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“Can a synod leave essential matters for local churches to decide, or does this create the danger that a federation will start falling apart?”

Topic as I want to explain it:

Synod is an essential means to preserve and expand the true religion in every local church - to serve the unity and spiritual reign of Christ in His Church

1. The problem of the topic

Assumption that there are church federations that, when they are unable to agree on essential and important matters on synods, send back the delegates of the churches with the message that their churches themselves are free to decide on these matters and whatever the decision of other churches is, they can persevere with their own decisions. Is that really what Christ want? Is He not the Lord and Head of His Church who is served and honoured and glorified when churches set them out to seek and found one another on Classis and Synod in the unity of faith when they discuss and agree on matters according to Scripture, the way the Holy Spirit in the Word and in the history of the Church teach? Is He not governing His church in a direct and personal way with his Spirit and His Word? He is Lord of lords and King of kings who gave Himself to His congregation governing over all things for the sake of His church. *Eph 1:18-23: Then, with the eyes of your hearts enlightened, you will know the confidence that is produced by God having called you, the rich glory that is his inheritance among the saints, and the unlimited greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his mighty strength, which he brought about in the Messiah when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realm. He is far above every ruler, authority, power, dominion, and every name that can be named, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. God has put everything under the Messiah's feet and has made him the head of everything for the good of the church, which is his body, the fullness of the one who fills everything in every way.*

The topic implies that there is a federation or more than one federation that are following a method of leaving essential matters on which the churches differs on synod, and cannot convince each other, for the local church to decide on. However, this paper is not about a specific concrete situation itself. I want to look at how both the local church and the major assembly, specifically the synod, need to function in a bond of churches for the gain and promotion of the spiritual reign of Christ in His Church.

I do not want to go into the discussion about the difference between confessional and other essential matters. For the purpose of our discussion, I consider all matters accepted for the Agenda of Synod and discussed by this assembly in one way or the other, to be decisive, to be essential matters for the assembly.

The assumption of the method indicated by the subject is that the synod could not come to a consensus on an item on the Agenda, or that the synod see no way to delay the taking of a decision for the churches for further reflecting on it.

This method indeed works against the reformed view of the place and function and value of what a synod should be. This practice is not to the benefit and advancement of the spiritual government of Christ in his church.

But it is a mirror of the local churches and office bearers' lack of understanding of Christ's spiritual government. A lack of a spiritual approach on Christ's authority, the authority of office bearers, and the authority of the congregation, means that the unity of the bond of churches in terms of Christ's spiritual government in his church is not maintained, and the bond being seen as an external, formal matter. The assembly hopes that the return of the delegates to the churches, without the essential issue settled in unity, will make way for life in federation without agreeing on essential issues. There can then still be a federation with various opinions and decisions opposing the view of some other churches in the federation. This does not mean that the bond will no longer exist or fall apart in a formal, outwardly way, but the meaning of church federation in terms of **Christ's spiritual government** in the local churches becomes in this way under pressure.

It is a way of trying to maintain the external relationship in the federation. The connection is in terms of managing the federation and its established institutions, but not that local churches serve one another in everything to maintain and defend the unity in Christ, the true religion, like it was decided for example by the Reformed churches in France during the 16th century, as well as the Netherlands churches in the dispersion at Wezel 1568 and Emden 1571.

The real question is concerning the local churches and their confession and consequent motivation and service to Christ and to one another in one faith and obedience to Christ's Word, the confession, and regarding our background, especially the Belgic Confession.

Problem is not that every church should decide, but that the churches no longer unconditionally continue in spiritual order and unity in the preservation and keeping of the true religion, no longer desire to hear together, no longer to give the instructions of the credential letter for discussion by the churches, no longer be prepared to be convinced by the counsel of the majority of churches. And by saying this, the condition is that we are bound to the Word of Christ and our consciences always bind to His Word.

2. Our context today

Question is how the office bearers and the congregation or classis who send the office bearers to synod, view Christ's spiritual reign? How do the office bearers see their place and function in the governing of his flock by Christ? And how do the believers, in the office of believer, see their place and function in the spiritual government of the gathered congregation?

According to Scripture and as we confess, the church acts on instruction of Christ himself, the office bearer knows that he was appointed and sent out by Christ and in his name and with His authority he may fulfill his calling with trust in the Lord and handle the keys of the Kingdom with zeal. To the

office is the care of the pastorate and discipline and service entrusted, and the congregation should accept and acknowledge it.

But our context have changed, and peoples' sense of authority outside and inside the congregation. We find today congregation and office bearers lack of ministering the spiritual rule of Christ, ministers' willfull neglecting of the rules for reading Scripture, their incorrect view of synod and the other means for the observance and gaurding of Christ's rule in the congregation, the inability of Office bearers and of believers in the congregation.

We are today confronted with cultural, technological, social and political shifts in our society. There is criticism and an outcry for a total re-evaluation of Scripture and Christian doctrine. We sense that we are part of a plural, democratizing society. The spirit of our time requires people to become more self-conscious and more independent. Detached from binding themselves to institutional forms and norms and authority, in short not to bind them to an ordely life before God. There is still much anxiety to keep all organized, in outer form, but spiritual cohesion under the Headship of Jesus Christ, our Lord is lacking, and there is sometimes constant struggle for control. There is a functional understanding of church, seeking evidence for approval by God in the life of the individual and not in the truth of Word and confession.

The Reformation was positive about the existing authority of society during the 16th century. And in the church there was a clear shift to find authority in the Word of Christ. It was all about the authority of Scripture, which is the objective basis for authority. Because it is the Word of Christ, the hermeneutical rules was the same.

Nowadays Scripture is critically questioned and studied socio-historically and historical-critical. For today's people, institutions such as church meetings are no longer credible. On synods, group formation is observed and interest and likeminded groups work closely with each other. Ministers who aspire for leading synod. The delegates are no longer attending to consult and discuss together in keeping the true religion, in a plural society with various religious roots. The office-bearers want to adjust the church so that people will value them as fellow humans with difficulties to believe and seeking and doubting with them.

Deputies are flooded by results and concepts of human sciences. Good counselors are needed, or theological specialists, who, through their knowledge of theology or church polity, are able to provide theological information or can move the synod when needed. Or to pursue a case. Experts. The Office bearer had to be able to justify itself. Beware of concistory governance, or dominocracy.

We live with a functional ecclesiology, with accent on the mission of the church, and the work of the members, the church had to make and prove her credible. Should have an unreserved presence in the world. Have to show in the world what it means to live for others. With no need to be fed and led as flock of the Lord.

The keys of heaven are for edifying, strengthening, building up the congregation. Not for destruction. The building of the body of the Lord receiving the maturity, when ongoing, new believers join and the congregation growing in the knowledge of Christ and faith in Him. He is the source of true piety and everlasting life. In the New Testament Christ in us is residing, not in a childish way, but as a mature man. We should grow towards the full richness of Christ.

3. Our roots in the Reformation

Let us go to the Reformation. On the other side of the Enlightenment. Although we can have some critical remarks on the view of the Reformer Martin Bucer, he helps us to see the authority of Christ in His reigning of His church, and the right and power and freedom of the church. In 1545 when the reformer of Strasburg, was asked for advice in government affairs regarding the reformation of the city of Hamburg, in which the king of Denmark and others try to expand their influence, he gave a principle explanation of the essence of church polity in terms of divine law. That is God's righteousness - God's highest virtue, his goodness, through which He give His Spirit to us, and also the order of the Church: the effectiveness of the Holy Spirit's work in the congregation – the justification by Christ, and faith in the Lord, and love for the neighbor, and the order for the whole of life. The textual references and exegesis on which Bucer based his statement is **1 Cor 3: 21-23**:

So let no one boast about human beings, since everything belongs to you,

whether Paul, Apollos, Cephas, the world, life, death, the present, or the future—everything belongs to you,

but you belong to the Messiah, and the Messiah belongs to God.

2 Cor 10: 8:

For though I should boast somewhat more of our authority, which the Lord has given us for edification, and not for your destruction, I should not be ashamed:

Eph. 4: 10-12:

The one who went down is the same one who went up above all the heavens so that all things would be fulfilled.

And it is he who gifted some to be apostles, others to be prophets, others to be evangelists, and still others to be pastors and teachers, to equip the saints, to do the work of ministry, and to build up the body of the Messiah.

The freedom of the congregation was set by Bucer against the political coercion of the government. The freedom of the congregation is based on the congregation's right that Christ gave her. And it is related to the justification by faith alone. A Christian congregation therefore has the possibility and the command to judge anyone in accordance with the Holy Scriptures. The congregation **has the right to maintain the true religion and thus to establish and reform the service according to the Word of the Bridegroom and King and Lord Jesus Christ**. Everything must serve to build up for salvation: the only power is power to save from sin.

Each member has, in accordance with their own calling, their task and place in the congregation. Members help each other in the things of temporary and eternal life. In the church it is the power to

forgive sin, which being given by the Spirit to the congregation, to open or to close with the keys of the Kingdom. Bucer refers to the Spirit as the power of authority (following **John 20:22,23** *When he had said this, he breathed on them and told them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive people's sins, they are forgiven. If you retain people's sins, they are retained."*)

It is not only given to the preacher but also to those who come together as congregation. Those who come to Christ by faith receive the keys of the kingdom of heaven, believing the Spirit of God and His Word. It is understood that office bearers teach and edify the congregation to live to the glory of God and for the salvation of the neighbor, that they increasingly repent and live a new life. From this central work of ministering the forgiveness of sins, everything happens in the congregation. The ministry of the pastoral office is the exercise of this ecclesiastical power. This right in the church is the right and authority of Christ as it functions by the Spirit in the congregation. To open the kingdom of heaven and teach those who repent. To reprimand and close it for those who do not believe.

The minister (servant) of the Word has to obey the only Head Jesus Christ and his spiritual government. Jesus Christ's direct and actual reign should be acknowledged in the church.

The minister of the Word has a particular task to maintain, support, promote, and preserve the authority of Christ, and the reign of Christ in the church. He is assisted and supported by the other servants. He must bring the Word of reconciliation, of forgiveness of sin, of the glorious God, to the congregation. He does this in the ministry of the Word and through the Holy Spirit, in the service of prayers, in teaching the doctrine, in caring for the flock of Christ.

Well, this is the point: Although Bucer did not refer to a synod, he explained the spiritual rule of Christ in His church. The synod is for a reformed church and a reformed federation of churches one of the essential and indispensable means by which the spiritual reign of Christ in His Church, is enhanced, established, defended, preserved, expression of the unity in the true doctrine of Christ in all the churches established. Although no governing institution in itself, Synod is one of the most important means by which the true religion in the unity of faith is applied in all the local churches, to enhance the spiritual reign of Christ in all the churches of the bond, by decisions that in one way or the other support the work for the ministry of forgiveness and the unity of faith in every local church. That is the conclusion from both the history of the French Reformed Churches and the Netherlands Reformed Churches during the 16th century.

4. Belgic Confession of Faith – by all means

Our confession of 1561, is clearly expressing that **by means** of the preaching of the Word, administering of the sacraments, the institution of the elders and deacons with the minister of the Word that forms the church council of the church, Christ rules over His church. I want to ask your attention for the word "**means**" in Art. 30 of the Belgic Confession of Faith.

ARTICLE 30—THE GOVERNMENT OF THE CHURCH We believe that this true Church must be governed according to the Spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in His Word. There should be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments; **there should also be elders and deacons who, together with the pastors, form the council of the Church. By these means they preserve the true religion; they see to it that the true doctrine takes its course, that**

evil men are disciplined in a spiritual way and are restrained, and also that the poor and all the afflicted are helped and comforted according to their need. ***By these means everything will be done well and in good order when faithful men are chosen in agreement with the rule that the apostle Paul gave to Timothy.***

ARTICLE 31—THE OFFICERS OF THE CHURCH We believe that ministers of God’s Word, elders, and deacons ought to be chosen to their offices by lawful election of the Church, with prayer and in good order, *as stipulated by the Word of God*. Therefore everyone shall take care not to intrude by improper means. He shall wait for the time that he is called by God so that he may have sure testimony and thus be certain that his call comes from the Lord. *Ministers of the Word, in whatever place they are, have equal power and authority, for they are all **servants of Jesus Christ**, the only universal Bishop and the only Head of the Church.* In order that this holy ordinance of God may not be violated or rejected, we declare that everyone must hold the ministers of the Word and the elders of the Church in special esteem because of their work, and as much as possible be at peace with them without grumbling or arguing.

But there are always a condition – the conscience may not be binded in any way. See Art 32.

ARTICLE 32—THE ORDER AND DISCIPLINE OF THE CHURCH We believe that, although it is useful and good for those who govern the Church to **establish a certain order to maintain the body of the Church, they must at all times watch that they do not deviate from what Christ, our only Master, has commanded. Therefore we reject all human inventions and laws introduced into the worship of God which bind and compel the consciences in any way. We accept only what is proper to preserve and promote harmony and unity and to keep all in obedience to God.** To that end, discipline and excommunication ought to be exercised in agreement with the Word of God

From this we derive that there is the preaching of the Word, the Word by which Christ reign directly wit His Spirit, but there are also various **means** by which the reign of Christ, the true religion being preserved and promoted, and that is the task in which the office bearers lead the congregation.

Following 1 Cor. 14 and other passages of Scripture, Christ gives office bearers various means, all means, to sustain the order and the true religion. To embody the spiritual government. The way to serve the keys. Now, the means are the worship service with the preaching and the singing and the prayers, the CO, the Forms, the meeting of the Church Council, the major assemblies, including synod, the disciplinary rules, the instruments and ways given by the Spirit to the church through the ages.

I ask your attention for the means by which the reign of Christ is preserved and promoted. There is the prescription from Scripture. But there are many other means through history by which the reign of Christ was promoted. And in this the major assemblies, especially the synod played an important role.

Listen what Calvin said in his Institutes: *First, then, let us understand that if in every human society some kind of government is necessary to insure the common peace and maintain concord, if in transacting business some form must always be observed, which public decency, and hence humanity itself, require us not to disregard, this ought especially to be observed in churches, which are best sustained by a constitution in all respects well ordered, and without which concord can have no existence. Wherefore, if we would provide for the safety of the Church, we must always carefully attend to Paul's injunction, that all things be done decently and in order (1 Cor. 14:40). But seeing there is such diversity in the manners of men, such variety in their minds, such repugnance in their judgments and dispositions, no policy is sufficiently firm unless fortified by certain laws, nor can any rite be observed without a fixed form. So far, therefore, are we from condemning the laws which conduce to this, that we hold that the removal of them would unnerve the Church, deface and dissipate it entirely. For Paul's injunction, that all things be done decently and in order, cannot be observed unless order and decency be secured by the addition of ordinances, as a kind of bonds. In these ordinances, however, we must always attend to the exception, that they must not be thought necessary to salvation, nor lay the conscience under a religious obligation; they must not be compared to the worship of God, nor substituted for piety.*

For being one in faith and therefor bind themselves together against all sorts of hierarchy art1, and to stand together against persecution, and to plan to built up the church of Christ back in the Netherlands and preserve the true religion, the churches in dispersion came together in Emden in synod in 1571. They show unity of doctrine between all the Dutch churches by signing at Emden the BCF, but also a bond of unity with the French churches, by signing also the French Confession art2. To the French churches they owe so much, because for the organisation and fuction of Synod they followed their example.

After the members of the churches in dispersion could return to the Netherlands after the defeat of Spain, one provincial synod after the other in the second part of the 16th century discussed and made decisions to gather and built up the churches in the Netherlands.

The history up to the National Synod in 1618-19 show how the true doctrine was defended and churches being supported by other churches against the Remonstrants, also by the major assemblies.

5. Christ govern His church immediately – this He do also by means of Assemblies

Scripture is clear on the direct spiritual government of Christ of every local church and of His universal church. In this regard we can read Revelation 1:1-20. I read from verse 9:

I am John, your brother and partner in the oppression, kingdom, and patience that comes because of Jesus. I was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony about Jesus.

I came to be in the Spirit on the Day of the Lord, when I heard a loud voice behind me like a trumpet,

saying, "Write on a scroll what you see, and send it to the seven churches: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea."

Then I turned to see who was talking to me, and when I turned I saw seven gold lamp stands.

Among the lampstands there was someone like the Son of Man. He was wearing a long robe with a gold sash around his chest.

His head and his hair were white like wool, in fact, as white as snow. His eyes were like flames of fire,

his feet were like glowing bronze refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of raging waters.

In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword. His face was like the sun when it shines with full force.

When I saw him, I fell down at his feet like a dead man. But he placed his right hand on me and said, "Stop being afraid! I am the first and the last,

the living one. I was dead, but look—I am alive forever and ever! I have the keys of Death and Hades.

Therefore, write down what you have seen, what is, and what is going to happen after this.

The secret meaning of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and the seven gold lamp stands is this: the seven stars are the messengers of the seven churches, and the seven lamp stands are the seven churches."

Does Christ instruct the churches to care for each other? Definitely we may derive it from passages in Scripture like 2 John:1-13. And send ministers and elders as delegates to Synod? How should we understand it that the minister or elder being delegated to go to synod?

See the correspondence of the apostle, called elder, of one church to another church, a means to strengthen the sister church in the teaching of the love of Christ, John: **2John :1-13** *From: The Elder, To: The chosen lady and her children, whom I genuinely love, and not only I but also all who know the truth, that is present in us and will be with us forever. Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us from God the Father and from Jesus the Messiah, the Father's Son, in truth and love. I was overjoyed to find some of your children living truthfully, just as the Father has commanded us. Dear lady, I am now requesting of you that we all continue to love one another. It is not as though I am writing to give you a new commandment, but one that we have had from the beginning. And this is what demonstrates love: that we live according to God's commandments. Just as you have heard from the beginning what he commanded, you must live by it. For many deceivers have gone out into the world. They refuse to acknowledge Jesus the Messiah as having become human. Any such person is a deceiver and an antichrist. See to it that you don't destroy what we have worked for, but that you receive your full reward. Everyone who does not **remain true to the teaching of the Messiah**, but goes beyond it, does not have God. The person who remains true to the teaching of the Messiah has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you but does not present His teachings, do not*

receive him into your house or even welcome him, because the one who welcomes him shares in his evil deeds. Although I have a great deal to write to you, I would prefer not to use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to come to you and talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete. The children of your chosen sister greet you.

Now, there can be correspondence, letters, e-mail or even skype meetings between two or more churches. But how beautiful is a regular structured meeting of churches, seeking the unity in Christ and helping each other to stay in the true faith. According to the Church Order of the FRCSA, the ministers and elders are being delegated by the classis to the synod, where the churches deliberate and decide. Synod is the most derived meeting of the churches. The delegates are there not with authority from their office in the local church, but with derived authority on behalf of all the local churches. And the churches will agree to the decisions of the majority at synod, provided they do not contradict the Word of God or bind the conscience, but align with the guidance of the Spirit through the ages. Direct instructions from Scripture, or derived from Scripture, or good custom, or what is needed in a specific situation, for the good order in the church. If it is not directly from Scripture, it can be in line with the way of the Churches through the ages. But it will always be that in the decision making, they will come up for one another, seeking the unity, thirst for the glory of God.

The synod is a means of confirming and maintaining true faith - firstly in every local church, secondly in the unity of the bond.

The purpose is to protect and promote the same faith and the authority of Christ in every church, they were together in common accord, it is for the common interest, in the promotion of the true religion, like at Emden in the times of persecution, so in our time, against unbelieve and hate against Christ and His church.

But so much is needed from the minister and the offices as well as the congregation. The minister or elder have to use the Bible faithfully, dependent on Jesus Christ the Lord. And lead the church council meeting wisely and make the maximum use of the Church Order, as means by which he will preserve and proclaim the true faith and care for the flock.

The churches were covenanted and find each other based on the similarity of the one confession. "So we found each other" we can tipify Emden of the 16th century. To serve the unity in Christ. To promote the operation of the keys of heaven. To establish the antihierarchial spiritual government of Christ.

To discuss and listen together to Christ's Word as given by the apostles, but also matters coming from the early church or through deriving and reasoning from Scripture. In which the Holy Spirit leads, because Christ works by His Spirit through the ages in His Church.

The Word and that which Christ commands, the bond should not depart from it. But room is left in mediocre cases in which one does not have to be bound by a direct command from Scripture. Spiritual unity is needed to be live up to. But agree and abide by agreement, or agreement on how to make changes as it is agreed upon, how changes will be made. This is in using Church Order. But also for Synod Rules and other decisions of Synod.

The churches gathered in synod need to find each other. Each has his credential letter from classis, but still it is churches being gathered by way of the delegates. And every office bearer is sent and comes with that expectation. The whole of churches, and all the churches could have come. But there is so much confidence of the churches in each other, that it is dedicated to a few office bearers, wise men who are sent to speak as delegates concerning various matters, to a decision of all the churches. Making sure not to bind anyone's conscience. Deciding after more than one round of discussion, with motivation and consideration. With discerning wisdom. Directed by Scripture. And then the decision is valid and it remains valid = - unless it is against the conscience, against the word of Christ.

See a beautiful example of the desire to seek and establish unity, in the letter sent with the delegates of the classis Voorne, Putten en Overflakkee 192 to the Synod of Dordrecht 1574. ***“Grace and Peace from God the father through Jesus Christ. Amen. We cannot very dear brothers and assistants in the Lord, sufficiently praise God our father for His inexpressible benefits, shown to us in His beloved son, through whose blood He has delivered his church which He now again purifies and releases from the unbearable yoke and tyranny of the Antichrist.***

This is also evident at the present day on which He grant His servants that they may come together, in order that He might allow them, by the power of His Spirit, to deal with what will serve the advancement of His kingdom. Having now come together several times, in accordance with the desire of the brothers and in the name of the Lord, and having not only considered what must be proposed at such an assembly, but also who would be the most suitable people to act on our behalf and in name of all, we therefor send our very worthy and dear brother and fellow servant Gerhardus Gallinaceus and with him an elder, namely Jan Commers. To these our dear brothers we grant power and authority to act and conclude, in all ecclesiastical matters, both in regard to what they have been charged with by us in their instruction as also in regard to what the other deputies will propose. And since we know that these brothers with the whole assembly will take God's Word as their rule in matters of faith, and the example of the most Reformed churches in the ordering of the church, we do not hesitate to give our delegates such authority that it will be as if our entire Classis were present, and each church of that classis in particular.

Meanwhile we pray that the father of our Lord Jesus Christ may succour you by His Holy Spirit, dear brothers, and govern your minds that His Kingdom may increase, the Antichrist may be destroyed and his oppressed people may be comforted. God be with you. Given in den Briel, at the charge and under the seal of the entire classis. Anno 1574, the 13 June.”

They gave them power and authority – that all churches being considered to be present. The delegates would not automatically be bound to decisions, but promised to consider them binding under the express proviso: in so far as they would conform to God's word.

Thus we see: 1. Specific persons sent, 2. Declaration that they are authorised, 3. Promise to consider decisions as binding, and setting of a boundary, God's Word. The Fathers understood that a decision have to ripen during the course of deliberations and investigation, and this deliberation cannot take place within each separate church, rather it must be of all the churches together. This is the correct way.

When it becomes clear what the majority is convinced, then all take that decision for their account, all objections are laid down by the minority unless the decision deviates from the Word of God. The ministers Jan Arendz and Pieter Gabriel of Amsterdam, did not want a fixed, structured federation. But at the end they also signed the Acta of Emden. Discussing together, led to unity of conviction. Local churches work together in a spiritual unity because of their redemption through their Lord, Jesus Christ.

Abraham Kuyper wrote concerning synod: Heraut 19 June 1887. 1. To our fathers a synod was a gathering of churches as if they were present. 2. Synod have no authority of itself, any more than its members, since all authority was granted them. 3. Members of Synod, and Synod self, received its power and authority from the churches, they say, **we give them such authority.** 4. Members of Synod received instruction from the churches who sent them, and they were bound to this instruction, since "on our behalf" and in "our name". 5. That the members of synod were granted general authority to make decisions without consulting with their consistory, only on the ground of the knowledge that **they would follow God's Word, and the principle of Reformed Church Polity.** Only on that basis they receive authority to take action and draw conclusions. 6. They could not refuse to submit to Synod's decisions arbitrarily in an independentistic manner, but that God's Word motivated them to submit and convinced them to live by that, not because of any higher synodical authority, but because Synod too had received the same ordinance to act accordingly.

6. Church Federation and Synod - a blessing, but so vulnerable

Church Federation and therefor also Synod should be a blessing. It is an expression of our common faith, and that we are united in faith. The churches seek each other in organisation in the unity of faith. Synod is expression of the bond with each other to help each other.

The churches in this way help each other **to be faithful and trustworthy**, reliable to the faith in the Lord. Therefor a CO is needed, an agreement and Synod should change it when the churches think necessary. It is a Summary of promises made to each other. And it is agreed upon that that is specifically the work of Synods. Accountability is asked. All things should be done in an orderly way.

Synod acts and decisions show us the vulnerability of Church Federation. We have to acknowledge that. As we confess our **unity of faith in our common Saviour.** And as we hold each other to the promises being made. How are we gathered as Synod. Therefor Synod rules are also needed. Tension because of unorderedly methods and unjust and selfish approaches can appear.

But still we **need each other.** Prov. 13:10: Arrogance only brings quarrelling, but those receiving advice are wise. 11:14: A nation falls through a lack of guidance, but victory comes through the counsel of many. 15:22: Plans fail without advice, but with many counsellors they are confirmed.

Possible hierarchy, **misunderstandings, suspicion** casting of **unfaithfulness to Scripture and confession, rebellion against the Word, should be prevented.** We should encourage but also admonish one another from Scripture. We should always have the point of censure on the Agenda of Synod.

We should pray for Synod, its deliberations and decisions. And we should put in all effort in the local church to execute decisions and live by it in a positive way as decisions of the churches. How beautiful it is to agree as churches on matters like Bible Translation, Liturgical Hymns, Ecclesiastical Fellowship, Confessional Foundation, Church Order, Theological Training, Mission Work. For discussing and deciding Overtures. Making rules on how to work on Synod. And for handling appeals. And gravamens.

Let us use as churches the means of the major assemblies.

For **counsel and advice**. Bringing matters to and waiting for response from all the churches.

Let us not do our own thing.

But it can only be with Christ holding the seven messengers in His right hand and moving between the seven congregations. Let us pray Him for faithful office bearers and a faithful church of people in the office of believer. Who are informed and mature in the knowledge and love of our Lord Jesus Christ. We should time and again be reminded of what we promise in the subscription form.

We declare sincerely and in good conscience before the lord that we heartily believe that the whole doctrine contained... fully agrees with the Word of God.

We promise therefor that we will diligently teach the doctrine and faithfully defend it....in disagreement we promise to make this known to the consistory and the classis, and if necessary to the broader assemblies, for judgment. Also willing and ready to comply under the penalty of suspension. Reserve the right to appeal. During time of appeal we will acquiesce in the decision of consistory or classis or synod.

8. Concluding Remarks:

- A shift away from a confessing church federation where it is important to be led by God's revelation in Scripture and the application of the wisdom of the major assembly, with the work of the assemblies as needed support for the elders and local churches, in the work for the unity of the churches in Christ in expressing a bond of churches, ---- to a different point where every one is working towards his own fulfillment, also in the church and the federation, is resistance against the direct spiritual governing of Christ in His church.
- The assembly of Synod and its decisions strengthen the churches and the offices in the churches to have decisions that were taken ununanimously and that they can take up as the decisions of all the churches. It strengthens the office of believers in the churches to follow what have been decided with agreement and to work with the knowledge that in all the churches it will be done in the same way.
- Therefore it is important to train faithful men of the Word 2 Tim. 2, trustworthy in the service of the Lord, and it is one of the tasks of the churches together in synod, and to decide on this.
- Individualism, that is personal preferences, pressure groups in churches, modalities, dominocracy, congregationalism, don't care attitude, may thrive, moving away from the

foundational awareness of the ever present Lord Jesus Christ in His church, not only in the local church, but also in Synod. That should be opposed

- If a Synod leave essential matters for local churches to decide, it will not necessary create the danger that the church federation fall apart in a formal outward way, but it will have the consequence of churches being in a process of losing their spiritual unity in the bond, losing their will to diligently teach and defend the doctrine of the Gospel and the reformed confession, their will to seek each other's wellbeing in Christ by supporting and exploring all means to glorify God and the good of the other through the work of meeting together and agreeing on the basis of Scripture. It will be rejecting of the spiritual government in the unity of the faith.
- Trying to leave essential matters for local churches can uphold Church Federation in a free-flowing, free choice, apologetic way - in a pluralistic, denominational, pragmatic, modern society, but without obedience to God's Word and without relevance in the World it should be able to convince.
- Coming with good decisions in terms of means to support the spiritual governing of Christ in every church is a witness to the work of Christ's spiritual reign in His church.
- But if the churches of the federation leave essential matters for local churches to decide, it is proof that the federation is lacking commitment and zeal to keep up to the central purpose of a federation, to enhance, expand and defend the spiritual unity in Christ and His reign in every church of the federation.
- Decisions by Synod regarding the essential matters should support the churches in their task of shepherding the flock. Therefore Deputies have a responsibility to take their work to the churches for discussion. This ought to work knowledge and interest by church members to follow issues on the Agenda of Synod, or the work of Deputies, and be involved with church council in working through the decisions of Synod, enhancing unity in the federation and thankfulness to God for the gift of Synod meetings.

I pleaded for agreement on how synod should be functioning as the great threshold to overcome in the process of church unity. Through this limited study I understand that the great threshold is in fact the Scriptural or spiritual view of the authority of office and the faithfulness to pursue it in dependence on Christ. Without it we cannot find each other as churches in a church order and synod. For then we do not yet understand the spiritual government of Christ in his church.

We need all to be bind to the spiritual reign of Christ for us to use the synod as means to preserve the true religion in the correct way.

