship with His creature man, requiring and demanding obedience and love in response. The Garden of Eden was a setting designed by the LORD God (notice the consistent use of the covenant Name in Genesis 2) to demonstrate the Creator's love for His world and to test man's response to that love and friendship. The ingredients of the covenant are sharply delineated by God, as the trees, the task, the commandment, and the punishment are poignant commentaries of the LORD's love and justice.

Adam and Eve broke the covenant and forfeited His friendship, while bringing on themselves and their descendants God's wrath. In Adam God's covenant included their entire race of children. The LORD did not abandon His covenant, nor annihilate the world. Instead He implemented his announced death sentence, cursed the ground, punished Adam and Eve, and revealed the Seed of the woman Who would one day make atonement. Genesis 3 is a clear revelation and commentary of the nature and components of God's covenant. The future of the covenant and the Church already at that time was secure since God had promised as Mediator of that covenant His own Son, Who would come as Messiah, and Who would also be Head of His Church.

The church and the covenant

It has been said that God established separate and distinct covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, as

well as the New Covenant. While the LORD did indeed confirm with an oath His covenant at these times, we believe that a unifying, comprehensive understanding of the Old and the New Testament history of redemption is to be preferred. At significant times in history God revealed and administered His covenant to suit the time and circumstance. As the Son of God was gathering, protecting, and preserving for Himself a Church chosen for eternal life, through all the centuries, He did so as the Mediator of the covenant and the Head of the Church. God's Word ties the Church and the covenant together.

Some Reformed churches maintain that God's covenant is only and exclusively made with those whom God has chosen in Christ from eternity. These churches tend to make some delineation or distinction within the covenant. These distinctions are some of the difficulties noted above. Some have used the distinction of "internal" and "external" realities of the covenant, the former comprising the elect, the others are those on whom God's wrath abides but generally are within the Church. Regeneration and conversion are key factors for this covenant concept in determining who is in covenant with God. An unconditional covenant is stressed in this view.

We hold that God establishes His covenant without conditions. An Arminian understanding of the Bible would insist that man needs to work out his own salvation by obeying God's commands and by believing in Christ, and thus earn his salvation in the setting of the covenant where the gospel is offered to him, viewing God's covenant as conditional. We reject such an interpretation. The Bible teaches an

unconditional covenant, we believe, and is made with those whom He calls.

God called Abraham and established His covenant with him. Central in the covenant is this Word, "I will establish My covenant as an everlasting covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you" (Gen 17:7). This central promise of the covenant is applied to the Pentecost Church, "The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the LORD our God will call" (Acts 2:39).

The LORD establishes His covenant with believers and their children as they comprise the Church. Concerning the one catholic or universal Church the Confession states, ". . . which is a holy congregation of true Christian believers, all expecting their salvation in Jesus Christ, being washed by His blood, sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit" (Belgic Confession, Art. 27). There may be "hypocrites who are mixed in the Church with the good, though externally in it" (Belgic Confession, Art. 28). Faithful members of the true Church "may be known by the marks of Christians, namely by faith, and when having received Jesus Christ the only Saviour, they avoid sin, follow after righteousness, love the true God and their neighbour . . ." (Belgic Confession, Art. 29).

The Church of Christ with whom God's covenant is established is called ". . . God's household, which is the Church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Tim 3:15). We confess that "the marks by which the true Church is known are these: If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein . . ." (Belgic Confession, Art. 29). The Head of the Church gathers and rules His Church by His Word and Spirit, and the office-bearers are enjoined to bring the claims of the covenant to God's people. "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke, and encourage with great patience and careful instruction" (2 Tim 4:2).

To be in covenant with the holy God is an immense privilege, but also a great responsibility. His people are to be holy as He is holy. The entire setting of the journey through the wilderness by Israel demonstrates how the Holy One punishes the breakers of His covenant, as His holy and righteous anger was aroused by His people's rebellion. One who took His Name in

vain had to die, and another who gathered wood on the Sabbath must be stoned to death. The covenant God insisted on the same stringent observance of His laws within the promised land of Canaan. Time after time the prophets brought the Word of warning. The people were sent into exile as punishment for covenant-breaking disobedience.

When finally the promised Messiah came, He said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets, I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them" (Matt 5:17). In the Old Testament the covenant God dwelled with His people in the Holy of Holies. In the New Testament "we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, His body" (Heb 10:20). The command to believe and repent comes to all who are placed within God's covenant, "so that we may serve the living God. For this reason Christ is the Mediator of a new covenant that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, now that He has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant" (Heb 9:14,15).

In calling its members to faith and repentance, the Church is mindful of the covenant's two-fold claim: promise and command. In the Church of Christ the sacraments always point to what the Form for Baptism states, "Whereas in all covenants there are contained two parts, therefore are we by God, through baptism, admonished of and obliged unto new obedience, namely that we cleave to this one God. . . ."

The sacraments and the covenant

One of the marks of the true Church is that ". . . it maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ" (Belgic Confession, Art. 29). The Mediator of the covenant, standing on the border of the Old and the New administration of it said, "Drink from it, all of you. This is My blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt 26:27).

The two sacraments, we maintain, are woven into the fabric of the covenant, and the Church has received the mandate to administer them in the name of the Head of the Church. It is hardly surprising that the Reformed churches have zealously maintained and protected these holy ordinances of the Lord. Those who profess their faith



in the Lord Jesus Christ and live an obedient life are urged and invited to come as members of God's covenant. In the Form for the Lord's Supper the Church instructs, "And that we might firmly believe that we belong to this covenant of grace, 'the Lord Jesus Christ . . . took bread and when He had given thanks, He broke it, and gave to the disciples and said, Take, eat, this is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me.'"

The seriousness of celebrating the Holy Supper and guarding the Table of the Lord from unbelievers is highlighted by the Apostle Paul, "Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Cor 11:27). Also at Holy Communion the curse is to be taken seriously, as the grace of God in Christ is celebrated.


In the history of the Reformed churches the sacrament of baptism in particular has played a significant role in the outworking of the nature of the covenant of God. It has been suggested that infants of church members are baptized on the basis of a presumed regeneration. Such children in the church are considered saved in Christ unless they were to show the contrary later in their lives. This is another problem referred to above when the covenant is integrally connected to election in eternity. Election is then envisioned to ensure justification in eternity as well. Reference in this view is frequently made to the words, "Otherwise your children would be unholy, but as it is they are holy" (1 Cor 7:14).

Those who teach baptism on the basis of presumed regeneration also point to the confession, "Since we are to judge of the will of God from His Word which testifies that the children of believers are holy, not by nature but in virtue of the covenant of grace in which they together with the parents are comprehended, godly parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom it pleases God to call out of this life in their infancy" (Canons of Dort, I,17).

We do not believe that baptism on the basis of presumed regeneration is Scripturally justified. Instead, baptism is properly based on God's covenant promise that He will be our God and the God of our children. We confess, "Infants as well as adults are in God's covenant and are His people. They no less than adults are promised the forgiveness of sin through Christ's blood and the Holy Spirit Who produces faith" (Heidelberg Catechism, LD 27, Q&A 74). The Church explains the matter in the Form for Baptism, ". . . God the Father witnesses and seals unto us that He makes an eternal covenant with us and adopts us as His children and heirs. . . ."

Though not inherent in being a true Church and confessing the doctrine of God's covenant, yet complacency and a sinful lifestyle are constant dangers. When church members consider that they are saved merely because they are in the covenant, antinomian and libertarian lifestyles may result from careless attitudes. The gospel of the Lord Jesus always calls on Christ's people to believe and to repent of all their sins, especially because they are in covenant with a holy and just God.

The fullness of the covenant takes place at the consummation of all things, when the Bride of the Lamb, "beautifully dressed for her Husband," comes down out of heaven from God. That is when "the dwelling of God is with men and He will live with them. They will be His people and God Himself will be with them and be their God" (Rev. 21:2,3). Such is the completion and full glory of the covenant of God, a wonder in anticipation of which "the Spirit and the Bride say, Come! And let him who hears say, Come!" (Rev 22:17).

For the Committee for Ecumenical Relations and Church Unity of the URCNA, Rev. R. Stienstra, minister of Grace Reformed Church (URCNA), Dunnville, Ontario 

The View of the Covenant

This is an unofficial presentation of the salient features of the doctrine of the covenant as maintained in the Canadian Reformed Churches with the specific purpose of seeking ecclesiastical unity with those who share the same confession and background as the Canadian Reformed Churches. It is merely designed to serve as a representative statement, and in no way seeks to bind anyone to any specific formulation contained herein.

1. The covenant is a relationship of fellowship and love between two parties, God and man. It was instituted in paradise upon the creation of our first parents, Adam and Eve. It forms the heart and centre of all true religion.
2. The covenant is unilaterally established entirely from God's side, without any worth or merit on the part of man. Hence the covenant in creation may be termed a covenant of favour and love. The covenant is one-sided in origin, two-sided in existence.
3. This relationship is not given in creation, but is an added supplement, factored into and yet augmenting the creation, filling out the potencies that God himself placed in creation. In other words, man was created to the covenant, and creationally equipped to live in the covenant. Being created as image of God is a being created *for* freedom, and being created *to* freedom.
4. The covenant is a relationship of mutual rights, duties and obligations. God freely binds himself to his obligations, but also sovereignly calls us to ours. Therefore, although the covenant is unilateral, coming entirely from God, it always must be connected with human responsibility.
5. The fall stamps man as a covenant breaker. The fall into sin was an act of rebellion by which the original blessings and gifts promised to man in paradise were forfeited, and

ARTICLE 17

THE RESCUE OF FALLEN MAN

We believe that, when He saw that man had thus plunged himself into physical and spiritual death and made himself completely miserable, our gracious God in His marvellous wisdom and goodness set out to seek man when he trembling fled from Him.¹ He comforted him with the promise that He would give him His Son, born of woman (Gal 4:4), *to bruise the head of the serpent* (Gen 3:15) and to make man blessed.²

¹ Gen 3:9.

² Gen 22:18; Is 7:14; Jn 1:14; Jn 5:46; Jn 7:42; Acts 13:32, 33; Rom 1:2, 3; Gal 3:16; 2 Tim 2:8; Heb 7:14.

- he so inherits nothing but eternal death. Here man forfeits the freedom to which he was created.
6. In an act of overflowing love and favour God not only maintains the terms of the original covenant, but adapts and refits them in such a way that we are extended mercy and redemption from sin through the sacrifice of the eternal Son of God on the cross. In other words, the Son agrees to pay our debt and set us free! He takes our place under the terms of the original covenant. Here the covenant of favour becomes the covenant of grace in Jesus Christ (Gen 3:15). This covenant is made with the believers and their offspring.
 7. The relationship of the covenant of grace and its accompanying provisions and implications spans the entire history of the world. All of history is determined by the mother promise (Gen 3:15); namely that there will be constant enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, but the seed of the woman will attain ultimate victory over the seed of the serpent.
 8. The promise of the covenant, together with the demand to repent and believe must be preached throughout the whole world. All who are grafted into the covenant are called to repent and believe the promises, and receive Jesus Christ as their Saviour. Those who do so share the fullness of the covenant promises and all its blessings.
 9. The covenantal provisions comprise both promise and the demand, and one member cannot be reduced to the other member. "The people who describe the promise in this way so that it is stripped of the demand are gutting the promise of its significance" (K. Schilder).
 10. In the old dispensation the covenant is primarily manifested through the law and its requirements. The law was a code of freedom, calling all people in Israel to a life of gratitude before God according to his terms. It represented the code of worship, praise and service before God.
 11. Israel failed miserably in keeping the terms of the law. "Through the law comes the knowledge of sin" (Rom 3:20). Yet all those who held to the promise of God in true faith found salvation in the blood of the Lamb.
 12. The fullness of the covenant of grace is manifested in the fullness of time with the birth of the Saviour. Here the original depth of the Old Testament law comes to light. At the same time all the ceremonies and rituals come to fulfilment in Jesus Christ. Paul's rule is: "by grace you have been saved through faith . . ." (Eph 2:8 NIV). This is the heart of the covenant in the new dispensation.
 13. The death of Christ on the cross represents the fulfilment of all the terms of the old covenant. "Golgotha


makes the right of eternal life free again," (K. Schilder). In other words, eternal life is now not only possible but actually granted to all those who through faith believe in the only sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

14. In the covenant of grace the sanctions of the covenant are much richer and deeper, especially in the new dispensation. In the old dispensation, God allowed for a repeated offence, and a repeated call. In the new dispensation, we have come to the last days, (Heb 12). There will be no further dispensations, but

only the consummation of all things and the final judgment according to the terms of the covenant.

15. All obedience to the covenant that is required today is a human responsibility. Yet it is given solely of grace (Eph 2:8-10). We obey, not in our own power but only in God's power. Yet God realizes His plan and counsel of election and reprobation only in the way of the believing and obedient response of his children.
16. The covenant will exist to all eternity. God will be manifested as the

Head, Source and Completer of the covenant, Jesus Christ will be manifested as the eternal Mediator of the covenant, and the Holy Spirit will be revealed as the Sealer of the covenant. The covenant results in the relationship of eternal fellowship between the one triune God and his chosen elect, through all eternity.

*For the Committee for the Promotion of Ecclesiastical Unity of the CanRC,
Dr. J. De Jong professor at the
Theological College and convener
of the Committee.* 

UNITY COMMITTEE REPORTS

Points of Agreement Between Canadian Reformed and United Reformed Representatives

History

We acknowledge from both sides that with sin and shortcoming, both the most recent secessions in our history, the liberation of 1944, and the 1990s secessions were acts of obedience, required and obligated, in keeping with the will of God, (as confessed in Art 28 and 29 BC).

The Church

We acknowledge that due to the many limitations and shortcomings of human understanding, there is a brokenness of the church both in local situation, and in broader federations. This implies that there can be more than one true church in a particular place at any given time. We need to reject a broad denominationalism on the one hand, as well as a narrow sectarianism on the other. Churches of various backgrounds but of one confession have the duty to pursue the highest forms of ecclesiastical fellowship possible in their context, in order to promote the unity of the church locally as well as in the federation of churches.

The Covenant


The covenant is a relationship between God and man established by God

at the time of his creation of Adam and Eve. It is one sided in origin and two sided in existence. God established it to live in fellowship with man and show him his love and favour, and to receive from man love, obedience, trust and honour. When man broke this covenant of favour by his rebellion and fall into sin, God in his grace maintained this relationship and promised to redeem man by the sacrifice of his Son, the seed of the woman in its deepest sense. The Lord makes this covenant of grace with the believers and their offspring.

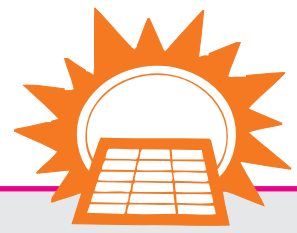
The promises of the covenant together with the demand to repent from sin and believe the promises must be proclaimed throughout all the world. All who are grafted into the covenant are called to repent and believe and receive Jesus Christ as their Saviour and so share in the fullness of its promises and blessings. The death of Christ on the cross represents the fulfilment of the terms of the old covenant. Therefore in the new dispensation of the covenant of grace in Jesus Christ, believers and their seed are called by the power of God to live in true thankfulness and live according to all the commandments of God.

In an obedient response to the covenant obligations the believers are called to gather together in unity with Christ, the Mediator of the covenant, and in unity of faith with the church of all ages. These gatherings are found where the Word of God is faithfully proclaimed in purity, where the sacraments are administered in purity, and where church discipline is exercised for the correcting and punishing of sins. All people belonging to God's covenant of grace are called and obliged to join the church and unite with it, maintaining the unity of the church. The fullness of this covenant takes place at the consummation of all things when the one triune God will live with his chosen people in perfect love and fellowship through all eternity.

Church Order

The section Committees express their gratitude that both federations have chosen to hold to what is in essence the style and order of the Church Order of Dort. Yet specific elements of difference need to be discussed and resolved before we can move to a subsequent phase in the discussion. 

RAY OF SUNSHINE



By Mrs. R. Ravensbergen

"Of old Thou didst lay the foundation of The earth, and the heavens are the work Of Thy hands." Psalm 102:25

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

It is the eighth month of the year, or the month of August. Days follow each other into weeks, the weeks become months, and the months become years. It has been like that since the beginning when God created the world.

God created order, by making the darkness and the light. There was a time for man to do his work, but there was also a time for him to rest. Light became day, and darkness became night. God made another order: He worked for six days, and on the seventh day the Lord rested. With that God established a day of rest for his people. So the days and the weeks were there right from the beginning.

But not the months and years. Nor was there a clock right away. Probably the people went by the march of the sun and the moon to see what time of the day or night it was. But how could they keep track of the weeks and the months, since there was no calendar? How did they know when to sow their seeds, and when to get ready for winter? It took a while before they figured out how they could put the days and months in order. The days and the months got names. Many of them are named after the gods and rulers of those days. The final result is that today we have a nice ordered calendar, and we can plan our activities long in advance.

The month of August got its name after "Augustus." A Roman emperor named Octavian received the title "Caesar Augustus." To receive this title was a great honour for him, because it means exalted or sacred one. The people of the Roman Empire wanted to say with this name that Octavian was not just a man, but he was almost like a god!

So now every year we live for thirty-one days in the month of August. (Some people say that August himself added a thirty-first day to his month, because he wanted it to be just as long as the month of July, which was named after Julius Caesar; but we are not quite sure of this.)

Of course we know that nobody really deserves a beautiful name like August. We are not allowed to honour people with a name like "exalted" or "sacred." Names like that only fit God.

But August is a beautiful month. Everything is nice and green, flowers are blooming, many fruits are ripening, the weather is often very nice (at least where we live). We do not really think often of the man after whom this month was named. It makes much more sense to think of the One Who put the possibilities for months and years into Creation. For even though man developed the calendar, the need and the purpose for it were all there. It is our exalted God who created the world. He made the sun and the moon move around in the firmament so that days, nights, months, and seasons were established. He made the world a good place to live in, and the Lord God created the world in such a way that there are many possibilities for man to invent and explore the earth. Yes, the earth was a perfect place to live. The only reason why it is not perfect anymore is man's fall into sin. Because man, at the instigation of Satan, wanted to be like God. Therefore man should not be named "exalted," for he is cursed by God.

Fortunately we know that the Lord did not only punish us. He still loved us. Therefore God sent us his Son to make up for what we had spoiled. Through the Saviour we are accepted again by our Father, and we are given the opportunity to repent of our sins, and to receive eternal Life.

So we live here in a world filled with misery. Some of us have to live a life that is very difficult, because the Lord has given us an exceptionally heavy burden to carry. Sometimes it takes all we have to deal with grief, loneliness, handicaps, sickness, and so many other things. Yet there is hope and comfort for us. When we pray, the Lord will hear. He does not forsake us, and we are never alone in our struggles.

And when we pay attention to many little things around us, we can see that the Lord is near: the birds and the flowers and the insects, but also the food we eat, the letters we read, the days and the nights and the weeks and the months. Even the calendar that is hanging on the wall. For was it not the Lord Who put all those things for us in his creation?

So when we live through the days of the month of August, and every day, let us think of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Exalted One. And at the same time let us pray: For help and support in our daily struggles, but also for Christ's return on the clouds. Then there will be no need anymore for clocks and calendars. For then we will be with our God *eternally*. We will be freed from our sins and misery, and we will be able to praise his Holy Name forever!

*All praise the Lord, O sons of light!
Extol Him in the highest height.
Praise Him, His angels; from your post
Praise God with all the heavenly host.
You sun and moon, for seasons given,
You shining stars aglow in heaven,
You highest heights and cloudy sky,
All praise the Name of God Most High. Psalm 148:1*

Birthdays in September:

- 8: MARSHA MOESKER,**
P.O. Box 164, Carman, MB R0G 0J0
- 11: MARY VANDEBURGT,**
c/o Togeretz family, 32570 Rossland Place,
Abbotsford, BC V2T 1T7
- 14: JERRY BONTEKOE,**
"ANCHOR HOME", 361 30 Rd., RR #2,
Beamsville, ON L0R 1B0
- 25: GREG AIKEMA,**
7118 – 192 Street, RR #9, Surrey, BC V4N 3G6
- 29: PAUL DIELEMAN,**
3 Northampton Street, Brampton, ON L6S 3Z5
Marsha will be 22, Mary 43, Jerry 35, Greg 11, and Paul 30. Congratulations to you all.

Until next month,

Mrs. R. Ravensbergen,
7462 Reg. Road 20, RR #1, Smithville, ON L0R 2A0
Tel: 905-957-3007. E-mail: RWRavens@netcom.ca

Like-mindedness in Courtship and Marriage

By R. Schouten

What does your love life have to do with the Church Order? When you are looking for a life partner or when you become engaged to be married, the Church Order is probably the last thing on your mind. In fact, it's entirely possible that you will say, "Church Order? What is it anyway?"

Nonetheless, if you can locate *the Church Order of the Canadian Reformed Churches* (in the back of the *Book of Praise*), you will find in Article 63 the following words: *The consistory shall ensure that the members of the congregation marry only in the Lord, and that the ministers – as authorized by the consistory – solemnize only such marriages as are in accordance with the Word of God.*

The inclusion of an article about marriage in the *Church Order* is a reflection of the important connection between marriage and the church. For at least two reasons, the church has a vital interest in the creation of a new family unit. In the first place, the marriage of church members is to reflect the relationship between Christ and his Church (Eph 5:22-33). In the second place, the Scriptures reveal that God builds his Church covenantally through the birth of children to believers (Gen 17:7; Acts 2:29). Therefore, it is no exaggeration to say that godly marriages and healthy family life are critical for the well-being of the church.

For these reasons, it is not surprising to see that Article 63 places courtship, romance and marriage under the oversight of the consistory of each local church. Those whom Christ has called to take heed to the flock are also to take heed to the love life of the young (and-not-so-young) people of the church.

Only in the Lord

The language of Article 63 is derived from 1 Corinthians 7:39. In this passage, the apostle indicates that a

widow is free to marry whomever she wishes with only the restriction that this new marriage must be *in the Lord*. This means that a relationship may be contemplated only with one who is a Christian in profession and life. The church must teach her youth that to give your heart in love to an unbeliever is to break faith with God. Sometimes, I have heard the argument that 1 Corinthians 7:39 only forbids marriage with an unbeliever but does not forbid dating a non-Christian. This argument fails on two counts. First, the Bible does not support a concept of recreational dating which would not have as its overall goal the seeking of a life partner. Second, to begin a relationship while knowing full well that this relationship cannot progress in a natural way would be to tempt God – something believers may never do (Matt 4:7)!

The Scriptural ban against marrying an unbeliever finds further expression in 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1. While Paul is not discussing marriage in this passage, he is warning against any entangling associations with non-Christian people. His basic principle is: "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers." Paul is not saying that believers need to shun the world as do the Amish and other Anabaptist groups (1 Cor 5:10). Contact in daily life with those who do not confess Christ is inevitable and even to be desired. How else would the glad tidings of the Gospel be spread? Paul is saying, however, that believers may not enter a compromising relationship. They ought not to be "yoked together" with unbelievers. This metaphor finds its origin in Deuteronomy 22:10 which states, "Do not plow with an ox and a donkey yoked together." Without trying here to explain this passage, we can say that for Paul, "the Christian is a different breed from the unbeliever and is forbidden an improper relationship with him."¹

Perhaps a person contemplating a relationship with a non-Christian takes comfort in the promise of the other person never to interfere with church-going or with prayer and Bible-reading. Many a young person has fallen for the promise of a non-believing boyfriend or girlfriend that "I'll never interfere with your beliefs." If we think this through, however, we soon realize that a marriage based on opposing religious presuppositions can never attain to the unity of life which is what the married state is all about. How can there be a real unity when one person's life is controlled by every word spoken by God while the other person has no regard for that same word of God? A clash of values and so of lifestyle is inevitable. One needs to think, too, of the impact of an unbelieving spouse on the upbringing of any children that might be born. Perhaps the unbelieving spouse will not stand in the way of baptism, church attendance and Catechism instruction. Nonetheless, one can expect that the lack of a positive, godly example of faith and conduct will put a stamp upon family life.

For these reasons, it is necessary for the churches to teach that God forbids inter-marriage with unbelievers. Those who fail to repent of this sin need to be disciplined by the church in a loving and yet firm manner. Whether a church member is just beginning such a relationship or is already deeply involved with an unbeliever, the church must have the courage to ask him/her to give up this wrong relationship – even if it were at great emotional cost. For the sake of their relationship with their God and Saviour, believers must be willing to deny even their strongest feelings for another person. Because our God is the only true God who deserves our unrestrained love and total obedience, we are called to "forsake all creatures rather than do *the least thing*

against His will" (Answer 94 of the Catechism).

How must the church respond if the outside party in a relationship is showing some interest in the Word of God and is willing to come for instruction in the faith? Does this initial interest make such a relationship acceptable to the Lord? The answer must be negative. Those who show interest in the Word of God and are willing to hear the Gospel are always most welcome among the people of God. However, they are not welcome as partners in a relationship with a believing person. A promise to attend church or to accept instruction is not enough. Let us be honest about this point. Romantic interest in a church member can lead an outsider² to make cheap promises. Needed for Christian courtship and marriage is not simply the *possibility* of a *future* acceptance of the Faith, but rather a *present* profession of faith adorned by a godly life in living communion with the church. Outside of this framework, the relationship stands condemned by God and needs a response of admonition.

From different denominations?

Let us now turn this discussion into a more complicated area. We have been talking about courtship and marriage involving a believer and a non-Christian. What about courtship and marriage involving a member of a faithful Reformed church and somebody who confesses Christ, lives a godly life but belongs to a different denomination? Is such a relationship permissible? How ought the church to respond?

The most significant factor involved in answering these questions is our view of the Reformed confessions. If we embrace the Reformed confessions from the heart as an accurate statement of Biblical teaching, we will not be able to enter a courting relationship with people who do not accept the Reformed confessions. To do so would be to *relativize* our own confessed faith.

Do we believe that God's Word *alone* is our standard in doctrine and life? Do we truly believe that God is *sovereign* in salvation and not dependent on our human will? Do we believe God's gracious *unconditional* election, Christ's *particular* redemption and the Spirit's *unfailing preservation* of God's people? Do we believe that human beings are by nature *depraved*, their hearts corrupted, their minds darkened and their wills enslaved? Do we believe that we are justified by *faith*

alone apart from works? Do we believe that God's covenant is established with believers *and their seed* and that the children of believers therefore ought to be baptized? Do we believe that the Word and the sacraments are *means of grace*? Do we believe that *God's law* is normative for the lives of God's children? Do we believe that the church is to be governed by *elders*? Do we believe that church *discipline* is a mark of Christ's church? Do we believe that Christ actually *communicates* Himself to us in the Lord's Supper?

Each of the above questions highlights an aspect of the confession of the Reformed churches which is either disregarded or denied by many other denominations. Without judging these other denominations, we may ask how a young person who has become heir of the riches of the Reformed faith can make light of them by switching to a Baptist, Arminian or liberal church or even by returning to the Roman communion? To do so would be an act of unfaithfulness – an ungrateful repudiation of a God-given heritage. Instead of changing churches for the sake of a relationship, should not Reformed youth defend their faith and stand firm as living members of the church to which they have given their allegiance?

Young people should aim for *like-mindedness*³ in courtship and marriage. Like-mindedness means *agreement* in doctrine and in the application of doctrine to life. A lack of like-mindedness brings serious problems into a marriage and brings division into the church. Thus, whenever this like-mindedness of confession and life is lacking, the elders of the church should intervene with words of warning and exhortation.

What if the non-Reformed believer in a courting relationship becomes convinced of the teaching of the Reformed church and is willing to become a member of the Reformed church? In this case, too, the elders should also be involved from an early stage in order to give instruction and to test motives. Until the time that the person actually commits himself/herself to become a member of the Reformed church, the relationship should be kept on hold.

An impossible standard?

Some may respond to what I have written by saying that it establishes an impossible standard. First, they might say, it is impossible to regulate love. Second, they might add, since our own

federation is so small, where does one find a spouse?


In response to the first point, we should realize that also in our love lives we are called to *self-control*. Romantic attraction is not an uncontrollable emotion. Love involves choices and decisions over which we have control and for which we therefore have responsibility. An attraction for a person who does not share our hope, our confession and our way of life can be suppressed. The world may find this approach unnatural but those who serve the living God are willing to resist all desires which conflict with his revealed will. Of course, once a person enters a wrong relationship and becomes emotionally enmeshed with an outsider, it becomes very difficult to renounce the bond. The lesson is: do not begin what you are not sure you can complete. If you do, you will suffer much pain in breaking up an impossible relationship or else risk making shipwreck of your faith by continuing a course of action which the Lord forbids.

Now what about the question of finding a spouse in a relatively small Reformed federation? In reply, it can be said that we are not so small that there are not many potential partners for people in every age group. Just ask the ministers of our churches who will tell you about a large number of single people over the age of 21. It seems that part of the problem is the failure of young men to properly initiate courtship. Many young men appear to lack the confidence or inner freedom to actively seek out a godly young woman of the church. Why this might be so could be the topic of another article. For now, I would like to urge single people to bring their heartfelt desires before the Lord in prayer, asking Him to guide them to the right person for marriage. We should not force the door of providence but when God Himself holds open the door, we ought to walk through and seize the opportunities which He gives.

Rev. Robert Schouten is minister of the Canadian Reformed Church in Abbotsford, British Columbia.

¹Gordon Fee, quoted by Paul Barnett in *The Message of 2 Corinthians* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), page 130.

²I've noticed that people sometimes respond negatively to the use of the term "outsider." But see Col 4:5, 1 Thess 4:12 and many other NT passages. Christian marriage is for "insiders" only.

³Douglas Wilson works with this concept of "like-mindedness" in *Her Hand in Marriage: Biblical Courtship in the Modern World* (Canon Press, 1997), pages 67-69. 

AN EVENING OF PRAISE

Featuring the new Pipe Organ

By Diane Kampen

On Friday, June 11, 1999, the congregation of Bethel Canadian Reformed Church, Toronto came together for an evening of praise and thanksgiving. After 14 years of hard work, the church organ was finally complete.

Our previous organ needed both a major overhaul and significant repairs such that tremendous costs would be involved and then the finished product would still have many limitations. In 1984 Brother Hugo Pilon undertook the building of a new organ. With the help of a fellow organ enthusiast Sieb Smilde, a layout and design were made. The years that followed were taken up with gathering thousands of pieces, parts, and components, electrical wire, tubing, and lumber and with much dedicated work also by many volunteers who assisted Br. Pilon.

In celebration, this evening of praise was not for a consecration, dedication or presentation of the organ but, as Rev. den Hollander spoke in his opening address, it was to recognize the new organ as an instrument used in assisting us with the singing in the worship services and in praise to God alone. Our God is in the center and our praise reflects the joy we share in singing of our redemption by Christ. The organ is not to be used for self-glorification, but in a modest way played for Sunday worship as a foretaste of the worship which we



will enjoy on the new earth. The Lord uses people as instruments in His hand and so we are grateful for the dedication and work of our Brother Pilon

which he showed by his years of ardent labour. Every detail, pipe and wire has received his attention. Thanks was also expressed to other members who had contributed their time and skills in bringing this massive project to completion. After the appropriate acknowledgements and speeches, we enjoyed listening to organ recitals by various members of our congregation. Some of the recitals were played in memory of one of our past organists, Mr. Martin Menken, who had served our congregation for many years. Songs were sung to God's honour and praise, a response for our thankfulness. For He is the one to be adored and Who has made this all possible. To Him be the honour, praise and glory!



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