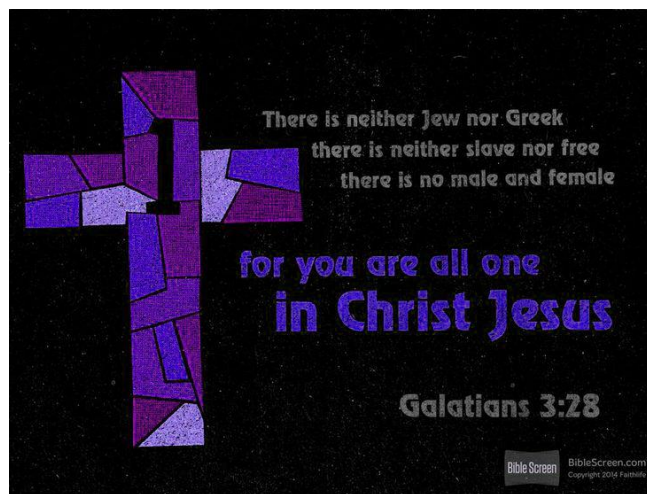


Contours of a Federation

How Wide or Narrow Should a Reformed Church Federation be
with regards to:
Doctrinal Matters
Geographical Location
Language and Culture

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1 General principles from NT:

True believers are duty bound to look for one another and to be church together. Cf. John 17:11 “Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.”

The word ‘federation’ is not found in Scripture. However, the matter does. For example, the image of the *body of Christ* in the NT – points to organical unity between Christ and believers. This image also points to the organisational aspect of the body of Christ – a well functioning unity. It also points to the institutional character of local church and all churches together.

The Greek word *ekklesia*, usually in NT translated by church or congregation, refers to an assembly of persons constituted by well defined membership. The plural of *ekklesia* is used to refer to a number of local congregations together. F.e. Paul in Romans 16:4: “churches of the Gentiles” – plural; or in Galatians 1:22: “the churches of Judea”; or in 1 Thessalonians 2:14: “the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea”

The word *ekklesia* (singular) can refer both to the local congregation, as well as the universal church, meaning all those who the Father has given to his Son to save. Cf Matt 16:18: “you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church” – *ekklesia*.

One can also think of the term saints (*hagioi*) in the NT, synonymous with the term *ekklesia*. F.e. in 1 Cor 1:2: “To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be *saints* together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours” And in 2 Cor 1:1: “To the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the *saints* who are in the whole of Achaia”.

Paul warned the Corinthians against independentism, as if the gospel has only come to them. (1 Cor 14:36) The church is called to be holy and use the keys of the kingdom of heaven (Matt 16:19, 18:18, 1 Pet 1:3). This is not only a local issue, but also a joint effort of different churches (1 Cor 5 & 6, 1 cor 12:28; Eph 4:11-16).

What we find in the NT, is that each local congregation stands directly under the authority of Christ. There is no superstructure between Christ and a local church. Therefore, even if, because of circumstances, federational bonds cannot function, still a local church can continue to function. There are examples from history where, due to war circumstances, there could be no communication for years between local churches. This was far from ideal, this was not self imposed, these

were adverse circumstances. Nevertheless, local churches continued to function fully.

Is the structure of and cooperation between the churches we read about in the NT, of a congregationalist nature? No. In the NT Christ gives us also instructions as for governance, organisation and edification of the worldwide body of the church. The instructions the apostle Paul f.e. gave, are not only applicable to one local individual congregation, but meant to be put in practice by all churches, wherever they were and in whatever time. Cf. f.e. 1 Cor 7:17 where Paul writes: "This is my rule in all the churches." Cf. also 1 Cor 14:33: "For God is not a God of confusion but of peace. As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches."

These, and in what will follow, are a few texts from the Bible. But to be honest, there are many more texts, also from the Old Testament. The time this morning prevents us to be more elaborate.

2 How wide or narrow should a Reformed church federation be?

With regards to:

2.1 Doctrinal matters:

In the NT it is already clear that confessional statements are reached together, defending the true Christian doctrine and lifestyle, meant to be kept by all the believers and by all the churches wherever they are. Cf. Acts 16:4-5: "As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily."

We can learn from the meeting about which we read in Acts 15, with regards to federational and ecumenical relations. In Acts 15 we see a process of transition of the authority of the apostles towards the elders in each congregation taking

responsibility. We see that churches convene when a matter cannot be solved locally, a matter which has a bearing not only on the local church, but on all the churches.

Each church is to be built on the foundation of the apostles, on the gospel they brought. See Ephesians 2:20-21: “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.”

When a church deviates from the apostolic testimony, then it is no church of Christ anymore.

Gal 1:8 “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.”

In Scripture a clear *antithesis* is revealed *between the church and the world*. Cf. John 17:14-18: “I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.” And 1 John 3:13: “Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you ...”

In Scripture an *antithesis* is also revealed *between the true believers and those in the church who have become worldly in doctrine and / or lifestyle*. Light and darkness, truth and lie, cannot live together in the same place (church). See f.e. 1 John 2:18-19: “... many antichrists have come ... They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.”

In Scripture we find also the call to unmask those who claim to follow Christ, but despise his Word. Cf. Rev 2:9 “I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.” We find the call to exclude those who have deviated from the doctrine of Christ. Already in NT era it was a reality that “not all who are

descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring” (Romans 9:6-7) Also in the NT era there are those who call themselves church of Christ, but do not deserve that name.

There is a clear call in the NT to *avoid* those and *secede* from those who have become apostate in doctrine and/or life. Cf. f.e. 2 Timothy 2:17-19: “... their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some. But God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: “The Lord knows those who are his,” and, “Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.”

It is a spiritual battle to guard one another close to the true doctrine of the gospel of Christ. Paul refers to this spiritual battle in 2 Cor 11:28 where he writes about the “daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.” Local churches are called to likewise take care of each other, protecting each other close to the true doctrine of the gospel.

Christ gives unity in the truth. Cf. John 17:17: “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.”

Cf. 1 John 1:6: “If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.”

Cf. 1 John 2:4-6 “Whoever says “I know him” but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected ... whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.”

Cf. 3 John 1:4: “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.”

Sub-conclusion on: How wide or narrow should a Reformed church federation be in regards to doctrine?

Sola Scriptura. Tota Scriptura. Churches who deviate from this, detach themselves from the rock on which Jesus Christ builds his church, and should be urged to return to the orthodox doctrine.

How wide or narrow should a Reformed church federation be?

With regards to:

2.2 Geographical location:

Let me start with Jesus last's words, before his ascension, the well known Great Commission: Acts 1:8 "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

3 circles are mentioned here by our Lord:

1. In Jerusalem and in all Judea – this is the circle of the old covenantal people of God.
2. Samaria – this is the circle of those who have become apostate from the covenant in the past.
3. And to the end of the earth – this is the circle of all humans (the heathen) who haven't been in the covenant yet.

See also Matt 28:18-19, Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47. The Gospel should go out in all the world, to the corners of the earth.

In the book of Acts, we see a beginning of this movement. From Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, Antioch, Cyprus, Asia Minor, Macedonia, Greece, and the book of Acts ends with Paul arriving in Rome, the capital of the gentile world of those days.

What we also find in the NT is the call on all the churches, the local congregations, wherever they were planted, to start cooperating. There is no indication of a superstructure in the NT. All local churches are directly under their Head, Jesus Christ. However there is inter-dependence.

We can think of the call to hold collections for each other, f.e. the more affluent congregations to the financially struggling congregation in Jerusalem. Cf. Rom 15:25-28 "At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints.

For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings.”

A du Plooy calls this joint action of collecting for Jerusalem: an organized and visible and tangible experience of being together in a federation, a unity in spite of the borders between countries and nations. (p. 12-13 *In die Skriflig*)

There are many more passages in the NT referring to this joint collection:

Cf. 1 Cor 16:1-3: “Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside ... And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem.”

Cause for the collection was the severe famine that hit the brothers in Judea (Acts 11:27-30).

John Calvin points to the fact that this famine was used by God to strengthen the ecclesiastical bonds between the churches from the Gentiles and that of Jerusalem. God providentially used this famine to alleviate the tensions between the churches mainly from the heathen and those mainly from the Jews.

In the way Paul wrote about these collections, it is clear that much more was at stake than only the money. For him it was very much a matter of attitude, love, mutual concern for one another, and unity between the churches.

Another example of cooperation across geographical borders, we find in the call to share the letters with each other, which the apostles had written to each local congregation. Cf. Colossians 4:16: “And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea.”

These revelations in Scripture of cooperation across geographical borders, can be compared to the seed of a flower. In the seed all the characteristics of the flower

are already present. We find the seed in the NT. A well functioning federational unity is the flower that comes from this seed.

The worldwide dimensions of Christ's church, as we found it in the Great Commission of Jesus just before his ascension, will come to full reality, as is revealed in Revelation 5:9-10, where the worldwide church is singing to the praise of the Lamb: "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth."

Sub-conclusion: How wide or narrow should a Reformed church federation be with regards to geographical location. In principle there are no boundaries.

This brings us to the next paragraph:

How wide or narrow should a Reformed church federation be?

With regards to:

2.3 Language and Culture

We profess the Scriptural calling that local congregations should live in federational unity with other congregations building on the foundation of God's Word alone. Cf. 1 Peter 2:6-10: "For it stands in Scripture: "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone," and "A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people"

Scripture here defines all believers (from whatever race, nation, tribe, or language they are) to become together a new unity, a new race, a new nation, a new people. This becomes their primary identity, their primary citizenship. Now this new unity is something that cannot stay abstract theory only, but it should become visible in federational and ecumenical unity. This is the unity in Christ, amidst all diversity.

The miracle of Pentecost was that the apostles were enabled by the Holy Spirit to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ in many different languages. This was the fulfilment of Joel 2:32: "And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved." This is quoted in Peter's pentecostal sermon, Acts 2:21. The miracle of Pentecost Day underscores the importance of the preaching in everyone's mother tongue. Acts 2:6-11: "they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language ... how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? ... we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God."

At the same time, we find in the New Testament, that when believers from different languages came together, they used the *lingua franca*, in order to understand one another. In actual fact, the NT itself was written in the *lingua franca*, Greek, the English of those days. This already points to the significant change in the new covenant compared to the old. The OT was not written in the *lingua franca*, yet the NT is.

The new reality of Christ's church in the NT is beautifully revealed in Colossians 3:11: "Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all."

In the NT we find no indication that there were segregations between congregations on the basis of different cultures. The indication is that there was unity in one congregation in each town. For example, although the harbor city of Corinth was very cosmopolitan, all that diversity came together in the unity of one congregation.

The call to unity we also find in f.e. Ephesians 4:1-4: “I therefore ... urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called ... eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit”.

Sub-conclusion: How wide or narrow should a Reformed church federation be with regards to language and culture? In principle language and culture should not determine the boundaries of a federation.

3 In conclusion:

In the NT we see that neither the persecution of the church, neither the hatred of the Jews and Samaritans, neither Jewish nationalism prevented the saints and the churches to experience their unity across geographical, linguistic and cultural borders. The Greek term *koinonia* in 2 Cor 9:13 very much captures the essence of what a federation should be – *koinonia* meaning fellowship, sharing, willing contributions towards each other.

Whether forming a federation is something local churches should partake in voluntarily, or whether it is a command ... perhaps one can best say it is both. The way Paul writes, encouraging the churches to collect for the sister church in Jerusalem, transcends the dichotomy of either voluntary participation or a command. At the one hand Paul did not force this collection upon the churches; he respected the self-governance of the churches. Neither was there a hierarchical compulsion from the side of the mother church in Jerusalem. It was not a sort of ecclesiastical tax. At the same time (1 Cor 16:1) Paul put an obligation on the churches. It was an appeal. The churches realized that this behaviour, namely to participate and share across geographical, cultural and linguistic borders, was the logical consequence of listening to the Gospel, and putting it into practice. The churches realized that there was no alternative than to willingly partake in this. Indeed it was a lovely duty.

The NT does not reveal any superstructure over local churches. Nevertheless, the NT reveals that local churches are called and obligated to organize in federational unity, the purpose being:

- the honor of God
- the mutual edification of the body of Christ
- the protection of every local church to continue to exhibit the marks of a true church.

A du Plooy writes: There are no borders for a federation. There is just one ecumenic federation, across and linguistic boundaries.

4 True Ecuminicity – Confessional Statement

A couple of local congregations from different federations have started working closer together. Being in the same city, yet from different denominations, makes things a bit more complicated. Questions that arise are for example: If in one of the federations women are serving in the ecclesiastical offices in some local congregations, should this prevent cooperation with other local churches? In our times it becomes a reality more and more that traditional church denominations display a variety of theological sub currents. These sub currents can vary from theologically conservative to liberal. Here in South Africa to this can be added political sub currents, to be either politically conservative (still defending the old 'apartheid' ideas) or to be politically liberal.

In this complex landscape it is not always easy for local churches from different denominations to move closer to each other and start trusting each other. A few years ago a conference was held, and afterwards a brochure was issued, containing brief confessional-like statements on a number of actual topics. In this way the conference endeavoured to bring together Reformed churches who really are one in the Reformed faith both in doctrine and practice.¹

I want to share with you the statement on ecuminicity and church federation:

¹ *Gereformeerd vandag. Belydende kerk in die hede* (2017). Editors: Dr. P.G. Boon & R. van der Kooy. A digital copy can be obtained from the author: famgboon@gmail.com

True Ecuminicity

“Jesus Christ, the Son of God, gathers, defends and preserves his church out of the whole human race (Heidelberg Catechism 21 - Joel 2:32; John 10:4,11,14; Acts 2:21; 20:28; Ephesians 5:25-27;). Therefore we believe that Christ’s church is peopled by all nations, languages, cultures, old and young, rich and poor (Colossians 3:11; Revelation 5:9). No manmade structures may curtail this diversity of Christ’s church. Each believer and each church is called to pursue full fellowship with everyone sharing the true faith, and not to limit the unity in faith only with those sharing the same culture or language. At the same time this does not take away that the Gospel should be preached as much as possible to each and everyone in his mother tongue (Acts 2:6,11). Nevertheless boundaries because of linguistic or cultural differences may not lead to ecclesiastical divisions.

It is therefore important to warn against the dangers of nationalism, where the fact that a believer is primarily a citizen of the kingdom of heaven is pushed to the background. This also applies to the danger of racism. There is but one Scriptural antithesis, namely between believing and unbelieving, between the empire of Christ and the empire of Satan (Psalm 129:4-5; John 17:14-17; 1 John 2:18-19; 3:10-17).

It is the duty of each believer to join the church where God’s Word is purely preached and fully put into practice (Psalm 22:23; 23:6; Acts 2:42-44; Hebrews 10:25; Belgic Confession 27-29). Therefore we reject the doctrine of pluriformity. Believers should take a stand against false doctrine and erring churches and denominations (Psalm 84:11; Galatians 1:8-9; 2 Timothy 2:19; Revelation 2:9). True believers are duty bound to look for one another and to be church together (John 17:11; 20-21; Ephesians 4:3-4), cling to each other, encourage and when necessary admonish each other.

Furthermore each local congregation is duty bound to pursue federational unity with other congregations bearing the marks of a true church, namely the pure preaching of God’s Word, the pure administration of the sacraments (Baptism and Lord’s Supper) and the exercising of mutual discipline (Colossians 4:16; 1

Thessalonians 5:27; Revelation 1:11; BC 29). The purity of a congregation is not found in its historic origin, but in its being church in the present. God's covenant is always conditional, meaning that no church or federation can claim to remain God's people for ever.

Throughout church history many churches have become apostate. God, who is great in mercy, has given through the ages times of reformation, revival and return to his Word (Psalm 102:13-14; Isaiah 1:9; Romans 9:29). Jesus Christ is an eternal King who will never be without subjects (1 Kings 19:18; Isaiah 59:21; Matthew 16:18, 28:20; John 10:28-29; Acts 2:39; 1 Corinthians 1:8-9; BC 27). Therefore the tendency of local congregations to remain part of a denomination because of traditional loyalty or for other secondary reasons should be rejected. And therefore each local congregation should reflect from time to time (for example each new generation or quarter of a century) in which denomination their calling to be church of Christ can be executed best.

We profess the Scriptural calling that local congregations should live in federational unity with other congregations building on the foundation of God's Word alone (1 Peter 2:6-10). At the same time we should be aware of the danger that belonging to an erring denomination can negatively influence local congregations in executing their Christ given duty (Acts 4:19-20; Romans 9:6; 2 Timothy 2:16-19).

Christ's church gathering work is dynamic and each new generation has the task to put the call to unity into practice (2 Corinthians 13:5-6). In this regard we reject the ecumenical movement pursuing a unity not founded upon the Word of God alone. Christ gives unity in the truth (John 17:17; 1 John 1:6; 2:4; 3 John 1:4). Any other unity is not a gift of Christ."