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FEDERATION - GIFT & CALLING

Introduction

To belong to a federation of churches is both a gift and a calling in the Lord Jesus Christ. His prayer "that they may be one" is the basis for our unity within the federation as churches. In this chapter we will pay attention to both the gift and the calling in belonging to a federation of churches.

1. Scripture

1.1. Old Testament

We confess that the Son of God gathers the church from beginning of this world (Heidelberg Catechism, L.D. 21). This shows the close connection between the Old and New Testament. The church of the New is the continuation of Israel of the Old Testament. In spite of this underlying unity we cannot in a simplistic way place an equation mark between Old and New. In terms of our topic we must be aware of an important change from Old to New. Under the Old Testament the people of God was not only a spiritual unit but also a political nation. The last element disappears in the New Testament. The church is being gathered from all nations. This does not render the Old Testament useless to help us understand the gift and calling connected to being part of a federation of churches. The way the LORD dealt with His people Israel teaches us how He deals with the church today.

The people of Israel consisted of twelve tribes. These tribes were united through God's gracious work. They walked together through the Red Sea. They travelled together to the promised land. Even the way they walked and camped showed this unity (see Numbers 2 and 10)

Joshua 4:20-22

And Joshua set up at Gilgal the twelve stones they had taken out of the Jordan. He said to the Israelites, "In the future when your descendants ask their fathers, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them, 'Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.'

Psalms 68:24-27

Your procession has come into view, O God, the procession of my God and King into the sanctuary. In front are the singers, after them the musicians; with them are the maidens playing tambourines. Praise God in the great congregation; praise the LORD in the assembly of Israel. There is the little tribe of Benjamin, leading them, there the great throng of Judah's princes, and there the princes of Zebulun and of Naphtali.

1 Kings 18:31

Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD had come, saying, "Your name shall be Israel."

Together the tribes received the promised land.

Joshua 4:20-22

And Joshua set up at Gilgal the twelve stones they had taken out of the Jordan. He said to the Israelites, "In the future when your descendants ask their fathers, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them, 'Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.'

Judges 1:3

Then the men of Judah said to the Simeonites their brothers, "Come up with us into the territory allotted to us, to fight against the Canaanites. We in turn will go with you into yours." So the Simeonites went with them.

They had to see to it that each tribe could keep its inheritance.

Numbers 36:7

No inheritance in Israel is to pass from tribe to tribe, for every Israelite shall keep the tribal land inherited from his forefathers.

Judges 21:7

"How can we provide wives for those who are left, since we have taken an oath by the LORD not to give them any of our daughters in marriage?"

Together the tribes had to worship the Lord. The people on the east side of the Jordan were not allowed to forget the people on the other side, or the other way around.

Joshua 22:24-27

"No! We did it for fear that some day your descendants might say to ours, 'What do you have to do with the LORD, the God of Israel? The LORD has made the Jordan a boundary between us and you--you Reubenites and Gadites! You have no share in the LORD.' So your descendants might cause ours to stop fearing the LORD." That is why we said, 'Let us get ready and build an altar--but not for burnt offerings or sacrifices.' On

the contrary, it is to be a witness between us and you and the generations that follow, that we will worship the LORD at his sanctuary with our burnt offerings, sacrifices and fellowship offerings. Then in the future your descendants will not be able to say to ours, 'You have no share in the LORD.'

Also in times of reformation the call to repent had to go to all the tribes.

2 Chronicles 30:1

Hezekiah sent word to all Israel and Judah and also wrote letters to Ephraim and Manasseh, inviting them to come to the temple of the LORD in Jerusalem and celebrate the Passover to the LORD, the God of Israel.

1.2. New Testament

Following Pentecost the distinction between Israel and the other nations fell away. The gospel was to be proclaimed throughout the world. We learn from the book of Acts that the Lord gathered His people in Asia Minor, Greece and Rome. Although these churches are dispersed throughout the world yet they are united in Christ.

1 Pet 1:1-2

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance.

James 1:1

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations:: Greeting.

The word "church" in the New Testament is usually applied to the local congregation. That local congregation is the body of the Lord. At the same time these local churches are united.

1 Cor. 1:2

To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ--their Lord and ours:

2 Cor. 1:1

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God in Corinth, together with all the saints throughout Achaia:

This belonging together comes out also in the few instances in which the term "church" in the singular is used to refer to all the churches together.

Matthew 16:18

And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

Acts 9:31

Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.

The unity between the churches is in Christ.

Gal 3:28

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

The vision which John sees in the Rev.1 shows that each church is a lampstand on its own, but at the same time these seven lampstands are united in Him who stands in the middle of them.

Rev 1:12-13, 20

I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone "like a son of man," dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. ... The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

We find instances in which this bond functioned, e.g. in the acceptance of letters of recommendation, in sharing letters from the apostles, in informing each other.

Col 4:16

After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea.

Gal 2:9

James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews

2 Cor 3:1

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you?

Rom 16:1

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant* of the church in Cenchrea

Acts 18:27

When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. On arriving, he was a great help to those who by grace had believed.

One beautiful example of this communion between churches is the financial help that was given by the churches in Greece and Italy to the needy churches in Judea

Acts 11:29-30

The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

Rom 15:26-27

For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings.

2 Cor 8:8-10

I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. And here is my advice about what is best for you in this matter: Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so.

We may conclude that the bond between churches is both a gift and a calling in the Lord Jesus Christ. Each local congregation which He brings together is bound to Him and has to obey Him. But because Christ's gathering work is not limited to one place, each church is duty bound to seek unity with the other churches. Because Christ prays that His disciples be one, each church which belongs to Him will seriously seek this unity. At the same time this bond with other churches may never infringe on the place of the local church before Christ.

2. Confession / Church Order / Liturgical Forms

2.1. Belgic Confession

The Belgic Confession recognizes that the church gathering work of the Lord is not limited by time or place. This unites the churches in the true faith.

Art. 27

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. However, it is joined and united with heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith.

2.2. Heidelberg Catechism

The Heidelberg Catechism brings this catholic element out as well.

54.

Q. What do you believe concerning the *holy catholic church* of Christ?

A.

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

2.3. Canons of Dort

The Canons speak about the church in light of the power of Christ's redemptive work.

Chapter 2, Article 9 , The Fulfilment Of God's Counsel

This counsel, proceeding from eternal love for the elect, has from the beginning of the world to the present time been powerfully fulfilled, and will also continue to be fulfilled, though the gates of hell vainly try to frustrate it. In due time the elect will be gathered together into one, and there will always be a Church of believers, founded on the blood of Christ. This Church shall steadfastly love and faithfully serve Him as Her Saviour (who as bridegroom for his bride laid down His life for her on the cross) and celebrate His praises here and through all eternity.

2.4. Church Order

Later in this chapter we will deal with some of the articles of the Church Order. Now we will concentrate on the character of the Reformed Church Order.

"These articles, which regard the lawful order of the church, have been adopted with common accord." (Art. 76 C.O.) The churches have voluntarily come together in a federation of churches, in obedience to the command of Christ. Having made these promises voluntarily, does not mean we can take or leave them as we like. These promises are binding. We may expect of all the churches that they abide by these promises. We may bind each other to them. In this way order and peace is maintained in the churches. The Church Order is not a straight jacket but a means to keep good order in the churches. This order is a fruit of the cross of Christ and a benefit for the life of the churches.

The Church Order functions as the formula for cooperation, or as the rule to maintain peace and order. It protects the authority of the local church, and at the same time defends the bond which we have as churches. The Reformed Church Order guards on the one hand against hierarchy, and on the other hand against independentism. It is against hierarchy. In joining the federation the churches retain their own place and authority as church of the Lord Jesus Christ. No church is therefore allowed to lord it over another church. No major assembly may lord it over the churches. See e.g. articles: 15, 30, 37, 74. At the same time the churches realize that having entered this covenant voluntarily, they are bound by their promises. Local churches may not go their own way ignoring the order reached by common consent. See e.g. articles: 4, 9, 26, 46, 48.

These two elements are in balance when the churches live in submission to the Word of God. Article 31 is an example of this. The churches have voluntarily agreed that whatever is decided by a majority vote is to be considered settled and binding. Each church is duty bound to help execute these decisions. The same article, however, not only allows any one who feels himself wronged to appeal, but also leaves the opening that when a decision is proved to be in conflict with the Word of God or with the Church Order the church is not bound to that decision. If this is the case the church has the duty to appeal such a decision.

2.5. Liturgical Forms

The Liturgical Forms themselves are a proof and a fruit of living in a federation. The churches have together adopted these Forms. The local church must then also use them.

3. Purpose

The purpose of a federation is to express the unity we have in Christ. In such a federation we have duties and privileges:

- to assist each other,
- to fight the good fight together,
- to keep each other from deviating from the truth.

The goal of the local congregation is to function faithfully in this federation and to share in all the duties and privileges.

4. Major Assemblies

One aspect of a federation is the convening of major or broader assemblies. These terms "major" and "broader" are significant. We do not speak about higher or lower assemblies, since this would mean that the higher assembly has more authority than the lower assembly. We speak about major or broader because these assemblies involve more churches. They may only deal with matters that are properly brought to their tables. The agenda of the major assemblies is made up by the churches. When the assembly has finished its agenda it ceases to exist.

The major assemblies have to give account of their decisions to the churches. The consistories receive the Acts of the major assemblies and have the duty to scrutinize these in order to establish that the decisions are indeed in accordance with God's Word and the Three Forms of Unity. If a council is convinced that a decision does not meet this requirement it is duty bound to appeal this decision providing grounds why it cannot consider a particular decision as settled and binding.

4.1. Classis

The Classis is the major assembly to the Council. Neighbouring churches form a Classis. A Classis is convened as a rule every three months. A classis deals with matters such as, appeals, proposals, approbation of calls, church visitation, advice in disciplinary or other matters and delegation to Regional Synod. At each classis the churches are asked whether the ministry of the office-bearers is being continued, whether the churches honour the decisions of the major assemblies and whether they need the judgement and help of classis for the proper government of their church.

The Regulations of Classis can be found in **Mandates and Regulations**.

4.2. Delegation

As a rule Council delegates two elders as delegates to a Classis, with one or two alternates. The minister, if possible, attends each Classis. The elders take turns, according to date of ordination. If an elder is unable to be delegated Council can decide to skip him or to delegate him to the next Classis. The delegates have to present a Letter of Credentials in order to have a vote.

Letter of Credentials:

The Council of the Canadian Reformed Church at _____, in its meeting of _____, has delegated to the Classis _____ to be convened, the Lord willing on _____ at _____, the brothers _____ with as alternate(s)

The Council has authorized these brothers to deal with all matters that have been legitimately brought to this Classis, and they are to do this in total submission to the Word of God, in faithful adherence to the Confessions of the Church, and with loyal observance of the adopted Church Order. According to Article 31 of the Church Order the Council on its part promises to abide by all decisions which have been taken by majority vote, unless it is proved to be in conflict with the Word of God or with the Church Order.

Wishing your Assembly the wisdom from above through the guidance of the Holy Spirit,
Signed by chairman and clerk
Date

Each year one Classis has to delegate three ministers and three elders to Regional Synod. If possible Council submits names of brothers of this Consistory who can be delegated.

4.3. Church Visitation

As part of belonging to a confederation, the churches are called to see to it that the purity of doctrine is maintained, and to help each other in word deed. The churches have agreed upon this in Art. 46 of the Church Order, which deals with church visitation.

The church visitation is a means to watch over and serve each, not a way to interfere with what belongs to the local church, nor to lord it over other churches. As churches in one federation we are accountable to each other. This requires wisdom and discretion from the side of the visitors and openness from the side of the consistories with deacons or councils.

Once each year the Church Visitors meet with the Council. This is announced twice to the congregation so that any member who wants to bring a matter to the attention of the visitors must notify the Council. Members may not bring a matter to the visitors that they have not prior to this brought to the Council or to the Consistory. In preparation for the visitation Council deals with the Guidelines. The answers which will be given to the visitors are not personal opinions but the judgement of the Council. If a member disagrees

with the answer of the Council he can ask to make his view known to the visitors. If a member cannot be present at the visitation he has to notify Council and prepare a written statement for the visitors to explain his absence.

The Guidelines for Church Visitation can be found in **Mandates and Regulations**.

4.4. Regional Synod

Once each year a Regional Synod is convened. Regional Synod East is made up of: Classis Ontario Central, Classis Niagara, Classis Northern Ontario and, Classis Western Ontario. Regional Synod deals with matters that could not be finished in Classis and appeals concerning decisions of a Classis. Regional Synod also appoints Deputies ad Art. 48. At the last Regional Synod before the next General Synod delegates shall be chosen to that General Synod. The churches are requested to submit names of elders who are can be delegated.

The Regulations of Regional Synod East can be found in **Mandates and Regulations**.

4.5. General Synod

The General Synod shall be convened at least once every three years. Each Regional Synod delegates to this synod four ministers and four elders.

The Regulations of General Synod can be found in **Mandates and Regulations**.

5. Matters that Involve the Federation

The Church Order requires the involvement of the federation in the following matters:

- Ordination and installation of ministers (Art. 5)
- Releasing ministers (Art. 9)
- Dismissal, retirement, release of ministers (Art. 11, 13, 14)
- Constitution of a Consistory (Art. 40)
- Places without a Consistory (Art.41)
- Counsellor (Art. 45)
- Discipline (Art. 68, 71, 72)

6. Matters that Belong to the Churches in Common

There are also matters which belong to the churches in common. These are dealt with by General Synod. In certain cases General Synods have established Deputies. These Deputies are appointed by Synod and must report to Synod. Matters that belong to the churches in common are:

- Eligibility for the Ministry (Art.4, 5, 7, 8)
- Training for the Ministry (Art. 19, 20)
- Archives of General Synod (Art. 43)
- Relations with Churches Abroad (Art.50)
- Contact with other federations
- Book of Praise, Psalms, Hymns, Text of Creeds/Confessions, Forms. (Art. 55, 56, 63)
- Church Order (Art. 76)

For the mandates of Board of Governors and other synodical deputies see Acts of latest General Synod

7. Attestations

Belonging to a federation includes duties and privileges. One of these is issuing and receiving attestations. An attestation is a testimony by a consistory concerning the life and doctrine of a member. It is usually issued when a members moves to another place and will join the church in that place. The consistory which issued the attestation informs the other consistory about the member. It includes not only a judgement of doctrine and life, but also statistical information. At times the consistory can decide to add a note to the attestation, or a add a letter to the attestation. This is done when there are concerns about the

person, or the member is under discipline. The person involved should be aware of what is stated in the attestation, or in the letter attached to it. A request for an attestation is announced to the congregation.

Because we live in a federation we accept the attestation issued by sister churches. If the member is under discipline then we accept him or her as such. This would mean that this consistory continues the discipline where the previous consistory left off. At the point of accepting the attestation the "new" consistory has its own responsibility and may deal with the person as it deems proper in the light of Scripture. With regard to notations on an attestation, these should be discussed with the person involved. A consistory should not put on paper judgements which have not been brought to the attention of the member involved.

If a guest wants to attend Lord's Supper the consistory requires a written statement of the other consistory that the person is a member in good standing.

8. Pulpit Exchange

As part of our federation we accept each other's ministers. They are allowed to preach and administer the sacraments. If the minister is suspended, or deposed, the churches in the federation must be informed. The Church Order at the same time makes clear that the consistory has the jurisdiction as to who is allowed on the pulpit. A minister from a sister church may not demand to be allowed. But the consistory is allowed to ask ministers who belong to the federation to lead in worship services.

9. Evaluation

1. Do we agree that the Lord calls us to be part of a federation?
2. Do we agree with the conclusions and goals?
3. Do we see the federation as a gift and a calling?
4. Is the fact that we belong to a federation alive in the congregation? How can we stimulate this?
5. Is this congregation fulfilling its task within the federation?
6. Is enough time given to the decisions of major assemblies? Or too much time?
7. Does the delegation to Classis run smoothly?
8. Are there things that need our attention and why? If so, what could we do?

10. Literature

Bound Yet Free, Readings in Church Polity, Edited by J.De Jong, Winnipeg, 1995
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W.W.J.VanOene, With Common Consent, Winnipeg 1990
G.VanRongen & K.Deddens, Decently and in Good Order, Winnipeg 1986