

The Calling and Duty to Maintain the Church Federation

Prof. J. Kamphuis

Apostolic-presbyterial church government

We now wish to pay attention to the Scriptural data concerning the bond of churches. The occasion is an article by the Rev. G. Visee in the weekly *Opbouw* entitled "Did Christ pour out His blood also for the bond of churches?". We have discussed a number of this writer's theses, and have particularly refuted his **main thesis** that there is a contrast, or at least a sharp distinction, between the spiritual unity of the churches of Christ and the 'organisational' unity and community as it is arranged by the Church Order, and that the Saviour would have given His blood for the former unity, but not for the latter.

We will now continue the discussion of this theme, although in fact we no longer have a partner in conversation. For his main thesis implies that he is convinced that Scripture does not reveal anything concerning an 'organized' community of churches, and that this is the end of the matter. As we continue our investigation, then, we may stop being confrontational, although we will not lose sight of the fact that the contrast, as it has been formulated - in fact a variant of the contrast which a man such as Rudolf Sohm made between church and polity, and in fact the application of spiritualism to church polity with respect to the federation - becomes the starting-point, the *a priori*, for the reading of Scripture. If this starting-point is refuted, little needs to be said on the use of Scripture in this respect: by means of a new church-political *a priori*, it has become impossible to read Scripture with an open mind, the

great danger of anyone who has a scholastic love for distinctions!

Rev. G. Visee does have something to say about the obligation to live together as churches, and we will mention that in order to do him justice. In the first place, he posits that while the churches may not be obliged to live together in a church-orderly way, they are **free** to do so; they do not have to, but they are permitted to. Next, he also recognizes a calling which the churches have with respect to each other, which he expresses as follows: “That the churches of Christ in various places are called to help each other, **if such help is requested**, both spiritually and materially, for that is the direction of Scripture.”

We are thankful for this acknowledgement, for is there not a law of Christ which is so fulfilled that we bear each other’s burdens (Galatians 6:2)? Would this ‘law’ not apply equally to the churches? Agreed, then. But only in part! For we cannot accept the clause, “if such help is requested.” Certainly, we are not to be busybodies (1 Peter 4:15). This applies to dealings with each other, and also to dealings among churches. But are we called to help each other only when we are asked to do so? If that were true, the priest and the Levite would have been excused when they passed by the man who had fallen among robbers, had been stripped and beaten, and left **half dead** at the side of the road (Luke 10:30). This man would not have had the strength politely to ask for help! The Samaritan, however, proved to be a neighbour by offering his help to one who needed it. Let no one say, “But that does not apply to the dealings of churches among each other.” Who is entitled to make such hair-splitting distinctions? One might earn a “Scribe of the Pharisees” diploma with such subtleties, but by them the law of Christ is not fulfilled. Or did the brethren in Antioch err or sin when they, “on their own initiative” held a collection for “the brethren who lived in Judea” and sent that money to them by the hand of Barnabas and Paul

Acts 11:28-30)?¹ Of course not, for in so doing, they fulfilled the law of Christ. They knew that they were neighbours to the brethren in Judea, and acted accordingly, just as the 'good Samaritan' of Luke's gospel did. They did not wait for a request from the church there, but knew that they were obliged by the law of love; they knew that God was asking for something, though no human had yet said a word. The need to which they were responding was not even present yet! Not the **request** for help, but the **need** for it, whether present or future, makes us each other's neighbours. This is as obvious as the law of God is clear, and its urgency applies to people among each other, to Christians among each other (Galatians 6:10), and to churches among each other, for God's law does not stop at any door, though we might wish to erect our little walls here or there. Whoever would live according to that law need not be afraid of becoming a busybody. One does need to fear his own flesh, also in this respect, and in this regard we are thankful for the warning given; but one may not, therefore, nullify the law of God.

The harvest of Scripture investigation in the article referred to is extremely meagre, since the writer cannot say anything other than that the New Testament knows nothing of a bond of churches in the sense of obligations and agreements mutually adopted, as fixed in a Church Order, and as may be appropriate, in the regular meetings of delegates in classical and synodical assemblies. He apparently means not only that Scripture does not report on any such actual meetings, but also that it has no instruction with regard to them, and that in this respect Scripture is not a light for our path, other than allowing the conclusion that they are permitted though not required.

Is this an accurate reflection of the facts? A well-founded answer

¹ F.W. Grosheide, *De tweede brief van den apostel Paulus aan de kerk te Korinthe*, (Amsterdam: H.A. Van Bottenburg, 1939), 276

will only be possible if we are willing to listen patiently. What now follows is meant to offer some help (whether requested or not!). The first time that the New Testament speaks of any 'organization' of the church, relevant also to the communal life of churches, is a saying of Christ Himself, spoken after Peter's confession "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God": "I tell you, you are Peter, and on this *petra* I will build my church, and the powers of death will not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18).

Throughout the ages, this saying of Christ has kept minds occupied: in Roman Catholicism it has been seized upon to support papal pretensions. Modern Protestantism, on the other hand, attempts to escape the force of these words by claiming that Christ could never have spoken this way: how could He have spoken about 'my church' already during His earthly life? This saying is considered to have been later ascribed to Him chiefly because of the special position of Peter in the first Christian congregation as first witness of Christ's resurrection.² In reality, this modern Protestant explanation means that the way is opened for the Romanist interpretation: attention is no longer concentrated upon Christ, but upon Peter; exegetically, the Reformation is also relinquished, for the only power against Rome, the Word of the Scriptures, is given up. The rapprochement with Rome is much broader than may sometimes be supposed: the actual relations achieved around and at Vatican II are but its offshoot.

No, here we truly hear the Saviour Himself, who, as the breach with the 'Jews' becomes a fact in their rejection of the Messiah, proclaims His great reformation and opens perspectives to His

² See L. Goppelt, *Die apostolische und nachapostolische Zeit*, 9, 19, in K.D. Schmidt and E. Wolf, *Die Kirche in ihrer Geschichte*.

organization of His church.³ For the word ‘church’ clearly refers to the ‘organized church’. This church receives its **foundation** here. Which foundation? That of the confession of Christ’s apostle. And rather still, of the apostle (and the apostles) in his (their) confession: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (see 1 John 1:1-3, where the apostolic **plural** is explicitly used, also in connection with the testimony concerning the Christ, the Word of Life). Christ will be founding the coming church on the apostles and their apostolic witness (Ephesians 2:20). There is no other foundation than He is Himself, for it has been their ministry - in this **they** are foundational - to lay the only foundation, Jesus Christ and Him crucified and raised (1 Corinthians 3:11, 12). A foundation is laid but once. Hence the uniqueness of the apostolate. Just as the one sacrifice was brought once for all on Golgotha, and we reject every repetition or enactment of it in the mass, so also there is only a one-time foundation, not a continual world-encompassing apostolic office. We are not founded from day to day by universal officebearers, but the church has been founded once for all (see Revelation 21:14). This is the ‘spiritual unity’ of all local churches: we belong together because every church, as the body of Christ, is to remain on that one foundation and thus may appropriate the promise that the powers of death shall not prevail against it. Here indeed is the only office and official testimony, encompassing all churches and the whole church.

After this, it pleased Christ only to grant local officebearers: He sent out the apostles, and their office included the appointment of elders ‘from town to town’ (Titus 1:5, see Acts 14:23).

In the first text, the apostle says clearly that Titus was left on Crete to amend what was ‘defective’ in his work. Paul himself will not have had the opportunity to complete the work of instituting churches,

³ See my *Verkenningen* (Goes: Oosterbaan en le Cointre, 1963), I 80-89

but that could not be left undone, for it truly belonged to his task.⁴ In this way the church was organized: **apostles** and **elders**. The universal and the local; and between the two there is the bond of faith, because the apostolic testimony has been preserved for us in the Scriptures.

In this way the church is organized: it is the ordinance of Christ, our only Master. And we **will** beware lest we deviate from that! (See Belgic Confession, Article 32) There are always difficulties in proposing a single characterization of church government according to the Scriptures, in which all elements are accounted for and which sufficiently distinguishes itself from other systems of church government. But with that proviso we can say: Scriptural church government is **apostolic-presbyterial**.

We gladly establish this starting point clearly. Does this not show how untenable the distinction 'spiritual - organizational' is? For as the Saviour first speaks about His church, He refers to **His** organization, the apostolic one; and when the apostle speaks of the last part, the climax of his work with respect to the church, he deals with its organization, the presbyterial. Furthermore, since all presbyteries (consistories) are bound together by **apostolic** bonds, they cohere, they stick together: not like a heap of sand, but like jelly.

Communally addressed

Because the church is built on the foundation of apostles and prophets, it is one; all local churches are bound together by the Word of God. Since the persons of the apostles have departed, the apostolic word is their bond of unity. This bond is so unique that no office which might

⁴ Here preference should be given to translations which suggest not so much correction, but rather completion.

placed above all churches and which would bind those churches together could replace it in the slightest respect. It is the Word of God's grace in Christ Jesus that is primarily and originally common to the churches.

That Word, so to speak, is addressed to all churches. But it is evident, time and again, from the concrete address of the letters of the New Testament, that this Word binds the churches together and causes them to live together in communion. We are thinking especially of those letters which, in their address, presuppose and accentuate the community of the churches, their solidarity. There is much which is uncertain with respect to those addresses, but even when we take that into account, we see how, under the dominion of the apostolic word, the churches are brought together, as it were.

We take note only of the following. The letter to the Ephesians, in all probability, was not addressed to that one church, but "to a group of congregations, so that it had to circulate among them."⁵ We suspect the same can be said about the letter of James.⁶ We are on firmer ground in this respect with the first letter of Peter, who addresses "the exiles of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia" (James 1:1). It is clear that not one local church, but the churches in a large area are addressed. But they are not named separately, successively, as would happen if a letter would be sent to a number of corporations; no, the one people of the church is addressed, which may be living in distinct local churches, but which truly forms a

⁵ S. Greijdanus, *Korte Verklaring der Heilige Schrift - Epheze, Philippenzen*, Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1925), 19

⁶ F.W. Grosheide, *Korte Verklaring - Jacobus*, (3rd. ed. Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1931), 9: "We may therefore assume that the first readers of our letter were Greek speaking Jewish Christians...who formed...various smaller congregations."

unity, which can also be characterized as such in the address. Something similar can be seen in Article 1 of the Church Order, which speaks of the “Church of Christ”: not referring to a national church, hierarchically or corporately fused together, but denoting the one people of the church. By his address, the apostle manages to reach that whole church people. Their solidarity and community is presupposed both in the address and in the entire letter; they can form a communal address to the apostle because they belong together. This will also have been further effectuated in the circulation of the letter among all the sister churches. The same is true for the letter to the Galatians. Here the “churches of Galatia” are addressed, 1:3. The apostle knows that the gospel and the salvation of God’s people are threatened by false teaching which has made its way into the churches. Just as the gospel belongs communally to the churches, so now they are under the communal threat of letting themselves be turned to another gospel, Galatians 1:6. In this situation, the apostolic word comes to the churches communally for their salvation warning, and instruction. The address, once again, presupposes the community and solidarity of the congregations, and advances it: the ‘spiritual’ unity of the churches brings them into community and obliges them to this, for no congregation in Galatia could say, “The Word of God has come only to us, and it is entirely our free and independent decision whether or not we wish to enter into correspondence with other churches.” Far from it: the apostle and the Spirit of Jesus Christ makes the churches sister churches of each other. “Divine obligation”, Prof Greijdanus would say in his *Scriptural Principles of Church Polity with Regard to Major Assemblies*.⁷

It should also be noted, furthermore, that Peter writes to the

⁷ S. Greijdanus, *Schriftbeginselen van Kerkrecht inzake meerdere vergaderingen* (Enschede: J. Boersma, n.d.). See the pages 13-64 in this volume; see especially 45ff.

believers, who are spread over various distinct local churches: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy **nation**, God’s own people... Once you were no people but now you are God’s **people**” (1 Peter 2:9, 10). There is a clear allusion here to the Old Testament, to Exodus 19:6 and Hosea 1:10, where all of Israel is addressed by the promise of God. Similarly, this promise, as is also shown by its concrete address, is directed to the whole of the church in the New Covenant, which is called, in Paul’s salutation of Galatians 6:16, “the Israel of God”; an entity which may be distinguished from those whom he has addressed in this letter in the first place, as Prof. Greijdanus has clearly demonstrated in his commentary on Galatians. This Israel of God (see James 1: 1 “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion”) which I may see in the local church, is simultaneously evident in the church in its New Testament geographical extent. This extent of the church is part of its completeness, its catholicity, although the latter is not exhausted by it: it also includes the fact that everyone who believes belongs to this catholic church, “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female,” (Galatians 3:28). Thus Paul addresses this catholicity in his letter to the ‘Ephesians’. We noted above that Paul probably speaks to various congregations in this letter; to these he speaks of the “unity of the congregation” as a number of editions indicate above the pericope beginning with 2:11. This unity of the New Testament Israel, to which both ‘circumcision’ and ‘uncircumcision’ may belong, belongs to the unsearchable riches of Christ which Paul has been allowed to preach (3:8); it is the **mystery** which was hidden in the Old Covenant, but has now been revealed (3:9).

That mystery has this content: Christ is our peace, who has made us both - Jew and Gentile - one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility...that He might create in Himself one new man instead of the two, so making peace (2:14, 15). The apostle is addressing Gentile Christians here (see 2:11-13), who therefore probably belonged to a

group of churches, and he gathers up Jew and Gentile (see “our” in verse 14) in this praise of the unity of the church. Of the local church? Certainly, but, in this, at the same time, of the church spoken of in Article 27 of the Confession, “spread and dispersed throughout the entire world” - as also the gospel bears fruit “in the whole world”, Colossians 1:6; however, “joined and united with heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith”. How beautifully the unity and completeness of the church is indicated in the “one new man” of Ephesians 2:15: the church is the new man-kind. But that is more abstract than what is vividly and vitally written: **man**. Prof. Greijdanus pointed this out, and as we noted during his lectures at the time, he explained: “With a man there is a complete unity. Everything coheres. Everything belongs to that unity. Nothing is superfluous. Everything has its place, its service, and its purpose. Everything has a single life, everything has grown from one. That word ‘man’ therefore indicates the highest and fairest unity, more so, even, than our word ‘mankind’. The Lord Christ is the Head; all believers together are His Body, who grow out of Him, Ephesians 4:12, 15, 16.”⁸

Thus this catholic church is also called structure, temple, and dwelling place of God (2:21, 22). This touches the subject which presently occupies our attention. The Apostles’ Creed rightly confesses that the holy catholic church is the **communion** of saints. Paul’s struggle against Judaism concerned that ‘communion’ (*koinonia*), when some attempted to limit the church (locally, but at the same time also the church in its geographical extent) by the act of circumcision. This communion was also his concern with the great matter of the collection for the saints at Jerusalem. These two matters are, in fact, quite closely related. The evil at Corinth may be characterized as a negation of the

⁸ See also his *Korte Verklaring*, 61

communion worked by Christ, by which the distinct local churches are tied together because Christ has a church (in reality, if not institutionally organized around the offices) in the length and breadth of the earth.

Thus we may point to Matthew 16:18 again: "...on this *petra* I will build my church". We do not appreciate the remark that when Christ pronounced this promise He could not yet have thought of the distinction between the locally limited and the globally dispersed church. But there is an element of truth in this: as certainly as Matthew 18:17 ("If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church") refers to the local church, so certainly, it seems to me, Matthew 16:18 refers to the whole church. Certainly, also to the local church (and this is the element of truth referred to above), but not exclusively. It is understandable that now the local church, and then again the whole church is in focus - despite the depth of mystery - for in the former we have to do with the latter. The Belgic Confession is not deficient when in Articles 27-32, which deal with the church, the one seems to flow into the other, with no sharp delineation. This is the language of Scripture! There is a deficiency when one meticulously tries to set up little dividers: here the universal, there the local church - or also, here the invisible, there the visible church. The confession, thankfully, is free of such schematism.

Just as in Matthew 16:18 the perspective and promise of Christ is global, although the contours of the local church are in no way obscured, so also in John 10:16: "And I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed My voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd."

Without citing more examples we may conclude that all those glorious terms (congregation, man, flock, body, structure, temple, Israel), which are indeed applied to the local church, as some also are used for the individual believer (see 1 Corinthians 6:19), are also used for the church of all times and places; for it is the woman clothed with the sun and with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars

upon her head; it is as with the eye of faith I see it being gathered in the course of centuries, that is, as in perspective I see the Shepherd bringing the flock together - it is the multitude of the one hundred forty-four thousand who are with the Lamb on Mount Zion. This does not conflict with the glory of the local church. This, precisely, is its glory. Certainly, great is the mystery, but in faith it may be comprehended. For that local church and church of all times and places have one Lord as Head. He has caused His Word to go out, in the power of Pentecost, "into the whole world". He has given local officebearers, after laying the foundation of apostles and prophets (see Ephesians 4:11, 2:12). He gathers His church in Jerusalem and Antioch, in Rome and Amsterdam, by the ministry of the Word. That 'local church' is not a phenomenon of a 'mystical' Body of Christ lying behind it, which would then be the real church. No, that church in Jerusalem and Amsterdam is the body of Christ. The eye of faith shifts its attention from that church not to what lies behind it, but to Him who stands above it and has bought it. But because of Him and His one all-encompassing church-gathering work, as it occurs in various places, I may know that He is bringing His one church together, in order that it may be one Shepherd with one flock.

Congregation and congregations

We have seen that in the New Testament, various distinct congregations are repeatedly addressed communally; this emphasizes that there is a community and solidarity because of the unity in the faith. This raises the question whether that is perhaps the reason Galatians 1:13 speaks of the "church of God" in the **singular**, as also Acts 9:31 does "the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace". The KJV has the plural "churches", but the RSV correctly chooses for the singular, based on the most authoritative manuscript evidence. This is the opinion, for instance, of Prof. S. Greijdanus, who writes in his

large *Commentary on Galatians*, “The **congregation** here” (that is in Galatians 1:13) “is not a local church, but the congregation of the Lord as a whole. All local congregations or churches form one spiritual unity, the body of Christ.”⁹ He comments with reference to Acts 9:31, “the churches in Palestine formed a certain unity, so that...Acts 9:31 can say, ‘the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace.’”¹⁰

However, in our opinion, the Rev. H. Bouma has conclusively argued, in a series of articles in a Dutch church weekly that to understand the singular used in Acts 13 and Galatians 1, we should take note of the plural used later in the same chapter of Galatians “I was still not known by sight to the churches of Christ in Judea” (verse 22).¹¹ Greijdanus, with his understanding of the earlier singular could not attach any special significance to this. Bouma, however, demonstrates that both Acts 9:31 and Galatians 1:13 refer to the congregation of **Jerusalem**, which had been scattered through the persecution, but which had not yet split into various local churches; in reality, also institutionally, it was one congregation, although through the circumstances it had received many distant members. But in Galatians 1:22 the apostle is speaking of the situation of three years later. By that time, the situation which had come into being by persecution had been so consolidated that various instituted churches, congregations, were now in existence. The apostle reflects this in his choice of words. First “church”, in verse 13, and then “churches”

⁹ S. Greijdanus, *De Brief van den apostel Paulus aan de Gemeenten in Galatië*, (Amsterdam: H.A. Van Bottenburg, 1936), 83

¹⁰ *Schriftbeginselen van Kerkrecht inzake meerdere vergaderingen*, 11. See in this volume, 24

¹¹ H. Bouma, “Schriftgegevens over de saamhorigheid der kerken” [Scriptural Evidence Concerning the Solidarity of the Churches] in the *Gereformeerde Kerkbode voor Groningen-Friesland-Drente* Vol. 12, #26, 28.

in verse 22.

The argument, which we can only touch on here, has important consequences indeed! Bouma points out that there is no justification for deducing, as Dr. H. Berkhof does in his *History of the Church* that we can rightly speak of ‘the Palestinian congregation’. This manner of speaking, which is at home in the climate of the one national church with its various local divisions, has no basis in Scripture.¹²

This does not mean, on the other hand, that we cannot speak of the one church of God “throughout the entire world”, as the confession does. In this respect Scripture gives a clear precedent, (Matthew 16 and many other places). This also does not mean that the Church Order’s manner of speaking in Article 1, where “the Church” refers to the people of the church, is to be rejected; however, it does mean that Scripture does not suggest that the instituted churches in a particular region or country may be referred to as ‘the Palestinian’, or ‘Dutch’, or ‘Southern Congregation’. Although we feel we must differ with Prof. Greijdanus on this point, we support him when he remarks against Dr. H.G. Kleijn, the vehement church-political opponent of the Doleantie, that one cannot deduce the necessity of a bond of churches only from the factor of sin.¹³ Kleijn had written, “In order to prevent individualism of local churches from destroying unity, and to enable the church truly to fulfil her calling, a federation of churches is necessary, the union of local churches into one body is the demand of Protestant principles.”

Greijdanus counters, “the local churches should, in fact, primarily enter into a bond of churches and work together because they

¹² H. Berkhof and O.J. De Jong, *Geschiedenis der Kerk* (7th ed., Nijkerk: G.F. Callenbach, 1967), 19

¹³ *Schriftbeginselen van Kerkrecht inzake meerdere vergaderingen*, 29. See this volume, 46ff.

are a spiritual unity, local manifestations of one and the same body of Christ. A bond of churches is not necessary, in the first place, because of sin and its unhappy results; rather, that which is essentially one must also manifest itself as such in the world, insofar as this is possible. Sin and its effects are only of secondary importance in this regard. The bond of churches ought not only to be sought to ward off danger, to prevent or resist individualism; each church has the calling, just as each individual does, to use its treasures and gifts readily and cheerfully for the benefit and well-being of the other churches and believers.”

Personally, we find this one of the most meaningful passages in this rich treatise of Greijdanus. Just as our thinking about the state and political calling is often weakened because we only speak of it in the context of a world which has fallen into sin (the state’s origin as subsequent to the fall, with an inappropriate appeal to Article 36 of the Belgic Confession), and our perspective remains limited until we understand that although the fall into sin changed the character of the state, in that now external compulsion becomes inherent, it did not create something new, and that the state and political calling are therefore to be positively evaluated - in the same way our thinking about the bond of churches has also often been weakened, because it is too determined by the fact of the fall into sin.¹⁴ But Greijdanus, who never stopped warning against a hierarchical bond of churches, speaks **positively**: the bond of churches should be maintained because of our common service of that God who created us and has granted us redemption in Christ, and who now seeks this service from His **new mankind**. He demands this service of each individually, but also of all. Being called to this one

¹⁴ See A. Zijlstra, *Tenzij. Schriftuurlijke beginselen voor het staatsleven* (Amsterdam: Buijten en Schipperheijn, 1950). Dr. K. Schilder spoke of an “original mandate” (‘oer-mandaat’), and Holwerda rightly emphasized the “liturgy” of the authorities in service of redemption.

service, we may not keep to ourselves. We are not concerned with our own little affair, nor are we concerned with our own salvation later and a way to heaven, but we are concerned with the honour of the Lord and living to His praise. Then we know that we need each other even more because of sin. "Bear one another's burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ", not only for each individually, but also for the churches. This may be read, we should note, in a letter addressed to "the churches"! However, sin is not the all-dominant and all-inclusive factor: rather, this is the Scriptural given of the one service of the Lord, by the one mankind of God in Christ Jesus, His body. For this reason, the Reformed have had a broad view in arguing for a church federation. One constantly reads in church-political treatises, "If it were possible, then we should help each other throughout the entire world." This breadth is according to the example of Him who has called us!

The "if it were possible" (which had greater weight in times past than it does now, in our age of intensified communication!) means reverent acknowledgment of the providence of God, who allots places of residence and means of association according to His good pleasure; however, this should remain respect for providence, and not become an excuse for carelessness or for our desire to live with a 'leave me alone' attitude.

Communion of saints

The bond of churches, we have argued in connection with Prof. Greijdanus' treatise above, is not only necessary to ward off sin, as important as that may be, but also has a positive value, because the churches, as well as believers personally, are called to serve each other in the communion of saints with the treasures and gifts they have received, in order that in and through this mutual service we may together serve the Lord as He demands of us.

If this is our starting point, this includes the rejection of the viewpoint that the ‘organization’ of the bond of churches necessarily means the **replacement** of the bond which was laid and maintained by the apostles in the earliest period of the Christian church. This is the basis on which the episcopal organization is often defended, as it also is for the argument that broader ecclesiastical assemblies are ‘**official**’ gatherings, rather than gatherings of delegates, as in Reformed church polity; the bishop or the broader assembly, then, more or less takes the place of the apostles. But here an element of truth is distorted. Of course the living, personal bond of the apostles was significant to the community of churches in the first years; because they maintained a connection with all of the churches, those churches did so with each other. It is obvious, also, that the churches continued that bond after the death of the apostles. But when one argues that the episcopate (or the broader assembly in its official authority over the individual churches) stands in the place of the apostolate, one has forgotten that the apostolic bond still binds the churches together, for the apostolic word is the only foundation of the life of the churches together; in preserving this word, each local church maintains true communion with all churches of Christ in all places and throughout all time.

One should not look for the replacement of the apostolate by the bond of churches: that leads to the Romanist position. But the churches, which individually and together have communion with the Lord Jesus Christ as Head and with all His treasures and gifts, must feel obliged to use their gifts readily and cheerfully for the benefit and well-being of the other churches, the sister-churches (see question and answer 54, Heidelberg Catechism).

We see this communion of churches take shape in their mutual and common service already at the time of the apostles. When there is a threat of poverty in the congregation at Jerusalem, the congregation at Antioch spontaneously comes to its aid (Acts 11:29), as we have already

seen. Later, when the threat of Judaism has been averted by the harmony among Paul and Barnabas and the other apostles (Acts 15, Galatians 2), the brothers at Jerusalem urge Paul and Barnabas to keep the mutual agreement "to remember the poor", that is, those at Jerusalem (Galatians 2:10). The apostle is able to say, "which very thing I was eager to do." We notice him take charge of this as a matter of honour in 1 Corinthians 16:1: "Now concerning the contribution for the saints [again, at Jerusalem]: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do." He returns to this in the eighth and ninth chapters of the second letter to this congregation. There it becomes clear that he has raised the same matter in the churches of Macedonia, themselves poor churches; from the letter to the Romans (15:26) it is evident that the churches of Achaia were also involved. In this way we can trace, through these epistolary notes, a whole field of apostolic activity with respect to the indigence of the congregation at Jerusalem: the congregations at Corinth, Rome, in Galatia, Macedonia and in Achaia all prove to have been involved. The **motive** which the apostle indicates is this: if the Gentiles have come to share in the Word of grace which came to them from the congregation of Jerusalem, it is only fair that the Christians from the Gentiles be of service to them with their material blessings (Romans 15:27; this is the same line of argument which the apostle uses to heighten the congregation's sense of obligation to provide for the living of the ministers of the gospel, 1 Corinthians 9:11).

Here one clearly sees that the churches are a communion, and therefore have things in common. From Jerusalem, a word spread to the churches of Rome and Corinth, of Galatia, Macedonia and Achaia. Because of that, when the oldest church is impoverished, there is a **communal** responsibility of all those other churches to help that of Jerusalem. If Jerusalem needs help, the bond of churches provides that help (Antioch, Acts 11), and the agreement to provide it is explicitly confirmed (Galatians 2) and observed, even if there is some resistance or

laxity on the part of some of the churches (1 Corinthians 16, 2 Corinthians 8, 9). For the one congregation's need for help concerns all churches, since the Word of Christ binds them into a community of life. In this way common matters arise in the community of churches: out of the Word of faith which is common to all, we accept each other in our concrete needs. No one can say to another, "Go on, see to it yourself that you be warmed...what do I have to do with you?". For the apostle it is more than obvious that also in the community of churches this applies, "he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully" (2 Corinthians 9:6). And let us not neglect the fact that Paul uses the incarnation of the Word and its display of great mercy in order to ensure, in a truly Christian community of churches, the provision for each others needs, "...excel in this gracious work also... For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that by His poverty you might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:7-9). Especially where it concerns the living together of churches, the word '**communion**' (Greek: *koinonia*) reappears time and again, the word that is constitutive for the faith concept of the **communion of saints**. Jerusalem has granted **communion** of spiritual goods, so now the churches of Christians from the Gentiles must be of service with material goods (Romans 15), and the poor churches of Macedonia begged the apostle earnestly, of their own free will, "for the favour of **taking part** in the relief of the saints." In this latter text, the word *koinonia* has sometimes been translated **fellowship**, as in the KJV, which better preserves its flavour. It has been rightly remarked that this word does not just have the neutral meaning of 'taking part in', but has a **religious** sense: communion and commitment to the service of the saints.¹⁵

¹⁵ F. Hauck, in G. Kittel *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* III, (continued...)

When we overview this data, we may conclude that the Reformed have always rightly seen the divine obligation to maintain the bond of churches as founded in the gift of and calling to the communion of saints. In no way does this imply that the distinct local churches are to be absorbed in one great whole, but it does follow Scripture, which sees the communion of saints, as gift and as calling, as also encompassing the community of churches.

We may not have Scripture say more than it actually does. Nor may we let it say less.

Freedom and Responsibility

Since we have seen that the churches of Christ are bound to each other in communal service, and that therefore there is, according to Romans 15 and 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, the communion of saints also among those churches, we now know what the bond of churches is according to the Scriptures. It is that communion which encompasses both 'circumcision' and 'uncircumcision', so that the official bond which exists between those who bring the gospel to the Gentiles and those who go to the circumcised may be sealed with the "right hand of **fellowship**" (Galatians 2:9).

Who could now still dispute that the Saviour has poured out His blood at Golgotha for this communion? That is where He has earned that communion. It is the uniting power of His blood and Spirit which is to keep the churches bound together, whatever the differences may be in descent, history, and environment. The Scriptures do not permit for a moment, considering the communal work of the churches for the poor

¹⁵(...continued)
(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 809

saints at Jerusalem, that we make a contrast between a 'spiritual' and an 'organizational' unity: when the churches start to **organize** their common concerns, that 'spiritual' term appears, that is, 'communion' (Greek: *koinonia*, Romans 15:26, 2 Corinthians 8:4)! That concrete purpose, that collection for Jerusalem, is denoted by this core word. No one may say, "Certainly, we have a 'spiritual unity' with the churches which surround us, in Achaia and Macedonia, and so on, but we are not going to have any part in those organizational niceties of Paul, for is not our mutual shibboleth the fact that we are free? Is that not the last word, the highest truth?" Any who would speak thus is to take note, according to the apostle, of the incarnation of the Word: "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor..." Therefore, Christians and Christian churches, is there not a **calling** to a communal service?

Indeed, that organization of the collection for Jerusalem is highly significant to our purpose! Especially because it teaches us how the apostle respects the **freedom** of the churches, but at the same time accents their **responsibility**; those two aspects are so inextricably related that if one does not take both into account, one can soon come to the conclusion that the apostle, when he enters the terrain of the bond of churches, becomes mired in inconsistencies. In his first letter to the Corinthians, for instance, he emphatically says that he has "directed the churches of Galatia" (16:1); and he similarly addresses the congregation of Corinth as with a command, "so you also are to do." However, in his second letter to the same congregation he points out quite emphatically that in this matter he says "this not as a command... and in this matter I give my advice..." (8:8, 10). This apparent contradiction cannot be as easily explained, in my opinion, as Prof. Grosheide does in his large commentary on 2 Corinthians, that we should explain the 'command' of 1 Corinthians 16:1 according to the "not as a command" of 2

Corinthians 8:8.¹⁶ In general, indeed, it is a good rule to explain the obscure according to the less obscure; however, one could hardly claim that 1 Corinthians 16:1 is obscure. The difficulty lies not in its obscurity as such, but in the apparent contradiction between this text and 2 Corinthians 8:8: both are clear enough in what they say, but the question is, how are they to be harmonized? For this reason, it is remarkable that Grosheide, in his shorter commentary on 2 Corinthians, which was published almost simultaneously with the larger commentary, does mention the apparent obligation which Paul had taken upon himself, according to Galatians 2:10, and rightly remarks: “a duty for the apostle is not necessarily one for the congregation”, but then passes over the difficulty of the relationship between 1 Corinthians 16:1 and 2 Corinthians 8:8 and 10.¹⁷ Both pronouncements must, therefore, guide us in our thinking about the churches’ communal rendering of service. The apostle has a direct pronouncement of the Lord about the concrete matter of the collection: here in 2 Corinthians 8:8 he uses the same formulation as in 1 Corinthians 7:6, where he makes that quite explicit. He knows that even as apostle he has no higher authority over the churches by which he may command its life and community. How emphatically the freedom and ‘independence’ of the local churches are maintained here! For this reason, the apostle boasts of the ‘free will’ of churches of Macedonia (1 Corinthians 8:4). On the other hand, this does not negate the fact that not only the apostle has an obligation concerning the collection - which he has taken upon himself, but also the churches of Rome and Corinth, as well as all those other churches in Macedonia,

¹⁶ F.W. Grosheide, *De tweede brief van de apostel Paulus aan de Kerk te Korinthe*, 389

¹⁷ *Paulus tweede brief aan de Kerk te Korinthe*, (Korte Verklaring, 2nd. ed., Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1955), 116

Achaia, and Galatia, are divinely obliged to exercise the communion of saints. Paul makes this quite explicit in Romans 15:27. No one, not even an apostle, can organize the community and communal service of the churches by regulation; but no one, not even the freedom-loving congregation of Corinth, can liberate himself from the “divine obligation”, as Prof. Greijdanus put it, to render communal service. This “divine obligation” - did not Christ offer His blood for the bond of churches? - is the basis for 1 Corinthians 16:1 “As I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do.”¹⁸ How emphatically responsibility is maintained! If this responsibility is understood, as in Macedonia, the apostle only gives directions, not to rob them of their Christian freedom, but to ensure the rendering of communal service. However, if anyone should say that the apostle is acting hierarchically, the unity of 1 Corinthians 16:1 and 2 Corinthians 8:8 and 10 answers, “You, congregation, are free, no one can compel you to community and cooperation, no one can compel you to participate in the bond of churches. Even an apostle cannot, and does not wish to.” Only, Christian freedom is freedom in responsibility, and also the freedom with respect to each other may not be misused “as an opportunity for the flesh.” There is a great chasm between Christian freedom and fleshly licentiousness. Freedom is to be respected, and **therefore** it should not

¹⁸ The verbs used in 1 Corinthians 16:1 and 2 Corinthians 8: 8 and 10 are identical; only the preposition which has become part of the verb differs. The distinction does not seem to us to be significant. Both verbs mean ‘to command,’ ‘to direct’. The sense of ‘direction’ is denoted by both related nouns. Perhaps the verb used in 2 Corinthians 8 suggests that various arrangements were made in the congregations of Galatia; this would be appropriate to the immediate context, which concerns practical ordering. But even then there is a clear imperative addressed to the congregation at Corinth. The coincidence of voluntarism and “divine obligation” is also very clear in Romans 15:27: “they were pleased to do it...(but) they ought also to be of service to them...”

be corrupted into (human) license.

Thus the congregations experienced their freedom in responsibility, when they began to organize the collection for Jerusalem, indeed, appointing a deputy, as is evident from 2 Corinthians 8:19. Besides Titus, who was the apostle's representative, there was a brother appointed by the churches, who, together with yet another (see verse 22), is emphatically called "messenger of the churches" (verse 23). We do not know in exact details how the appointment of this delegation took place. One might suppose there was an assembly of the churches, or of delegates from the churches in which this matter was discussed and decided. One might also think of a written correspondence about the matter, or a consultation by means of messengers. But that is of secondary importance. The important thing is that we have evidence here that such a deputation functioned expressly within the bond of churches in the time of the New Testament. And it receives quite some emphasis: the apostle himself takes action and sends his representative. Would he not have been able to arrange the whole affair himself? No, he too, indeed, especially he respects the freedom of the churches and their right to speak for themselves. In this communal effort, we see them functioning next to the apostle, and with each other. Especially in the Christian exercise of the communion of saints between the various local churches, the freedom of the churches and the love of Christ which knits them together is manifested. That is also why these messengers of the churches are called "the glory of Christ" (verse 23). When a hierarchy of deputies or delegates threatens the freedom of the local churches, it is wise to keep in mind that those who send are greater than those who are sent; it may even be good to use the pointed formulation that "delegates to a synod are servants of servants." However, in the face of mockery of the work of delegates to a general synod by libertines, Rev. J. van Bruggen, the chairman of the General Synod held at Assen in 1961 did well to comfort those delegates and strengthen them to their

service by addressing them as “the glory of Christ.”

Prof. Greijdanus has pointed out that the uncertainty about the explanation of various decisive elements of Acts 15, where the apostolic conference is described, should make us careful.¹⁹ We agree that in church-political treatises too much weight - and often incorrectly - is given to Acts 15; however, this does not mean that Scripture is silent about the community of churches. 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 and the texts from Acts, Galatians, 1 Corinthians and Romans which are associated with them give us penetrating instruction.

By regional jurisdiction

We have seen that in the New Testament, the bond of churches is a matter of the **communion of saints**. Also with respect to its actual practice, especially the apostle Paul characterizes it with that term. This explains why the voluntary aspect of the exercise of this bond is so strongly accented, but why also, and no less, the “divine obligation” of this exercise is emphasized. The one may never be separated or seen in isolation from the other. Otherwise the ship of ecclesiastical community will be stranded either on the reef of hierarchy or on that of independentism. One should not stake everything on one text - as, for instance, in the triumphant remark: “Nowhere does the Scripture speak of broader assemblies!” - but allow oneself to be led by the continuing instruction of the Holy Spirit; if we do not do that, we are in danger of letting our self-conceit cause the exercise of the communion of saints to become sterile.

Once we have discovered this background, all sorts of items in

¹⁹ In his *Schriftbeginselen van Kerkrecht inzake meerdere vergaderingen*, 30ff. See this volume, 48ff.

the New Testament begin to speak a penetrating language. We have seen how a distinct groups of churches exercised contact with each other for the collection in aid of the poor at Jerusalem. The references have been noted above. All the churches come together in the promotion of the communal task of all, but in this cooperation there is a very natural articulation: within the whole, the churches of Macedonia find each other, as do the churches of Achaia; they consult and agree upon a course of action which they then carry out. This means: from out of the Word and the common confession of the Name of Jesus the churches discover what has been entrusted to them communally, and they find each other in the larger, but also the smaller unity. They find each other in a **general** but also in a **particular** bond. As such, then, they are also praised and accepted by the apostle. If it is said that the Scriptures do not know classical and synodical assemblies such as those prescribed in our Church Order, we have no difficulty in acknowledging that obvious truth. But it should then first be acknowledged that the principle of the Church Order, namely that there are matters which belong to the churches of the broader assembly in common (see Article 30, Church Order), is fully Scriptural and derives from the New Testament. The Convention of Wesel was quite correct when it drew this bottom line: "For it does not accord either with the authority of Scripture or with the equity of the laws that those things which concern all equally should be determined by one or another church alone, without consultation with the other churches whom these equally concern." The importance of the Convention of Wesel has always rightly been seen in the fact that here, in the year 1568, the rules of conduct for the community of churches were drawn up! It should not surprise us, moreover, that during the course of the broad attack upon the solidarity of the churches, there was

also an attack upon the historicity of this convention.²⁰

In the second place it should be acknowledged that the New Testament, under the leadership of the apostles, does not depict the beginning of a hierarchically ordered community in which one church dominates another, or one officebearer another; but rather a true community which functions by regional jurisdiction, so to speak: Macedonia, Achaia, Galatia. The churches do not arbitrarily seek out the churches with which they will take on this project or that one; rather, they accept all of each other for Jesus' sake. Their own subjective preference does not dominate their community to determine its nature and extent, but they submit, in the realization of their solidarity, to the gracious choice of Christ, who has brought them into this solidarity.

We have already pointed out that we are not unqualified admirers of what the General Synod of Kampen 1951 decided concerning mission, but its decision that "if churches wish to come together for a combined dispatch, they will do so taking into account the division into regional jurisdictions accepted by the bond of churches" is clearly in line with Holy Scripture and the classical Reformed church polity. Certainly, it is easier to let one's own preferences determine the way churches live together. This enables one to avoid difficulties by avoiding one another

²⁰ The Convention of Wesel is of relatively great importance to Dutch church history and to Reformed church polity; it precedes the synods of the sixteenth century, beginning with that of Emden 1571. Although it has no formal church-political authority (it was not a synod in the church-political sense of the word), it was significant because guidelines were drawn up for ecclesiastical conduct in a time when tens of thousands of Reformed people were living in exile; rules which, by their publication in the sixteenth century and subsequently, have remained of significance for anyone who wants to know the sources of national Reformed church polity. As far as I know, the most recent publication was last year, the second printing of the Church Manual originally published by Rev. G.H. Kersten, see G. H. Kersten *Kerkelijk Handboekje*, (3rd ed., Utrecht: "De Banier", 1980).

and seeking out only those who are congenial to oneself. But in the long term, this is deadly. For in avoiding one another, we also avoid the command to practice Christian self-denial, which always proves to have its greatest relevance in relations with the brothers, in mutual accommodation in order to render service. If this is true within a local church, it is equally true in the community of churches. Surely we know that we are not automatically immune to death: only in the obedience of faith and of love may we lay hold of the promise of God's blessing.

Promises are binding

Summarizing what we have discovered up to this point of the New Testament's instruction on the bond of churches, we see, in the first place, that Scripture most certainly knows and presupposes a community and cooperation of the local churches. In the second place, we see that this community and cooperation is characterized by the **communion of the Word**, which urges the practice of the bond of churches upon them as a divine obligation, although from a human perspective it is voluntary. In the third place, the New Testament clearly teaches that this communion has been obtained through Christ's ransom, so that its exercise is a matter of the obedience of faith working in love. Furthermore, according to the New Testament, the exercise of this communion occurs in an entirely natural articulation: the cooperation takes place in larger and smaller contexts. In other words, ecclesiastical cooperation makes use of the 'natural' distinctions of regions, provinces, and so on. These cooperative groupings also practice intensive written or personal contact in relation to particular matters, sometimes through deputies; which the apostle Paul honours by calling such ecclesiastical deputies "the glory of Christ".

In short, the federative community of the Reformed Churches proves, up to this point, to be entirely consistent with the instruction of

Scripture. The newer church polity, on the other hand, which we are confronting in this essay, and which is based on the principle that Scripture knows nothing of a bond of churches, and that this is therefore a matter of free choice, ignores clear Scriptural evidence.

Until now we have chiefly restricted ourselves, after a few comments about the address of various New Testament books, to the Scriptural data concerning the collection for the poor at Jerusalem (Romans 15, 1 Corinthians 16, 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, and so on). To conclude, we will make one further remark. We have seen that as an urgent motive for cooperation in what was of common concern in the concrete situation of the first Christian congregations, the apostle points to the obligation implied by the communion of saints, and to the example of Christ; however, he does not mention the agreement reached concerning the collection at the apostolic conference in Jerusalem (Acts 15, Galatians 2), nor the promise which he himself made there. We can read of that promise in Galatians 2. After the apostle has said that James, Cephas, and John, "who were reputed to be pillars" had given to him and to Barnabas "the right hand of **fellowship**" and within that fellowship or communion had accepted the division of responsibilities - "that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised" - he informs his readers, "only they would have us remember the poor, which very thing I was eager to do."

We have already seen that it is quite logical for the apostle not to hold out this promise as a motive for the cooperation of the churches: as has been remarked, a promise of the apostle is not a promise of the churches. Nowhere is there any evidence of apostolic 'domination' over the congregations. He did not misuse his office to this end. On the contrary, he stimulated the bond of churches in order that each church should act freely and upon its own responsibility.

However, there is one other matter here which is significant as we speak of the bond of churches. The apostle keeps his promises, he

fulfils the commitments which he has made, and he wants this to be known. To him, this whole matter of the collection, as wearisome as its settlement is, is a matter of honour, for he has given his word concerning it. He knows that this binds him in the community of congregations and brethren. In his large commentary on the letter to the Galatians, Prof. Greijdanus writes concerning this text: "This is not a condition which James, Peter, and John insisted upon prior to their recognition of Paul's apostleship and gospel service. It was not an obligation which they imposed upon him and Barnabas. It was a mutual commitment, which these three urged upon Paul and Barnabas, and which the two promised to fulfil."²¹

As we can see, the arrangement most definitely includes a commitment, a promise. Of this Paul says openly (and anyone could verify it) "which very thing I was eager to do." This is very straight forward matter, which all of the Scriptures reinforce as a matter of fact: one's word, once given, is to be worth a great deal, one's promises are binding. All fidelity in a community, also the church, stands or falls with it. But it is necessary to pay special attention to this here as well. For it seems, sometimes, that the voluntary nature of the church federation implies that promises need not be kept. Is not our community and cooperation purely voluntary, the reasoning goes, and does this not mean that we retain the freedom, if it should seem better to us, to put previously made commitments behind us? By way of contrast, let us note the example of the apostle, who certainly knew of the difficulties which can trouble the life of brothers together, but who despite this could thus openly testify of his own ecclesiastical fidelity.

Indeed, reasoning such as that just noted is absolutely perverse.

²¹ *De brief van den apostel Paulus aan de Gemeenten in Galatië*, (Amsterdam: H.A. Van Bottenburg, 1936), 155

It is true that church federation comes about voluntarily, although from God's side there is the obligation to solidarity with the sister churches. Once the bond has come into being, however, that does not mean the loss of freedom in Christ, for that is the very purpose of the federation. That is also why the Reformed church order includes the promise not to give any ecclesiastical ruling or decision such honour as would violate the authority of God's Word. From the moment of federation there are actual obligations - accepted voluntarily, but indeed therefore binding: no one has compelled the churches to live together and no one has compelled them to make the promises. They themselves made these promises, and they themselves are to keep them. All should be "eager to do" that, as Galatians 2:10 has it.

For this reason, it was perfectly legitimate that the churches, when the Union of 1892 between the Christian Reformed Church (*Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk*) and the Nether-Dutch Reformed Churches (*Nederduitsche Gereformeerde Kerken*) occurred, agreed to review the existing synodical provisions. There were commitments which the congregations of the first body had made over the course of years; the churches of the latter group, which had voluntarily federated in 1886, had similar commitments. Those commitments could not simply be declared mutually binding at the Union. The Synod of 1892, therefore, made a united start in order that maintaining these obligations should not degenerate into a farce.

It is important that the churches exercise great caution in their decision-making, so that commitments can be honestly kept. On the other hand, the churches also do well to insist that promises once made be upheld. This is our obligation. Our name as Christians depends on it. The general guidelines for our life together as churches are given in the Church Order. Interestingly, the final stipulation includes a word which implies the same as the word 'eager' in Galatians 2:10. This article (Article 76 Church Order) reads:

“These articles, which regard the lawful order of the Church, have been adopted with common accord. If the interest of the Churches demand such, they may and ought to be changed, augmented, or diminished. However, no consistory, classis, or regional synod shall be permitted to do so, but they shall **endeavour diligently to observe** the articles of this Church Order as long as they have not been changed by a general synod.”

“**Endeavour diligently to observe**”! This means, on the one hand, that the Church Order does not intend to give **standing orders**, compliance to which is unconditionally required under threat of expulsion. There may be, for instance, situations in which a congregation is not **able** to send delegates to a classical assembly. The church has diligently endeavoured to maintain the commitment made, but circumstances beyond its control have made it impossible. We would not hold such a church in contempt. On the other hand, there should truly be diligence; one should truly **endeavour** to keep the agreements which have been made in the midst of the sister churches. We too should be able to take Paul’s words on our lips.

Above all, this means that it is not sufficient only formally to abide by whatever we have agreed together, so that a church just barely escapes censure. No, the knife cuts both ways: our life together as churches is not regimented, but this also means that we will live together in love, and eagerly fulfil our obligations, even by way of self-denial. Therefore, the continual undermining of the community of churches, as regulated in the church order, either by ridiculing any form of church organization or by minimizing the exercise of this community, is disastrous. It causes us to consider our promises of little weight, to be arbitrary in keeping our word, and makes living together in love impossible - and that in the church, the place of fidelity and truth! Thus it becomes a fundamental breach of promise, in the wake of which all

kinds of 'incidental' liberties and anomalies follow. It neutralizes the real attractive power of the church, which should be evident in the maintenance of the inviolate truth that it lives out of the inviolable word of grace: "For all the promises of God find their Yes in Christ. That is why we utter the Amen through Him." With this word concerning the immutability of God's Word the same apostle Paul was able to counter the accusation of thoughtlessness and vacillation which had been brought against him (see 2 Corinthians 1:17ff). **In doing so, he left us an example.**

Acts 15: Jerusalem preserved for the bond of Christian churches

In Acts 15 a meeting held at Jerusalem is described, at which the gospel preaching of Paul and Barnabas was discussed, as well the fact that circumcision was not maintained in the congregations gathered from the Gentiles. Countless times this assembly has served as example, as prototype of our major assemblies. Prof. Grosheide's heading above Acts 15:1-35 in his shorter commentary is a case in point.²² The 'divine right' of major assemblies has often been based upon this chapter without further reflection.

In the meantime, there has been no lack of opposition to this reading. And that opposition has only increased - fortunately, in our opinion - in this century. Not only did Prof. Greijdanus urge caution, because Acts 15 contains so many elements of uncertainty, if one should try to characterize this assembly as a 'synod'; but there was also exegetical opposition from another side.²³ We are thinking of Prof.

²² The heading is *The First Synod*. See his *De Handelingen der Apostelen in Korte Verklaring*, (2nd. ed., Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1950), 5

²³ See his *Schriftbeginselen van Kerkrecht inzake meerdere vergaderingen*, (continued...)

Brouwer's *First Century Church Organization and Us*. We are also thinking, especially, of Dr. D. Jacobs' thesis *The Relation between the Local and the Universal Church in the First Three Centuries*.²⁴ And this is only in the area of the Dutch language. Jacobs draws special attention to verse 22: "Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, **with the whole church**, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas." He rightly says, "It will have to be admitted that such a meeting is quite different from a present day synod," and he concludes, "Here we have to do with a decision **only** of the congregation at Jerusalem with the apostles and the elders."²⁵

Leaving all sorts of matters aside, such as the course of the meeting(s), according to Acts 15, we wish to subscribe to this conclusion of Jacobs, and to use it as the starting point of our own discussion. For it is true that Acts 15 will lead to many riddles if one chooses to see the assembly described here as a 'synod', and to make the chapter serve Reformed church polity in this way. On the other hand, however, if this idea is relinquished, one could freely ask, What does Acts 15 teach us? How is it relevant also for church polity?

We believe that the answer is simple. Having seen, in the preceding paragraphs that the apostle Paul and the congregations which submitted to his instruction wanted to maintain the **communion** with the church at Jerusalem, from which the Word went out into the world, we now see, in Acts 15 (as also in Galatians 2, where Paul discusses the

²³(...continued)

36ff. See this volume, 48ff.

²⁴ A.M. Brouwer, *De kerkorganisatie der eerste eeuw en wij*, (Baarn: Bosch & Keuning, n.d.). See also D. Jacobs, *De verhouding tusschen de Plaatselijke en de Algemeene Kerk in de eerste drie eeuwen*, Leiden, 1927.

²⁵ Jacobs, 51, 52

same assembly), that the congregation at Jerusalem, from its side, wanted to maintain the **communion** of faith with the 'Gentile' congregations. There were those who said, We can only exercise communion with those churches which maintain circumcision "according to the custom of Moses". These were Paul's great opponents (see Acts 15:1 and the letter to the Galatians). They too had a 'bond of churches' in mind; however, this bond would not be one based entirely upon the reconciling blood of Christ, but one which obtained its cohesiveness through the submission of Gentile congregations to the custom still in vogue among the brothers at Jerusalem, the custom of circumcision.

It is not surprising that circumcision was still customary there. The congregation was composed entirely of people from the congregation of the old covenant. And revolutionary innovation has never been the style of God's church-gathering work. Therefore, also after Pentecost and the transition in principle from the old to the new, much of the old remained. However, when circumcision became a **demand** also for former Gentiles (see Galatians 2:5), this was an attack upon the gospel of justification through faith only because of the merits of Christ. Then the apostle knew that he could remain faithful to the gospel only by an unrelenting "No!" (Acts 15:2). That "No!" sounds in the entire instruction of the apostle: Romans, Galatians, Philippians, Ephesians, and Colossians - all those apostolic letters are full of this evangelical opposition. In this issue Paul is concerned about **salvation**, no more and no less. And therefore he is also concerned quite concretely about the **bond of churches**. For Christ's work was not to grant the Gentile the possibility of becoming a Jew, nor was it to offer a Gentile congregation the opportunity to affiliate with the Jewish congregation through circumcision, but by His blood He has made these two (Jew and Gentile, Jewish congregation and Gentile congregation) one; He has bound them together as one body (Ephesians 1). Now, therefore, not the earthly Jerusalem, where circumcision is still practiced, is "the mother of us all"

to whom we must all accommodate ourselves; but there is a Jerusalem from above, coming by way of the preaching of the free gospel, through which the churches of Christ far and wide are created and called and bound together in the bond of unity of faith. Paul's opponents said, Jerusalem **remains** the metropolis also in the Christian dispensation. This, then, was **also** a church-political conflict, concerning the question whether one church should rule over another. In receiving the grace not to yield to the Judaist temptation, Jerusalem was also preserved from the temptation to lord it over the other churches. When Paul, with all due respect to the brothers in Jerusalem (Galatians 2: 9), said, "Here we may not yield even a handbreadth," he also kept open, by the guidance of the Spirit, the way of the free bond of the churches: no church shall in any way lord it over other churches (Church Order, Article 74). This is the evangelical rule of thumb for re-formed church government, for it is the first rule of evangelical church government according to the Scriptures.

For it is clear what the temptation was. Jerusalem was the place from which the Word had gone forth. This determined a certain bond between those many churches to whom that Word had come and the one from which it had come. A connection, as Paul explicitly assures his readers in Romans 15, by which the congregations from the Gentiles should know that they are in debt to the first congregation gathered in Jerusalem. In addition, Jerusalem had the apostles, who were called to be witnesses of Jesus Christ, and James, the brother of the Lord. Besides, there was a history of centuries behind circumcision, the history of the covenant. The earthly temple-city, also, had been the centre of redemptive history until now, serving as anchor to the bond of the tribes of Israel. Would this Jerusalem now be put at the same level as all those other churches?

Basically, the same kind of question could be asked concerning Mary, the mother of the Lord. Was her position in redemptive history not exceptional? Would there not remain a **separate** place for her in the

congregation? Yes, answered Rome. No, says Holy Scripture, which in Acts 1 portrays Mary as being a normal member of the congregation under the leadership of the apostolic office. This was the greatest grace she received, that she, although a miserable sinner, was saved by the blood of her Saviour, just as all who believe. She is part of the one congregation covered by the ransoming blood of the blessed Beloved.

Similarly, the burning question of that first time was: would there be one church in the community of churches with the others subordinate to it, or would all churches be at an equal level, standing before the same, only Head? The Judaizers chose for the first option. Rome did the same. But the Reformation followed the evangelical line, which breaks through all opposition in Acts 15. Before the Reformation ever knew this, Jerusalem discovered it, and had been brought to this knowledge. Jerusalem had a very modest place: one church among the others. Only the gospel has the power to bring the churches into a federation and to keep them there. But despite the modesty of that place, it was at the same time a glorious one: **the place of salvation.**

All this means that Acts 15 truly concerns matters of the bond of churches, and so of church federation. It means that the 'spiritual' unity of the believers and of the congregations, and their 'federative' unity are not contradictions, but are extensions of one another. One of Paul's concerns in his struggle against the Judaizers was to ensure that the community of the churches remain pure, and thus be preserved to function in purity. That is why after the assembly of Acts 15, where Jerusalem maintained the spiritual bond of churches, he made every effort **honestly** to keep the promises and commitments into which he entered, in order that no one should be able to say, "Paul rejected the Judaistic bond of churches so that he would be free of all ties, and to be able to go his own way." No, in his polemic with Rev. K. Doornbos, Prof. K. Schilder was right: when Paul wrote against the counterfeit bond of churches, he did so for the sake of the true bond of churches,

that for which Christ gave His blood at Golgotha. Thus the church at Jerusalem was preserved for that bond; thus it also was able to share in the blessings of that bond for its poor members. Now that we mention the name of Prof. K. Schilder, permit us also the comment that the matters touched on here indicate the unity that there was between his church-political struggle of the forties and that of the fifties. A unity which is also evident from his appeal to Galatians 2 (the refusal to have Timothy circumcised) in the well-known letter of December 13, 1943, in order that the bond of churches not be corrupted by hierarchy; and his insistence over against Rev. Doornbos that the apostle does not only (negatively) resist the corrupted bond, but also (positively) protects and preserves the evangelical bond.

Anyone who neglects or -- even stronger -- ridicules the bond of churches, despises the ordinance of Christ, and the peace which is based on it. For **peace**, the peace of Christ, is the watchword of the Christian bond of churches.

Solidarity means belonging together²⁶

We have seen that in the first, apostolic period of church history, the bond of churches was sought and maintained on the foundation of the gospel of Christ and His reconciling blood. We have seen how a heresy such as Judaism attempted to counterfeit the bond of churches - each false teaching has its effect in church polity and the church-political

²⁶ Translator's note: The word here translated as **solidarity** is *saamhorigheid* in the Dutch text. Literally this means 'belonging-together-ness', the closest equivalent of which in English is **solidarity**. This becomes important to what follows, especially because Kamphuis introduces a play on words on '*behoren*': taking the latter part of this verb, '*horen*' (to hear, listen, obey) and developing a thought based on this meaning, which is reflected also in the derivative '*gehoorzaam*': (obedient).

practice of living in communion with sister churches. We have seen how, already at this early stage, a congregation (that of Corinth) tried to escape the divine obligation to exercise the bond of churches; but also, driven by the love of Christ, many churches did exercise that communion in word and deed.

This community of churches within the context of the New Testament has been characterized by Rev. H. Bouma as togetherness or solidarity.²⁷ Indeed, the New Testament speaks powerfully about this: the congregations of Jesus Christ **belong together**, not because they are divisions of one greater organisational whole, or because the local congregation is a branch of the universal church as an institutional-official entity; but because they have been joined by the ransoming blood, the Word of grace, and the Spirit of Jesus Christ. The “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” of Ephesians 4:5 is not a charter or urgent reason for modernistic ecumenism, but an appeal for Christian church bonds; for it impresses upon the diverse local churches: “be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call.” (Ephesians 4:3, 4). It impresses upon the churches their belonging together, their solidarity - both as gift and as task.

Now the verb ‘to belong’ (*horen*) which is part of the noun ‘solidarity’ (*saamhorigheid*) means ‘belonging’. But this belonging together, this solidarity, is to be evidenced by the churches’ desire to hear (*horen*) and to be obedient (*gehoorzaam*) together, just as it is based on that. Each congregation individually must be willing to hear the comfort and admonition of the gospel, but because we are altogether called by one Word, hearing together must be very important to us if the

²⁷ Dutch: *saamhorigheid*

solidarity is not to become a farce or an empty show. This is why we notice the apostle Paul paying such special attention to the necessity of living together when he addresses the church at Corinth, which was so inclined to forget the solidarity in a false sense of freedom; making it an urgent motive for the church there to experience its freedom in true communion with the sister churches.

When it concerns following the apostolic word, also as it comes to the congregation in the apostle's way of life, he insists: Corinth is not alone obliged to be obedient, but shares it with the whole row of churches: "I urge you," so we hear him say already at the beginning of 1 Corinthians, "be imitators of me. Therefore I sent to you Timothy...to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church, (4:16, 17)." Speaking about Christian marriage life a few chapters later, Paul informs the Corinthians that also in this respect they are not in an exceptional position, as if he would be placing particularly heavy burdens upon them: "This is my rule in all the churches," 7:17. In bringing them the Word of God, then, Paul guards against the notion that having this Word would give them an argument for standing alone. This would be as great a misuse of the Word as some there had made of the *charismata* (1 Corinthians 14). No, for the Word of God comes to the churches in their solidarity, and it seeks to effect the solidarity of obedience; this is the will of the God of that Word. Note the sharp criticism of 14:36: "What! Did the Word of God originate with you, or are you the only ones it has reached?" In response to Corinth's unwillingness to exercise the bond of churches, the solidarity, the apostle says two things: "You, Corinth, are not the mother-church, are you? You, Corinth, are not the church alone, are you?" The second of these attitudes actually constitutes a denial of solidarity. Later it will become known as independentism. Independentism has often spoken out sharply against hierarchy and hierarchical domination. Those who have but one slogan, that of the autonomy of the local congregation, will only be able

to perceive one threat: that of hierarchy, which would be exercised externally. But, it should be noted, Paul asks another question prior to the second, showing that the denial and enervation of solidarity actually imports hierarchy in *optima forma*. For is not it so that assuming the status of mother-church means a complete surrender to the ideology of hierarchy? It means adopting an earthly centre, even if this is restricted to one's own location; it is ecclesiastical egocentrism. The essence of hierarchy is this, that it is claimed, whether in a larger or smaller context, that the church has its centre here on earth. This is exactly what anyone does who insists, "Here is the Word of God. We have it, locally, and this is sufficient. No more needs to be said." Indeed, this sounds staunchly Scriptural, staunchly Reformed; however, it is the enervation of the Word of God, which is **ecumenical** in its approach, and which presents the only ecumenical Bishop of the church, Jesus Christ. He demands that He be honoured as He thus comes to His church. He desires to be honoured in His centrality.

For this reason the solidarity of the churches is emphatically part of the apostolic argument and motivation, as this same context of 1 Corinthians 14 demonstrates. Dealing with the place of the woman in the congregation, he first addresses his readers by his apostolic authority, and next by the authority of the law, the written Word (verse 34 conclusion), but at the same time, he points to the example of the other congregations, "**As in all the churches of the saints**, the women should keep silence in the churches..." (verse 34, opening). This is not conformism, not a collective ethics - for the solidarity consists in listening to the explicit commandment, the written law, and the apostolic admonition together; and this must truly be together!

The same thing becomes very obvious in the other chapter (1 Corinthians 11) in which the apostle speaks of the place and behaviour of women. Again he concludes his discussion with an appeal to solidarity: "If anyone is disposed to be contentious, we recognize no

other practice, nor do the churches of God, (verse 16).” Whatever one’s explanation of this saying (and there is some discussion about its relation to the preceding pericope), it is clear that Paul confronts the congregation at Corinth with his own example (“...we recognize no other practice”), and with the example of the sister churches (“nor do the churches of God.”) This takes us back to the text cited above, 1 Corinthians 4:16, 17; but now Paul explicitly sets the sister churches as an example for Corinth. While in chapter 4 he said that they should be imitators of him, now he says that the Corinthians should follow the example of Paul and the other churches.

If the apostle already at this time gives the sister churches a place in his instruction and admonition, just as he has done with respect to the ecclesiastical delegation by the congregations (2 Corinthians 8:23), despite his own very unique place in the midst of the congregations, everyone will surely understand that in doing so he intends those congregations to depend on each other also in the time to come. The administration of his office encompassed all congregations. In this administration he bound the churches together and set them as examples for each other. When the one who bears this office is no longer there, the lesson remains: compare yourselves to each other, listen to the Word, but do so together, in order that your hearing may remain acute and not be dulled by stubbornness and egocentric self-absorption. This, then, is also the function of the Reformed bond of churches: it serves the obedience to the truth. In it the **communion** of the churches is practiced which flourishes in the knowledge that we **hear** together because we **belong** together. Just as the members of the local congregations depend upon each other with respect to their hearing, so also the churches in their mutual relationships.

What is primarily and originally common to the churches? **The Word which called them.** This will again and again be the root of our communal life, if only that Word is permitted to overpower us.

'To the seven churches'

We will now conclude our consideration of the New Testament's instruction on the bond of churches, particularly with regard to the question whether or not Christ poured out His blood for this bond of churches. More could be said than what we have brought forward, but we think that one thing has become clear: Prof. K. Schilder was not overstating the case when he connected the bond of churches with Christ's ransoming blood. The whole New Testament, all of church history as it is recorded there shows us that one of the major issues of that first period was maintaining a pure practice of the bond of churches: based on the only legitimate foundation, the reconciling merits of Christ Jesus. Negating this obvious truth will debilitate us in the struggle against any form of hierarchy. We have indeed seen the congregations of the Lord, in that first period of New Testament church history, truly exercising the bond with each other, as they were also called to do by the apostle Paul.

Given this background, we add in conclusion: there is little weight in the assertion that the seven churches of Asia mentioned at the beginning of Revelation are not called to hold a classical assembly in order to deal with and solve the problems in the congregations of Laodicea, Sardis, and so on. Indeed, such a call is lacking, as is also the call to the diligent attendance of the worship service. It would be ludicrous to defend an attempt to compromise worship and attendance with an appeal to the silence of the letters to the seven churches on this point. An argument based on silence is weak, especially if the rest of Scripture would abundantly support a Christian exhortation to exercise solidarity. It is also not the point whether the forms of church federation that we know, and the names and terms which are associated with them are found in the Bible; rather, the basic question is whether the exercise of this bond is a voluntary matter, since Scripture's silence leaves us

free. We believe that this basic question has been clearly answered on the basis of Scripture.

From this viewpoint, it can be seen that also the letters to the seven churches give us valuable directions. It must be obvious to all that although the Saviour addresses the angel of each congregation separately (and thus speaks to each individual church), and directs to each church His analysis of its situation and the encouragements, admonitions, or reprimands which are appropriate to that case; yet He does not deal with that congregation as if it stands alone, or loose, or independent, without a concrete relation to the other congregations. No, what the Lord says to one particular congregation is at the same time addressed to the world-church of every time and every place. His church-visitation report was not locked away in the archives of Ephesus or Laodicea, but was published in the Book which lies open on every Christian pulpit. We are still confronted with the spiritual and ecclesiastical situation in those seven congregations, and that for our own admonition and consolation. True, here we have to do with the incomprehensible counsel of the Lord who chose to give exactly these letters ecumenical fame through the Scriptures, because in them the eternal counsel and will of God for our redemption is revealed. But that implies that the issue which the Saviour has with each of these congregations is not just a private matter, which may be dealt with in isolation from every other congregation, in order to "preserve the autonomy of the local church." Surely we can leave it to the Saviour to guard the purity of church polity! And it would be better for us, in answering our church-political questions, reverently to follow Him rather than conceitedly to express our disapproval.

However, it is not only remarkable that Christ has given these letters ecumenical fame by including them in the canon, or the rule of our faith; it is also noteworthy that the letters themselves give no hint of isolation between one congregation and another. Before anything else, John receives this instruction with respect also to each letter: "Write

what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches,” (1:11). This applies to all of Revelation, but no less for the first chapters: each of the seven churches receives Christ’s word to all the seven churches directly. The contents of the letters correspond with this. For instance, each of the letters ends with the unchanging “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (2:7, and so on). Note the plural “churches”. This clearly indicates the ecumenical address of the letters to every congregation, wherever it may be and in whatever time - as is evident, also, from the inclusion of these letters in the canon; but even more significantly, it relates the affairs of this one congregation to the life of all the others. If Christ addresses Pergamum or Thyatira, Sardis and Philadelphia may not say that it does not concern them, for the matter concerns only that congregation over there. By no means! That particular angel and congregation must listen, but the churches must listen with them. It also applies to the churches that each person’s burdens and joys are those of the Lord’s whole people. We do not know what the seven churches did with the Lord’s admonition and consolation; we do not know if it became the subject of mutual consultation in whatever shape or form; but we do know that Christ’s appeal at the end of each individual letter normatively prevented the affairs of the local church (for there can be no doubt that this is what the matters addressed are) from becoming private affairs. There could be no endless circling about oneself, in difficulties or sorrows, in joys or also in the struggle with sin. The exercise of solidarity was not left to the freedom of the churches in Asia, but was **an obligation demanded by Christ**.

So the rest of the contents of the letters show that the life of the churches in relation to each other has Christ’s immediate attention, so to speak. Announcing to Thyatira the sentence of “the woman Jezebel” and her followers, whom they tolerate there (2:20), He indicates that it will be a spectacle of His righteous judgment, for “all the churches shall know that I am He who searches mind and heart” (2:23): they all are and

will be involved in what Christ will do in that one congregation.

Presenting Himself to the congregation and angel of Sardis, He calls Himself "Him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars" (3:1). It is well-known that in each letter the Lord makes Himself known in a distinct manner related to what He intends to say to that congregation. "The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches," (1:20) the ministers of the Word. Christ makes Himself known as the one who has possession of the seven spirits and of the seven stars in order to demonstrate that the beneficial effect of the administration of the Word is in His hands, and that, therefore, the only salvation from the death in which Sardis lies is to be found in Him.²⁸ What we should notice, however, is that the Lord does not say that He has the "star" of Sardis, but that He has "the seven stars": there is a coherence and a unity in the administration of the offices, even if the ministers are associated with distinct local congregations. This coherence lies in the Christ. Therefore, it is truly a reality for the ministers and the congregations.

The letters to the seven churches teach us that the dispensation of one centrally regulated worship has passed. John sees, while he is in the Spirit on the Lord's day, "seven golden lampstands" (1: 12); which are, as the Saviour explains, "the seven churches" (1: 20). Prof. Greijdanus writes "the image of the lampstand itself would be clear to John from the lampstand in the tabernacle, Exodus 25:31ff. The fact that it represents the Lord's people, His congregation, could be known from Zechariah 4; but there it was one lampstand with seven lamps. Here there are seven lampstands."²⁹ This symbolizes the decentralization of

²⁸ See the conclusion of verse 1.

²⁹ S. Greijdanus, *De Openbaring des Heeren aan Johannes*, (*Korte Verklaring*, 2nd. ed., Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1938) 47

the new covenant. The congregations no longer have an earthly centre, for Christ Himself walks among the lampstands (1:13) and holds the stars in His right hand (verse 16). **He** is and stands central, also in the community of churches. This is the pure gospel which we will continue to hold on to, though some earthly institution should try to fulfil a central role in the life of the churches. May the Lord give us the grace that we may maintain, in word and deed, the sufficiency of Christ, for only from His mouth do we truly hear “Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one; I died, and behold, I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and of Hades” (Revelation 1:17, 18).

Precisely because of this the congregations should realize that they will find their unity in Him, and that they can and must exercise their unity only by Him. **How could we ever deny the cohesive power of His right hand?**