

Reformed Churches and the unity of the church in a European context

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I A historical perspective on Europe, on being Reformed, and on Church Unity

In order to deal with the different aspects of my subject a clarification seems necessary of the terminology involved.

First of all we may not escape the necessity of a historical perspective. When using words like 'reformed' and 'reformed churches', as well as the indication 'Europe', it is impossible to just look around in the 21st century and consider what we see or want to see and experience.

We must realize, therefore, that the word 'reformed' is related to the 16th century Reformation, and that also in that century the unity of the church was an important topic in ecclesiastical and theological discussion.

Even in mentioning the European continent a similar historical context must be taken into account.

To deal with this political part first I just make the observation that in the Middle-Ages the political entities where people lived were small. The larger countries were of later date. Life was organized in provinces, 'countries', in which even different peoples were recognized, and it was governed by knights, earls and dukes and the like. In the 16th century, however, many of these smaller societies were united in larger centres of power. At the beginning of the century a major part of Western Europe was united under the political umbrella of the Burgundian-Habsburg Empire, and the Catholic Church was the only church in town and countryside.¹ Perhaps for that reason it is not so strange that our fathers in the age of the Reformation were more inclined to think on an international scale than we sometime appear to do!

After Luther's public presentation of his 95 propositions in 1517 the Reformation spread in a remarkable speed all over Western and Northern Europe. What happened in Wittenberg, Germany, appeared to be of spiritual importance in the Netherlands, in England, in Switzerland etc.

Of course the seed of difference was sown also. Between Lutherans and Reformed people sometimes hard feelings were developed. This difference still exists on a world-wide scale. Without hesitation we may speak of a spiritual tragedy that the Reformation could not, in spite of a spiritual unity that often was felt and testified, develop itself as a real catholic movement.

At the same time we need to recognize how intensively 16th century reformers, theologians and synods have tried to close the gap that meanwhile existed between the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformed Churches. Not immediately this gap was seen as something definitive. We may respectfully mention the efforts of Martin Bucer in relation to the several discussions between representatives of the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformation. In spite of many negative experiences Bucer and others went on looking for any opening that could restore unity with the Roman Catholics.² It must be admitted that the result of these discussions has been very limited. Calvin was a bit more reluctant than Bucer, when asked to par-

¹ Wiebe Bergsma, 'The Low Countries' in: Bob Scribner et al. (eds.), *The reformation in National Context*, Cambridge 1994, 76

² See for the history of these religious conferences and for the role of Bucer and the other reformers e.g. C. Augustijn, *De godsdienstgesprekken tussen rooms-katholieken en protestanten van 1538-1541*, Haarlem 1967; J.M. Stolk, *Johannes Calvijn en de godsdienstgesprekken*, Kampen 2004; H.J. Selderhuis, *Huwelijk en afscheiding bij Martin Bucer*, Leiden 1994, 101-109

ticipate in the discussion in Regensburg 1541, but notwithstanding that, afterwards Calvin was content with the fact that he had contributed to the protestant witness of the truth. And he did appreciate the intentions and the spiritual attitude of both Bucer and Melanchthon when they were more inclined to compromise for some time than he was himself.³

An interesting aspect of these religious discussions with Roman Catholics, is that several important reformed confessions had their origin in this discussion. The Lutheran *Confessio Augustana* was prepared by Melanchthon in order to be presented as a testimony of reformed faith in the Reichstag of Augsburg in 1530. His *Apologia* had its origin in the same context as an answer to the roman catholic *Confutatio* – an attack on the Augsburg Confession, by Johannes Eck – and both the *Confessio Augustana* and the *Apologia* still have a prominent place in the Lutheran body of confessions.

More generally spoken also in the Calvinistic part of the reformation these discussions on unity have contributed to the formation of the distinctive reformed identity as it had become clear in quite a number of confessions. We must add - alas! – that this has been the outcome in spite of the sincere efforts to be engaged in meetings with the Roman Catholic Church aimed at the restoration of unity. Unity as the first objective was important!

Generally speaking – and I am aware of the fact that my speaking also goes rather roughly - in the light of both the political and the spiritual situation in the 16th century, we might say that in that age there was a real international, even European awareness. This could be underlined by many historical features with regard to theological education, correspondence of the reformers, a wide international ecclesiastical and theological exchange etc. A beautiful instant may be found in the presence of quite a number of representatives of churches in many countries in the historic Synod of Dordt, 1618-1619. And they made a massive contribution to the decisions taken! This was of course the 17th century, but no one considered that as something new at that time.

Later, in the course of the 17th and 18th century, an inclination becomes visible that is not any more directed to church unity, but primarily to the identification and defence of national reformed churches.

The acceptance and maintenance of different confessions made clear that the churches circumscribed their positions as different from that of other churches. More than in the 16th century this aspect became a specific function of a confession. In the 16th century confessions served as a means of unification of scattered believers into one church, in the 17th century the confession confirmed the difference between protestants and roman catholics, as well as between Calvinists and Lutherans.

Of course sometimes changes took place in the fixed positions. An interesting instance still is the fact that some reformed as well as Lutheran theologians sought contact with orthodox churches in eastern Europe. In the beginning of the 17th century that even led to a strongly Calvinistic theological influence on the patriarch of Constantinople, Cyrillus Lukaris.⁴

There were also groups of believers and churches, like the Hussites and Waldensians, originating from long before the Reformation, that came to consider themselves as part of the Reformation.

Generally speaking, however, the contacts between churches and confessional positions rather were controversial than irenic in character.

It makes sense to point at an additional development in the British atmosphere. During the Westminster Assembly in 1643 the Congregationalist minority used over against the Presbyterian majority the term ‘denomination’. Since that time this word is used as an indication and

³ See L. Praamsma, *De kerk van alle tijden* II, Franeker 1980, 117; J.M. Stolk, *o.c.*, 298-302

⁴ See L. Praamsma, *o.c.* II, 384-388

perhaps as a legitimation of the diverse protestant churches. Specially in circles of the revival movements the word 'denomination' received an inclusive and neutral meaning, because it made clear that, even when churches formally keep distance from each other, yet some form of unity can be experienced between them in essential aspects.⁵ Since that time a church that separates itself is not automatically characterized as a sect. Denominations rather are seen as branches of the one Kingdom of the Messiah.

I have to interrupt these historical considerations at this point, expecting that at least we may have a look in some 16th and 17th century mirrors in order to come to a better evaluation of our position as churches in the 21st century.

II The unity of the church in a more modern confessional perspective

In a sense our confessional orientation can be continued up to our time, because what followed after the 17th century was a tendency to put confessions into perspective. In the movement of Pietism by some representatives – like Gottfried Arnold (1666-1714) – the personal pious affections of the soul were considered to be of far greater value than doctrine and dogma. Also the influence of Ludwig, the earl of Zinzendorf (1700-1760) had the same sort of effect. Confessions no longer served the principle of identifying the church and the unity of the church. Unity could be experienced on a different level, without any necessity of a commitment to ecclesiastical unity. The diversity in the landscape of churches can be considered a beautiful phenomenon, not at all conflicting with the spiritual unity of Christians.

In a way this tendency also became visible in the 19th century, when, mostly in the German field, theological volumes appeared that presented a comparative presentation of confessions, with no other intention than just showing the diversity.⁶

In the 20th century theological dealing with confessions the different positions of churches often is presented with less disassociation as before. Authors express their intention 'to replace prejudices by well-founded judgments'.⁷ In the further course of the last century the ecumenical movement gave incentives to look at other churches from the perspective of symbols and confessional positions as only offering a 'relative norm'.⁸ Some authors in the same ecumenical tradition tend to pose the question of what is truth, but others just skip that question and do not want anything but to present a phenomenological picture.⁹

If we share the conviction that within the community of the ICRC, and upon its foundation, a confessional attitude is relevant, as well as the question what we as churches do with the unity - or rather: the lack of unity - of the body of our Lord Jesus Christ, then we have to focus a bit sharper on a few issues in which the previous orientation on the 16th century must be kept in mind.

⁵ See Reinhold Frieling / Erich Geldbach / Reinhard Thöle, *Konfessionskunde. Orientierung im Zeichen der Ökumene*, Stuttgart 1999, 15f.

⁶ E.g. Gottlieb Jakob Plank, *Abriß einer historischen und vergleichenden Darstellung der dogmatischen Systeme etc. etc.*, 1796; Karl Graul, *Die Unterscheidungslehren der verschiedenen christlichen Bekenntnissen im Lichte der heiligen Schrift*, 1899 13th ed. (!)

⁷ 'Vorurteile durch begründete Urteile zu ersetzen', H. Mulert, *Konfessionskunde*, Gießen 1927, Vorwort. VII

⁸ So Ernst Wolf, 'Ökumenische Symbolik. Zur Aufgabe der Konfessionskunde heute', in: *Peregrinatio*, München 1954, 338-358

⁹ Peter Meinhold, *Ökumenische Kirchenkunde, Lebensformen der Christenheit heute*, 1962, deals with the matter of truth, although the confessions do not play a large part in the answers; others take just a general religious standpoint, that allows them to accept as legitimate all sorts of religious and even interreligious attitudes.

As we are together in this conference on the basis of Reformed and Presbyterian confessions – two names that in confessional respect stand for the same thing, although there are a few differences – we have to deal with a couple of fundamental notions. I give them as statements:

1. *The unity of the church is closely, if not exclusively, related to the unity of doctrine.* To be clear: I do not want to reduce the confession of the church to some paper in which we - on paper - can *conclude* to unity. Doctrine in the Bible is ‘sound doctrine’ (1Tim 1:10; cf. 6:3; 2Tim 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1; 2:8). That has to do with the way it is soundly digested in faith and obedience.
2. This matter of doctrine is *connected with a personal knowledge of Christ* as the Head and Lord of the church. The church is the body of Christ. That makes it impossible to deal with the church without a living relationship with the Lord. Exactly this connection makes clear why and how doctrine is sound doctrine.
3. Our dealing with doctrine, then, has to be defined as *differently from* how this is done by a number of the *mainstream churches of Europe*, that also share the same reformed heritage.

This last aspect needs some more specification, by referring to the *Concord of Leuenberg*. This Concord played an important part in the discussions and federations, even mergers, between Reformed and Lutheran churches since about thirty years.

The *Concord of Leuenberg*, as most of you may know, stands for a document with a long history, reflecting the consensus that was reached in 1973 between Reformed and Lutheran churches on a number of themes that had divided them for centuries. Originally it was purely a German affair. Eventually, through involvement of the *World Alliance of Reformed Churches* (WARC) and the *Lutheran World Federation* (LWF), and with technical assistance of the *World Council of Churches* (WCC) it became an ecumenical document of broad European importance, at least on the continent. It definitely helped to come to unity in the Netherlands between the Lutheran Church and the two largest reformed churches, that together now form the Protestant Church in the Netherlands.

Important for us is the fact that churches, in a process dealing with doctrine, eventually came to unity. We must be positive about that very fact.

Unfortunately, when the doctrinal road of the *Concord of Leuenberg* is inspected more closely we lose this positive appreciation. To sum up in a very short way what is done with conflicting doctrines:

- a. Interest for the way in which Christ is present in the Holy Supper, is not useful any more, as long as we eat the bread and drink the wine of the sacrament. So the former conflict on this matter is solved. (art 18-20)
- b. As far as the doctrine of Christ being God *and* man, is concerned, we combine the reformed conviction of Christ’s unchanged divine and human natures and the Lutheran interest for the perfect unity of Christ’s person, and we conclude that the former accusations do not fit any more. (art 21-23)
- c. Dealing with the doctrine of predestination, in which also the Arminian conflict is involved, is says that in the gospel God promises unconditional acceptance of sinful man. Election only means that all are called to salvation in Christ. The human decision is equally important as the universal will of God to salvation. No eternal council of God regarding definitive reprobation of a people or of men is to be accepted. So the former repudiations of false doctrines, as the reformed confessions had them, are not any more valid. (art 24-26)

Moreover, in the positive parts of the Concord we read about the coming of the Son of God in a lost mankind, but without any clear word about sin or guilt, or about reconciliation. As a matter of fact, implicitly the *Canons of Dordt*, the *Belgic Confession* (art 16), and the *West-*

minster Confession of Faith (Ch. 3) and the *Westminster Larger Catechism* (Q 13) must be regarded as rejected.¹⁰

In conclusion of this part I am sorry to say that on the basis of taking the Word of God and the reformed confessions seriously, the mainstream ecumenical history of the last century does not offer us much. Perhaps our very participation in the ICRC easily causes us to join in this conclusion. However, this cannot possibly leave us the issue of church unity as a sort of non-issue.

III. The unity of the church in the light of being reformed in Europe

So, in the third and last part of this lecture I try to give a number of considerations, in which I take up a few earlier thoughts, but in which I most of all try to present the urgency of church unity as something that really gives us homework.

In a somewhat arbitrary order I give a number of remarks that are partly practical, but partly also very fundamental.

1. Concerning Europe

Is Europe only of some interest because we have a European conference? I think there is more to it. In the light of the history of the Reformation, it is striking that in such a short time the rediscovery of the gospel became a fact that touched almost the whole of Europe. It is one of the marvels of history how this great revival movement, as the Reformation may be called, crossed all borders. The church in that time, partly because of the Roman suppression, was international. How many preachers of the continent stayed in London as well as in Emden or Dordrecht, how many reformed scholars taught as well in Strassbourg, in Heidelberg, in Zürich as in Oxford!

In our 21st century existence as churches we have difficulty implementing an international and European outlook to the same measure as was reality in the 16th century and at the beginning of the 17th.

With a growing political European reality as we have in our age, this is strange! This hardly needs any illustration.

Together with this we may remember that the *catholicity* of the church since the year 381 at the council of Constantinople is part of what we believe regarding the church. It *is* catholic. That means essentially the church is not belonging to any age, or to any country. It is beyond the limits of time, and beyond the limits of geography. If we speak of a Dutch Reformed Church, or of an Anglican Church, or a Roman Church, there is conflict. The church may be present *in* a certain country, and of course living in a certain age, such as ours, but its identity lies elsewhere. I might correctly say: the church of Christ is international. And if we feel very much at home in our own part of the world, even in our own race – as in Germany 70 years ago there was an identification of ‘german christians’ - we must be keen on not losing sight of the essence of the church. Being together from different parts of Europe we must meet the challenge of helping each other to see and experience and even ‘organize’ the church as it essentially is *beyond* the spiritual territory that is familiar to us.

¹⁰ Text of the Concord in: ‘Wortlaut und Stellungnahmen zur Konkordie reformatorischer Kirchen in Europa’, in *Ökumenische Rundschau* 21 (1972), 402-421. See on the Concord of Leuenberg a.o. also K. Blei, ‘Die Leuenberger Konkordie tussen traditie en situatie’, in *Tussen openbaring en ervaring*. Studies aangeboden aan prof. dr. G.P. Hartvelt, Kampen 1986, 23-36; W. Lohff, ‘Konkordie und bekenntnis’, in idem, 62-76; G.P. Hartvelt, *Symboliek*. Een beschrijving van kernen van belijden, Kampen 1991.

2. *Concerning the unity of the church*

I dare say that we all have problems with the unity of the church. That has to do with the very fact that the perspective we have on the identity of the church often is not defined by the identity of our head, Jesus Christ. Who else – just like it is in our passports – decides the identity of a body than the head? We often have quite a few specifics that we cherish as most decisive for the identity of ‘our’(!) church before we even think about Christ in this respect. We have the history of our separation, the doctrine as it was given shape by our theologians or other leaders, we have the spirituality of our sermons as it is different from other denominations, we have our theological institutions and our missionaries etc. etc. Of course, all these things are signals of received blessings from above, but too easily we use them to stick to the divisions of the body of Christ. And too easily we leave the world with a picture of the church that shows manifold human portraits and sometimes no image of Christ at all. I found a sentence in a sermon of Calvin in which he says: ‘If we are not united, God will disapprove of us en declare that we do not belong to Him at all.’ It was in a sermon on Ephesians 4:1-5 dealing with ‘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..’¹¹

In our continental confession we have the phrase that there is the distinction between the true and the false church. (*Belgic Confession* art 29) It is quite obvious that the church of the Reformation over against the Roman Catholic Church is meant. This implies, that using the name ‘false church’ on grounds that are not as clear as what art. 29 says, will lead us astray.

When the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, art 22, 4, confesses of the church, that particular churches, which are members of the Catholic Church are *more or less pure*, this can possibly serve a scale of acceptance for denominations, because in this article only local churches are meant, on which no decisions are applicable regarding acceptance or not.

It is also not biblical to accept a spiritual unity as if this could be without a connection with the visible appearance of the church. The Holy Spirit of God was given to the concrete church (Rom. 8:11; 1Cor. 12:13; 2Cor. 1:22), but that never meant that such a church was blameless. The warnings and exhortation to these congregations are many! It therefore makes sense that art 29 of the *Belgic Confession* not only deals with the marks of the true church, but also with the marks of the true Christians.

That unity at the same time is a gift and a commission to the church, is important. ‘Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.’ (Eph. 4:3)

My personal conviction has grown, after having served in our synods committee for church unity for more than twenty years, that our ecclesiastical history is full of identity-signs by which we are convinced to be in a better church than all the others. To be honest: deep in my heart I share that conviction. But at the same time the feeling does not leave me any more that we have too much trouble to combine all this with the knowledge of faith in which we only can find our identity in Christ, our Head, who has but one body.

3. *Making unity visible*

I want to finish with a few practical suggestions that only intend to be examples of how more justice can be done to the visible unity of the church in a European context. I must say beforehand that it is not easy to make things work as they should. Yet it is most fundamental, in the light of what is said before, that we do not leave the practical part out.

Beforehand I agree with the ICRC-policy that has no aspiration to be more than a conference. The ICRC as an organization of churches cannot have any authority over a member church. Notwithstanding that we all feel that the subject of church unity is rightly put on the present agenda. Well, the identity of the church among others being catholic - meaning that the one

¹¹ CO, 51, 520

body of Christ is to be found visibly in all history and all over the world - how do we act upon this faith?

The presence of reformed Christianity in Europe geographically is not very balanced. Reformed churches in the Netherlands are stronger than in many other parts. But in the Netherlands we are aware of the heritage we also owe to Germany: Wittenberg, Heidelberg, Wesel, Emden; and to England that offered hospitality to fugitives in the 16th century as well as during World War II!

So far financial help from Dutch brothers and sisters is going to the small Academy for Reformed Theology in Hannover, Germany, and there is occasional help for small reformed churches in Great Britain and in France, but can we see these instances as a sign of the one body of Christ or only as a proof of Christian charity? I am convinced, that contacts on more practical and also more principle levels would bear fruit to the benefit of both parties. If a diversity of contacts has to do with the unity of the church, then a mutual responsibility develops, and a mutual blessing is experienced, like there was between the congregations of Macedonia and Jerusalem in the time of the apostles. All congregations feed on the same grace, similar to the blessings that all congregations experienced when all received the letters of the apostles directed to just one of them.

Whenever we learn to live by the grace of our Lord's salvation, we are connected in one body with those who 'have received a faith as precious as ours' (2 Peter 1:1).

How do we give shape to this reality in a European context? To give a practical start, I would suggest that every church, represented here, appoints two members, commissioned

a) to find out what the specific needs - spiritually, theologically, physically or otherwise – of a certain sister church may be;

and

b) to formulate how within the 'own' denomination advise, help and assistance in other form could be found that might answer such needs;

and

c) to report to the synod or assembly of the 'own' church and to that of the other church, in such a way that the unity and the communion of the saints be more visible, on the basis of the common confession of our faith in Christ the Lord.

It may be important not to focus too much on financial or material needs. The church is so much more than that!

A second example would be that churches share the doctrinal challenges they face. Here also we must stick to the equality of churches, but accepting that we are not given to each other without good reason.

There is a number of subjects that need further reflection of the church, because in a perspective of centuries they are more or less new to the church:

- The status of the present Israel in the history of salvation;
- the perspective of the Kingdom of God and the mission of the church;
- the issue of millennialism as it sometimes affects older and younger members of our church;
- the charismatic influences many reformed churches are facing, sometimes without having proper answers;
- the questions regarding creation and the scientific challenges to this article of faith;
- our ecological responsibility, because of the same creation.

It is clear that subjects like these are not dealt with in the confessional standards of the 16th and 17th centuries. My argument is not that we need to develop an new modern confession, dealing with such issues – although it need not to be excluded – but that we take the unity of

the church seriously in its international, catholic form. Meeting each other, searching the Scriptures together, trying prayerfully to find answers for the 21st century, in my opinion belongs to the essence of the church. And that essence, present in the unity and catholicity of the church, is represented more properly in such international co-operation than in the work of only one synod in one 'denomination'.

The riches of a joint recognition of the gospel of God's grace may be much more abundant in such a better, catholic, co-operation of the church of Christ than we normally experience in what we too often define as 'our own church'.

Let us seek unity with prayer and creativity, to the honour of our Lord.

Thank you