

**Living together in the faith:  
The roots of the Reformed view of church federation**



Conference on the Essentials of a Church Federation  
Free Reformed Church, Pretoria  
28–29 June 2019 (40 min. speech)

Dear brothers and sisters,

I am very thankful to God to be here in South Africa with you. We already enjoyed standing together in the presence of God last Sunday, and I could preach in Soshanguve. Wonderful! I also want to thank God publicly for the encouraging conversations I've had with four different senior elders here who are very well read and so greatly love the church of Christ. For five days this week, I have been privileged to teach seven students for the Free Reformed Churches, to help them prepare for seminary. What a wonderful experience! I am much looking forward to seeing them in Hamilton in the future. I also love the creation here, and, by the way, while you all think it is cold I would rather have this than 30 degrees and 80% humidity back home in Canada at this time of year.

**Introduction**

Our topic at this conference concerns the essentials of a church federation. There is a lot already assumed in that title. What is the church? What is a federation? What are the essentials?

It's up to me, I suppose, to unpack those terms and to lay some groundwork, both biblically and historically. Thus, after offering some brief definitions, let me divide my presentation into three parts: the first regards the organic roots of the Reformed view of church federation; second, the historical roots; third, a very brief point about the biblical roots. Finally, some conclusions.

**Definitions of church, federation, church order, and essentials**

I define *the church* as the assembly of God's kingdom. Jesus is the king in this kingdom. As believers each of us are citizens in his kingdom and we acknowledge his rule. Indeed, we aim to worship and serve him in all that we do. We say that we aim to serve this king in his kingdom in all that we do. But serving him in our daily occupations does not make us the church. To be the church, we need to assemble. The church is *the assembly* of the citizens of his kingdom. The church goes into the building on Sundays and goes out of the building on Sundays. The church

assembles before Jesus Christ and in his presence. He addresses the assembly of his kingdom's citizens from the pulpit through the minister and we respond with active listening, with prayers, and praise. One person alone or two persons is not the church, for the church is the *assembly* of God's kingdom.

This church exists from the beginning to end of time in the one truth of the gospel. Only God can see all of its citizens at once, and they will all assemble before him in worship upon Judgment Day. In the meantime, this one church is made visible wherever believers gather in local assemblies. The local church is a microcosm of the universal. The two are not essentially different, but the one is the reality of the other made visible. Whatever is "church" is rooted in Christ, its head and king. The church father Cyprian said that the church is united to Christ like the sun and its rays, like a tree's trunk and its branches, like many streams to their one source.<sup>1</sup> This is true of each local church as much as of the one, holy, catholic church of Christ. The local church is the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church of Christ in local expression. We could think of the church like a repeating fractal pattern, a pattern that is the same at every scale and repeats itself (like the branch of a fern, the bronchial tree in your lungs, snowflakes, and even river systems).

What is a *federation*? A federation necessarily involves more than one party. It becomes possible when more than one local church exists and these local churches find each other in the unity of the faith. Each one is a full manifestation of the church itself, but they agree to express their love and joy in Christ together. They agree to exercise and practice their unity under a certain agreement. That agreement is called the *church order*. The churches that have made this church order keep it because they have made their Christian promise to one another to keep it, plus they have also agreed to a process whereby they will seek to change it if they do not agree. If they break the church order, they are failing to keep their promises. So then, we have defined the church, a church federation, and a church order.

What are the *essentials* of a church federation? This conference will seek to answer that. But let me begin by stating that I think we all should agree that the statements found in our Belgic Confession, articles 27–32 should be considered essential points. Nothing should compromise our adherence to these points, for we confess that these are fully biblical. These points include:

- The duty of all believers to join the church of Christ (28)
- The duty of all believers to discern what is the true church of Christ (29)
- The duty of all churches to exhibit the marks of the true church of Christ (29)
- The desire of all believers to show from themselves and to see in others the marks of Christians (29)
- The true church should have ministers, elders, and deacons, who form the council of the church (30)
- The church should follow biblical instructions and good order in calling men to serve in the offices (31)
- The church shall ensure that Christ's sole Headship is acknowledged by preventing any minister from having authority over another (31)

---

<sup>1</sup> See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.2.6.

- Members must honour the ministers, elders, and deacons whom God sets over them (31)
- No church shall deviate from what Christ has commanded (32)
- Those who govern the church should establish a spiritual order, that is, a Spirit-guided church order, based on God's Word (30, 32)
  - This order should not bind or compel any conscience beyond God's Word (32)
  - This order should preserve and promote harmony and unity (32)

I believe we are right to state that these are essentials. When we discuss various other points, we want to know that they adhere to these essentials. If other points are essential, we must carefully argue our case for this from Scripture.

At the same time I don't want to be misunderstood: this is not to say that only a minimum number of points in the church order actually are important. Once we have made a church order together, we bind ourselves to follow all of it, not just the essential parts.

### **The organic roots of the Reformed view of church federation**

Imagine, if you will, that the year is 1970 and you are young man, a South African Sotho speaker, and by the grace of God you have come to know Jesus Christ as your Saviour. The Spirit has moved you to study the Word of God. You have realized that if he is your Saviour, then he has laid down his life to redeem you and has made you his own entirely. You desire to serve him as your Lord. You are now determined to know the whole counsel of God not only for your salvation, but for all of life, for his church as a whole, including for the governance and guidance of his church. By God's grace you are granted an opportunity to study at a suitable seminary. It's 1970, so there is no such thing as online courses. Imagine that in this time you are the only Sotho-speaking man who is pursuing God's Word with such intensity and depth. You now return to your community and begin to preach the gospel, all on your own. After a decade a church of forty members has formed, with elders, deacons, and the Reformed confessions. But there you are all alone, praying frequently that God would raise up more churches among your people.

Well, now imagine that you, the lone Sotho pastor, and your congregation receive a letter from another group of Sotho-speaking believers who live about a two-hour drive away. This group has somehow heard of yours. They are former Pentecostals who have been on a journey of growth in doctrine and practice. Their letter states that they have been praying for years to find like-minded believers with whom they can confess the fulness of the faith as they have come to know it. They are wondering what you believe and whether you would be willing to dialogue with them. What would be your reaction?

Would your little consistory not explore this matter immediately? Would you perhaps read the letter to your congregation with tears in your eyes and tremor in your voice? This letter means that the Lord God has been at work, without any doing of your own, preparing the ground, planting the seed, making it grow, all without you, and only a two-hour drive away! O the great power and love of God! How he can plan wonderful surprises for us!

You can imagine a similar scenario playing out in Brazil, Poland, China, Argentina—just about anywhere today, even in Switzerland and Germany, the heartland of the Reformation.

What has happened? Two churches have found each other in the unity of faith. The Spirit has worked this faith in their hearts and they recognize the Spirit's work in each other. The same Spirit joins their hearts together. They want to recognize each other as true churches, so they proceed with investigation and soon they exchange pastors for a Sunday. Their elders meet together and make some decisions about accepting each other's members, serving as a court of appeal for each other if necessary, and holding a church retreat twice a year together. What is happening? The churches are forming a bond and making decisions together. They establish a committee to look at liturgy and Lord's Supper policies. Very soon they realize that they have made some standing decisions that amount to the beginnings of a church order. At no point did they look at each other and say, "Let's federate," or "Let's form a covenant together." Rather, they naturally acted out of the unity of faith, out of the joy of witnessing the Spirit's work in each other. God added a blessing into their life as his church for which they responded to him with joy and thanksgiving. What you have in these scenarios are the essentials of a church federation, and they arise in a very organic way by the work of the Lord Jesus Christ gathering his church by his Spirit and Word, putting in his people the desire to use their gifts readily and cheerfully for the benefit and well-being of the other members (HC, QA 54, 55). This does not mean there were no bumps in the road or no hardships ahead, but fundamentally, the essentials of church federation are eminently positive. I submit to you that these are the proper organic roots of Reformed church federation.

If we approach church federation and church order in this sort of way, we realize that *the church order* is in essence a bundle of synod decisions, not a foreign entity imposed upon the churches. It is something that they themselves have created in response to God's Word and Spirit as the conditions under which they want to demonstrate the unity of their faith together, to build each other up, and to meet the challenges of the world. The church order belongs to these churches, but if it is soundly based upon biblical principles it is, in its essence, not merely theirs, but something that should belong to all faithful churches. No one should say that it is imposed on them. That is not its nature. They either agree to it or they are not in the federation.

Let us now move on to the historical part. As we do so, you will see that reality is not quite as glamorous as the ideal that I have just laid out. In fact, the Reformation did not begin with church "federations" such as we have them. They came later.

### **The historical roots of the Reformed view of church federation**

In the summer of 1520, shortly after Martin Luther was served by Pope Leo X with a papal bull threatening excommunication (*exsurge Domine*), he began to think about the role of the princes in promoting Reformation. By August he had produced a tract in German entitled, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate*. As it had become clear to Luther that the church authorities and the pope were refusing to reform the church, he laid this obligation upon the German princes.<sup>2</sup> This was the beginning of what has been called the "Magisterial Reformation." That term "magisterial" simply means that the magistrates, the civil rulers, were expected to lead the way in bringing about Reformation.

---

<sup>2</sup> William J. Wright, "The Homberg Synod and Philip of Hesse's Plan for a New Church-State Settlement," in *The Sixteenth-Century Journal* 4.2 (Oct 1973): 30.

Luther did not mean that the ruler could simply legislate reform and make it happen. He knew that preaching had to occur, that people had to be led to see the need for reform, and that only then could structural changes follow. But he did expect that the ruler would protect such preachers, would support them, and would seek the reformation of his territory as a whole.

On this latter point Luther was followed by most of the Reformers. They generally expected entire cities, territories, and even whole nations to adopt the new ways of reform. The term “Protestant” comes from a meeting in 1529 called the “Diet of Speyer II.” It was a meeting of princes, not clerics, with the emperor’s regent (Charles V could not attend, and was represented by his regent, Ferdinand). When the regent became harsh towards the reform-minded princes, they officially “protested” on April 25, 1529, arguing that the regent’s prohibition of religious reformation was contrary to the Word of God, to their consciences, and to an imperial decision of three years prior (Diet of Speyer I). They lodged a protest by which they appealed the decision of the 1529 Diet to the emperor and to a general or German council. From this protest came the term “Protestant.” We are named after a protest lodged by German princes, not by clergy. The separation of church and state at that time did not at all mean that the state had nothing to do with religion, not even that the state had no interest in the doctrine of the church.

I could explain how many territories at the time of the Reformation were reformed by the leadership of a prince or a city council, but I will limit this study to three: Hesse in the German territories, and Bern and Geneva in the Swiss territories. The important point is that none of these involved a church “federation” in the sense in which we are speaking.

Hesse was a territory called a “landgraviate,” and was governed by its landgrave, Philip. He was one of the princes who led the official “protest” in 1529. In October 1526 he called a synod at Homberg, which synod appointed a committee, which committee drafted a document called, “Reformation of the Hessian Church.” In a well-argued essay, one scholar has shown that this reformation document, a kind of church order, was primarily the work of Philip of Hesse himself, not of his theologians, François Lambert and Adam Kraft.<sup>3</sup> We learn that, “The Hessian plans . . . emphasized the authority of the prince over the church, and his role in the affairs of the church, more strongly than the Saxon reformers did, especially more than Luther.”<sup>4</sup> What Philip had in mind was the reform of his entire territory. His own new-found faith, based on reading Scripture and Luther, was so important to him that he wanted to legislate reform of all his subjects; thus, his church would be “territorial” and “evangelical.”<sup>5</sup> Luther warned him that he could not simply legislate this, and that he should give the Holy Spirit time to do his work through the preaching.<sup>6</sup> This is not to say that Luther did not favour a magisterial reformation, but that he was not as positive as Philip of Hesse about legislating reform by fiat. In this case we do not encounter a series of churches forming a federation but a prince overseeing a reform of the churches in his territory. Note well that our very own Heidelberg Catechism, composed in

---

<sup>3</sup> Just the same, In a document that provided the basis for discussion at the Homberg Synod, Lambert had stated that the princes and secular authorities had the duty to “see to it that the decisions of the church are obeyed,” even with a “strong hand.” Wright, “The Homberg Synod,” 28–9.

<sup>4</sup> Wright, “The Homberg Synod,” 30.

<sup>5</sup> Wright, “The Homberg Synod,” 32–3.

<sup>6</sup> Wright, “The Homberg Synod,” 35, 38–9.

the same area as Hesse 35 years later, was commissioned by the civil ruler, Elector Frederick III, and written by ministers of the gospel whose stipend was paid by him.

For our second example we move ahead to January 1528. The city council of the German-speaking Swiss canton of Bern ordered a great public disputation to be held regarding the reformation of the church. Berchtold Haller had been working as a reformer in Bern for some time without success; he now drew up ten theses, had Zwingli approve them, and these served as the basis for nineteen days of disputation.<sup>7</sup> Hundreds of theologians attended to hear both academic debate and popular sermons. Zwingli came from Zurich and Oecolampadius from Basel for the Reformed side, as those cities had already held disputations and adopted the ways of reform. The reformed arguments won the day, especially when a priest abandoned saying mass in mid-sentence at a side altar in the cathedral where the debate was occurring.<sup>8</sup> The city council soon voted to proceed with reformation. This made Bern's reformation magisterial. To highlight the role of the city council, consider the fact that the origin of the Reformed "consistory" seems to be the *consistorium*, a committee appointed by Bern's city council for the regulation of morals and marriage in their city.<sup>9</sup> Basically, the city council took over this jurisdiction from the old church, partly because of their concern about how poorly the clergy had been taking care of this. Once again, we are not really describing a federation of equal churches but a powerful city that would lead the way in introducing reformation elsewhere.

Bern's power as a Swiss canton was quickly evident when the city council almost immediately employed Guillaume Farel as their missionary preacher, who tirelessly promoted disputations and reform in the French-speaking Swiss cantons. His Bernese protection saved his life more than once.

One of the cities that began to receive Farel's attention by 1532 was Geneva. Three years earlier, in 1529, the Genevans had rudely kicked him out. But in January 1534 Bern ordered that Geneva should allow Farel to debate the Dominican preacher Guy Furbity in public. After three days of debate, Furbity was tossed in jail (where he remained until April 1536). The reformers then initiated daily preaching in Geneva. In June 1535 Farel debated Pierre Caroli, a doctor of the Sorbonne, with success. What was the result? A couple of months later, in August 1535, the celebration of the mass was provisionally abolished in Geneva. Daily gospel preaching continued. The rule of the Duke of Savoy was also thrown off and the city declared itself to be a semi-autonomous republic. Then, on May 21, 1536 the majority of the city's household heads voted to "live henceforward according to the holy law of the Gospel and the word of God, and to abandon all masses and other ceremonies, papal abuses, images, and idols."<sup>10</sup> This referendum secured the city for the reformation. Five months later, in October 1536, Calvin arrived, and was quickly recruited by Farel to assist in him in Geneva.

---

<sup>7</sup> Thesis 1 stated. "The holy Christian Church, whose only Head is Christ, is born of the Word of God, and abides in the same, and listens not to the voice of a stranger." This thesis combined the sole headship of Christ with the sufficiency of Scripture.

<sup>8</sup> James I. Good, *The Historical Handbook of the Reformed Church in the United States* (Philadelphia: Reformed Church Publication Board, 1897), 11–12; Irena D. Backus, *Baden and Berne*

<sup>9</sup> In German the term was *Chorgericht*. Herman Speelman, *Calvin and the Independence of the Church of the Church*, trans. Albert Gootjes (Göttingen: V&R, 2014), 27, cf. 38.

<sup>10</sup> Benedict, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed*, 81; Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography*, 114–18.

Let's just say that when Geneva developed its own consistory, the elders were selected from and by one of the city councils. As in Hesse and Bern, so too Geneva's reformation was magisterial and its consistory was connected to the city council. The city council was quite interested in overseeing reform because its former prince-bishop had all but promoted immorality—the city council had a greater desire for holiness than did their bishop! Very quickly, all of Geneva was expected to be Reformed and go to church faithfully to hear Reformed preaching, be baptized, catechized, and married by Reformed pastors.

Although these pastors met in synods from time to time with pastors from other Swiss cantons, and although the cantons formed loose confederations or alliances for the purpose of civil defense, the Reformed churches in the Swiss territories more or less each had a distinct church order for each canton.<sup>11</sup> The churches were not in one federation.

Nor were they entirely free of hierarchy. Zurich's lead pastor, called their *antistes*, functioned like a bishop. Basel often had the same.<sup>12</sup> The churches around Geneva were really under Geneva's authority, as its city council made decisions about who would pastor the country parishes around their city.<sup>13</sup> Our roots are in these churches in terms of doctrine, the marks of the church, and the formation of consistories, but the way we understand church federation comes from a bit later time and another place.

Where then do we find the historical roots of the Reformed church federation such as is presumed by the Church Order of Dort? The historical roots of our church order lie in a strand of the reformation that was not magisterial. By that I am not referring to the Anabaptist sects. Rather, I am thinking of the *French Reformed Churches*, which held their first national synod in 1559 in Paris.

What makes these churches different than the Reformed churches in the German and Swiss territories? The difference is that as much as the French Reformed Churches sought to receive approval from the French king, they did not obtain it. Many Reformed churches were established, but the French king remained Roman Catholic. In 1524 a group of Reformers at Meaux that included Guillaume Farel had been broken up by order of the king.<sup>14</sup> In 1534 Calvin had to flee from Paris.<sup>15</sup> In the 1550s decrees against reform-minded persons at Toulouse were enforced, with some deaths.<sup>16</sup> In 1558 Protestants in Paris were jailed and some died.<sup>17</sup> After 1562 waves of persecution began, and in 1572 St. Bartholomew's massacre left thousands of Protestants dead. By 1585 full-out civil war occurred, but the Reformed had great hope in Henry of Navarre, who had four prominent Reformed pastors as his chaplains in the war.<sup>18</sup> He won the war but by 1593 he became Roman Catholic to obtain Paris. In a settlement of 1598 he granted official toleration to the Reformed churches, but under subsequent kings the toleration

---

<sup>11</sup> See a similar point made by Amy Nelson Burnett, "It Varies from Canton to Canton': Zurich, Basel, and the Swiss Reformation," *Calvin Theological Journal* 44:2 (Nov 2009): 252, 262.

<sup>12</sup> Burnett, "It Varies from Canton to Canton," 255.

<sup>13</sup> It may be that the churches as such did not rule over each other, but the city council certainly did.

<sup>14</sup> Zuidema and Van Raalte, *Early French Reform*

<sup>15</sup> Selderhuis, *John Calvin*

<sup>16</sup> Van Raalte, *Chandieu*

<sup>17</sup> Van Raalte, *Chandieu*

<sup>18</sup> Van Raalte, *Chandieu*,

was whittled away little by little until 1685, when all Protestantism was declared illegal in France.

We now may overview four moments at the beginnings of the history of the French and Dutch Reformed Churches to learn about the roots of Reformed federational church government.

Here is the first moment, in 1557: Going back to the 1550s, already then the French churches had to meet secretly and had to devise a system by which they could recognize each other and work together in the unity of the faith. The first meeting we know of, which produced some rudimentary points of church order for the churches around Poitiers in 1557, made a fundamental point: **“Inasmuch as all primacy is dangerous and tends to a tyranny, as one can see from the example of the papacy, we shall keep ourselves from deciding anything which pertains to the other churches without their consent . . .”**<sup>19</sup> The brothers went on to say that decisions that affected all the churches should only be made at a synod that represents all the churches. Consent was key; any decision pertaining to all the churches would require a **common consent**. It could not be imposed upon them because there was no civil ruler who would impose it. The churches would each have to agree on their own. This rule of needing **common consent**—and with it the idea of a **church federation**—arose only as the church of necessity became more separated from the state.

The Reformed churches generally had been arguing for the sole headship of Christ from the beginning of the Reformation. We can see this from the first thesis at the disputation of Bern in 1528, which stated, **“The holy Christian Church, whose only Head is Christ, is born of the Word of God, and abides in the same, and listens not to the voice of a stranger.”** Yet this thesis did not preclude the role of the magistrate in overseeing reform and in legislating that the churches would follow the gospel. They did not consider this to compromise Christ’s headship of the church. This concludes discussion of the first moment, 1557 in Poitiers.

The second moment, 1559: The French Confession of 1559, art. 30, developed Poitiers further. Following Calvin’s draft confession on this point, it stated that *because* Christ is the only Head of the church, all pastors have equal authority and power. It then came to the further conclusion that **“For this reason no church may assert any dominion or lordship over another.”**<sup>20</sup> These words are original to Calvin’s draft and correspond to arguments he had made in his *Institutes* about the Roman see not having primacy over other sees or bishoprics. The argument against Rome was a stock Protestant position, but it seems that the first churches to work out the headship of Christ for each local church were the French Reformed, and the reason for this was closely tied to the fact that they did not enjoy the favour of the magistrates. None of the churches could depend upon the king to legislate reform, to require

---

<sup>19</sup> “Pour autant que toute primauté est dangereuse et aspire à une tyrannie, comme on en voit l’exemple en la papauté, à ceste cause on se donna garde de resoudre chose qui touche les autres Eglises sans le constentement d’icelles et en ester requis, ce qui se pourra faire en synode legitimement assemble, là où pourront assister ceux qui seront deputez d’une chacune Eglise.” Philip Benedict and Nicolas Fornerod, eds., *L’organisation et l’action des églises réformées de France (1557-1563): Synodes provinciaux et autres documents* (Geneva: Droz, 2012), 5. Compare Speelman, *Calvin and the Independence of the Church*, 154.

<sup>20</sup> Olivier Fatio, “La Confession de foi,” 124; Bakhuizen van den Brink, 120. Calvin addresses the place of Christ as the Head of the church in several places of the *Institutes*. See, for instance, 3.16 (Christ as only Head) 4.6.1–2, 4.6.5–11, 4.7.6, 4.7.12, and 4.20.7–9.



churches to adhere to it, to support the pastors financially, or to call synods to resolve difficulties. He would do nothing of the sort, so the churches had to undertake this entirely on their own. I am fairly certain they would have been happy to have the king legislate reform and they would have acknowledged his authority to do so, but he would not initiate reform. Thus the very first article of the first federational Reformed church order, the *Discipline Ecclesiastique* of the French Reformed Churches, adopted at their first synod, in 1559, stated, **“No church may make a claim to primacy or dominion over another, nor especially the ministers of one church, some over the others, nor the elders, the deacons, some over the others.”**<sup>21</sup>

According to one scholar, Calvin did not want the French churches to adopt a confession and church order precisely because he wanted them to secure the favour of the king, and thereby to bring *all* of France into the Reformation. Until that occurred, he preferred for the churches to stay underground.<sup>22</sup> But the French churches felt that they had to deal with the reality of each other’s existence in a situation where magisterial favour was highly unlikely. Beza’s *Histoire Ecclesiastique* depended upon solid statistical evidence from these churches and claimed that there were 2150 Reformed churches in France in 1562. Two scholars have carefully collated all the same information and noted that the number includes all the assemblies of believers who wanted to live only according to the gospel, whether they had consistories or not. Those that were *dressées*, that is, fully set up, with a consistory constituted, numbered 816. Thus in 1562 in France there were 816 “instituted” churches, and the number grew to 2150 if all preaching points were included. These are remarkable numbers, especially in light of royal disfavor!<sup>23</sup> But it was a reality with which their church order had to reckon, and in 1559 their first article did so with utmost clarity.

Now for the third moment, 1564: Just North of France, in the Low Countries, the same situation of persecution prevailed. In 1561, in the Belgic Confession, Guido de Brès took over the confessional point about no church or office bearer having domination over another (BC, art. 32). These churches called themselves the “churches under the cross,” and at first relied on the *Discipline Ecclesiastique* of the French churches for their church order. The provincial synod of Antwerp in 1564 established as the second article of their acts that, **“No church may lay**

---

<sup>21</sup> “Aucune Eglise ne pourra pretendre primauté, ni domination, sur l’autre: ni pareillement les Ministres d’une Eglise les uns sur les autres, ni les Anciens, ou Diacres, les uns sur les autres.” Jean Aymon, *Tous les synodes nationaux des Eglises Reformées de France*, vol. 1 (La Haye: Delo, 1710), 1.

<sup>22</sup> Speelman, *Calvin and the Independence of the Church*, 154–6.

<sup>23</sup> It is interesting that Calvin retained his original dedication of the *institutes* to King Francis I in all editions, from 1536 through 1559. Similar to the sometime policy in the German territories—the policy that “such was the prince, such was the religion” (*cuius regio, eius religio*)—Calvin, Beza, and most Reformers thought of a given city, territory, or nation as naturally following a single religion. How they implored God for the heart of the king to be changed! They had support from his sister Marguerite, but minimal support from Francis. Later, when in the early 1600s King Henry IV would provide financial support to the Reformed churches, this would become a tool in Cardinal Richelieu’s hand to assert control of the churches. We see that magisterial reformation is not necessarily a good thing. Only after St. Bartholomew’s Massacre in 1572, when it became clear to Beza that the Reformed churches were not going to win the day in France, did he begin to entertain the idea that perhaps a jurisdiction could have two accepted churches within it. But it seems his view was driven more by necessity of the circumstances than exegesis of the Scriptures. The pluralism within which we exist today was only rarely envisioned.

**claim to primacy or dominion, one over another, nor in the same way the ministers, some over others—notably those who are from the same church—nor similarly the deacons and elders.”<sup>24</sup>**

Now finally, the fourth moment, 1571: The churches in the Dutch Lowlands formed under conditions similar to those of France. The King of Spain, staunchly Roman Catholic, was determined to stamp out the Reformed churches. Their first synod therefore met in a German territory, in Emden. The year was 1571, and it was too dangerous to meet in the Netherlands. We should not be surprised, then, that the first article of their church order was identical to the first article of the *Discipline Ecclesiastique* that the French churches had adopted twelve years before. **“No church shall lord it over another church, no office bearer—be he minister, elder or deacon—over another office bearer . . .”<sup>25</sup>** Same situation, same faith, same principle.

Surprisingly, in 1583 the Dutch and French churches not only subscribed to each other’s confessions of faith, but also to each other’s church orders, “as a proof and testimony of the mutual agreement of all the churches of both federations, as much in doctrine as in good order.”<sup>26</sup>

These four moments, 1557 in Poitiers, 1559 in Paris, 1564 in Antwerp, and 1571 in Emden, provide us with the historical roots of the Reformed view of church federation. Let us now look briefly at two points for the biblical roots of the Reformed view of church federation (at the conference this section was skipped over in speaking).

### **The biblical roots of the Reformed view of church federation**

No one who reads the New Testament can doubt that the churches worked together. A study of their care for the poor, and the apostle Paul’s directions to various churches to collect money on the Sundays, so that he could bring it to the poor in Jerusalem, shows that all of the churches worked together to help each other, under the apostle’s direction. They were endeavouring to fulfil his command to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:1).

---

<sup>24</sup> “Nulle Eglise ne pourra pretendre primauté ni domination l’une sur l’autre, ni semblablement les Ministres les uns sur les autres, et notamment ceux qui sont d’une mesme Eglise, ni semblablement les Diacres ete Anciens.” See N. C. Kist, ed., “De Synoden der Nerderlandsche Hervormde Kereken onder Het Kruis, gedurende de jaren 1563–1577, gehouden in Brabant, Vlaanderen, etc., in *“Nederlandsch Archief voor Kerkelijk Geschiedenis, (1849) p. 141.*

<sup>25</sup> “Gheen Kercke sal over een ander Kercke, gheen Dienaer des Woorts, gheen Ouderlinck, noch Diaken sal d’een over d’ander heerschappie voeren, maar een yghelijck sal hen voor alle suspicien, ende aenlockinge om te heerschappen wachten.” See P. Biesterveld and H. H. Kuyper, eds., *Kerkelijk Handboekje* (Kampen: Bos, 1905), 35. Readers may note that I have not included in this discussion the so-called “Convent of Wesel” of 1568. This is because there is no evidence that any such meeting ever occurred; rather, the manuscript was probably devised by Petrus Dathenus in the event that William of Orange would be successful in 1568, and then men from various cities of Dutch refugees signed it at different times. No synod between 1568 and 1618 ever referred to any decision from Wesel, but all treated Emden 1571 as the first Dutch national synod (as it is, the articles by Dathenus, dated 3 Nov 1568, do contain a muted statement about churches not domineering over each other; see 8.20). See Jesse Spohnholz, *The Convent of Wesel: The Event that Never Was and the Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>26</sup> “They also opened their pulpits to each other’s pastors and the French decided to send deputies to the Dutch synods.” Theodore G. Van Raalte, “The French Reformed Synods,” in *The Theology of the French Reformed Churches*, ed. Martin Klauber (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 94.

Some Reformed folk argue that unity is best found in diversity, and that we should therefore encourage diversity of practices among the churches, to show all the more that our unity is in Christ, not in certain outward practices. Unity is good, they say, but not uniformity. That may sound compelling, but in fact it is a false dilemma. The apostles desired both unity in Christ and uniformity in practice. Between different congregations, diversity is the diversity of languages, of locations, of people groups, of ages, and classes. Within a congregation, diversity may be many of those things, but it is especially the diversity of gifts (Rom 12; 1 Cor 12). However, a diversity of practices within a given congregation and between various related congregations is not encouraged.

Rather, we find that the apostles keep together both *unity* from *uniformity*. Just after stating that “God is not a God of disorder but of peace,” Paul writes, “*As in all the churches of the saints, the women should keep silent in the churches*” (1 Cor 14:33–34). In his letter to the Corinthians he particularly emphasizes that they should follow the practices he teaches in all the rest of the churches. Paul commends them when he writes, “Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you” (1 Cor 11:2). But when the Corinthians deviated from the other churches in the matter of head coverings (a socio-cultural indication of the woman being under her husband’s headship), he taught them the right practices and then exhorted them, “If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor do the churches of God” (1 Cor 11:16). Earlier, regarding the question of whether one should obtain circumcision or undo it upon becoming a Christian, or whether one should continue as a slave or seek freedom, Paul writes that each is to remain in the place God has assigned him, adding, “This is my rule in all the churches” (1 Cor 7:17). Similarly, when he urges the Corinthians to endure suffering for Christ instead of being proud, and to imitate himself in this, he adds that he is sending Timothy, to remind them of his own ways in Christ, “as I teach them everywhere in every church” (1 Cor 4:17). Finally, when he teaches them to give offerings each Sunday, he states, “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 . . .” (1 Cor 16:1–2). In sum, the apostle urges a uniformity of practice to a significant degree. Since the role of apostle is completed and no church may rule over another and no office bearer over another, the best way to achieve such uniformity of practice is for churches to federate together and come to agreements based on common consent.

We can find a similar effort made towards a uniformity of teaching in Acts 15. The events of this chapter are not a true federative synod such as Reformed churches today might hold, but the events of Acts 15 do show us how the autonomy of the local churches of Jerusalem and Antioch were upheld, while the broad authority of the apostles helped determine the progress of doctrine. Let us review what really happened in Acts 15.

Some Christian men came from Judea to Antioch and taught Judaizing ideas (15:1), though it turns out they did this “without authorization” (15:24) and that they may have also reached churches in Syria and Cilicia (15:23–24). Their teachings greatly disturbed the church of Antioch. Paul and Barnabas disputed with these men from Jerusalem (15:2). The church of Antioch then selected Paul and Barnabas, with some other brothers, and officially “sent” them “to see the apostles and elders about this” (15:2–3). Thus, the church of Antioch is checking whether or not Jerusalem as “sending church” stands behind the teaching of the Judaizers who came from there. Jerusalem is also a kind of “mother church” at this point in the early church.

The gospel has gone out from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and is now going “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

When Paul and Barnabas arrive in Jerusalem some Christian Judaizers (of the party of the Pharisees) teach what the Judaizers from Jerusalem had taught in Antioch (15:5). They say that the Gentile converts must undergo circumcision and must keep the whole law of Moses. This includes all the clean and unclean food laws, the laws of sacrifice, etc. With Paul & Barnabas’s concern now confirmed, the apostles and elders meet to consider this question that Paul and Barnabas had presented (15:6).

It appears that Paul and Barnabas expected a decision from the church leaders of Jerusalem, and that Paul and Barnabas themselves are not among the decision makers here, i.e., it is not a true “synod” in the sense that we are familiar with in our own Reformed practices, but is a case of a sending church needing to render a judgment about the teachings of men who went out from that church.

In the meeting Peter confirms from his own revelatory experiences (see Acts 10 & 11) that God has brought in the Gentiles purely by faith, without any other marks of distinction; implying that the Judaizers are teaching falsely (15:7–11). Paul and Barnabas then add their testimony from working among Gentiles (15:12). James, the half-brother of our Lord, and an apostle and elder from Jerusalem, states that Peter’s, Paul’s, and Barnabas’s testimonies agree with the Old Testament and that the Gentiles should not be held to the whole law of Moses (15:13–21).

The assembly decides to choose “some of their own men” and “send” them back to Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia with Paul and Barnabas in order to clarify matters for the Gentile believers, whence the problem had first arisen. They send Judas and Silas as official representatives of the Jerusalem church as well, to bear the letter and to verify the decision. The apostles and elders state that they have come to this decision under the special inspiration of the Holy Spirit (15:28), a point that makes the Jerusalem council (“synod”?) unique. Further, this council was unique because the apostles were present, and carried an authority that extended over other churches. Once they died, this authority had served its purpose and ceased.

Thus, Acts 15 gives us an example of Antioch recognizing Jerusalem’s authority, of Antioch officially “sending” its own delegates to consult the church authorities in Jerusalem about the teachers who had come from there. It was not a modern-day synod. Even Paul and Barnabas did not come to participate in a vote, but to submit a question. Jerusalem, in turn, did not rule over the churches of Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia, but sent a letter with two of their own elders to confirm by word of mouth that Jerusalem did not endorse what the Judaizers had taught. Later, Antioch “sent” these men back to Jerusalem (15:33).

At the same time, given the early stages of the gospel’s spread, the role of the apostles as intermediaries of divine revelation and as having authority in more than one church, the Jerusalem council sent out a letter to the Gentiles specifying with apostolic authority that the Gentile believers were free from the ceremonial laws of Moses. They were only required to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality (15:29). I would suggest that the “sexual immorality” in view here is probably the laws of consanguinity found in Leviticus 18 and similar laws against sexual immorality in Leviticus 20. In my view, everyone agreed that the Gentiles were to abide by what we usually

call the moral law, and thus they would have been assuming that adultery and fornication as such were not even in dispute.

Whatever the details of the operations of the Jerusalem council—and I trust readers can appreciate that they are well worth exploring, as we have above—it is clear that the churches were acting together for the sake of the gospel. They did not ignore one another; they were not independentistic. At the same time, the churches respected each other's authority, asking the sending church to judge regarding the teachings of men who went out from it.

The care of the poor and the way that the churches dealt with the Judaizers who troubled Antioch shows ways in which the churches respected each other's jurisdictions, cared for each other's spiritual and material needs, and at the same time were obedient to apostolic authority.

### **Conclusions**

In conclusion, I present seven benefits of the church polity that grows out of forming a church federation such as we have. I then conclude that some kind of federating is not merely for the well-being of the church, but that the essentials of a church federation is itself essential. Here, then are my seven conclusion.

First, forming a federation of churches fits the doctrine of the church better than other alternatives inasmuch as the federation forms organically. The federation is made up of churches who have been given the Holy Spirit, who are aiming for maturity in Christ. They must not bind the consciences of believers against the Word, and yet they must also pursue unity with fellow faithful churches. The federation is an organic outgrowth of how true churches should work together without falsely binding anyone's conscience.

Second, this kind of federation flourishes without magisterial approval. Thus it can be used under any kind of political regime. It has no central nervous system that any civil ruler can assault. The central office is in heaven, and he who sits in heaven laughs them to scorn. He does not need their approval, though he does call for their obedience.

Third, the Reformed federation follows the principle of subsidiarity. That is to say, decisions are kept closest to those who are affected most. As many decisions as possible are kept at the local level. This also means that the formation of broader assemblies is a flexible matter. If your federation has four churches, you probably meet in synod twice or three times per year. If you have ten churches, you form two classes that meet at least twice per year and then a synod once per year. If you have forty churches, you could form eight classes of five churches each, two regional synods of four classes each, and a general synod that would then only need to meet once per three years. The principle of subsidiarity and the federational system has this kind of flexibility.

Fourth, the Reformed federation prevents false hierarchies. Because of its voluntary nature, each church agrees to be a part of it, and these churches themselves have made the regulations. As soon as one church rules over another or one office bearer over another they act contrary to the very nature of their church order. This in no way at all prevents a robust system of admonitions and censure, but it does prevent any outside body from removing the lawful office bearers from a given congregation.

Fifth, this polity is better suited to an amillennial eschatology. It is more realistic as regards the persecution of the church, knowing that it will happen. It does not tie the church's

well-being to that of the state or to an ever-increasing greatness. The small, persecuted church can covenant with any other small, persecuted church as they await the return of Christ.

Sixth, this federational polity is better suited for aiming for a purer church, recognizing the deceptiveness of men's hearts. When the civil rulers favour the true church, many more tares are sown among the wheat—the church soon fills with hypocrites. From that perspective, it is not surprising that the *Nadere Reformatie* preaching developed as it did. The ministers were well aware that many joined the Reformed church in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries because it benefited them economically and politically. A federational polity in a pluralistic society has the members join the church in a way similar to how the churches join the federation: the joining is voluntary.

Finally, in the seventh place, this federational polity is more fitting to an egalitarian society. Where people are fundamentally equal as made in God's image, where believers have equal standing as those united to Christ (Gal 3:28), and where each church rightly enjoys equality with all other churches, this polity has its proper place.

These seven points do not, however, preclude that the civil authorities ought to support and defend the church's freedom of worship. But it does make more clear the distinction of jurisdictions, heading back more in the direction of Luther, even if Luther did not work out the principle of equality as he should have.

Finally, the Reformed church federation is both part of the being of the church and its well-being. It is part of the being of the church because the unity of faith erupts with joy when it finds fellow faithful churches. A church that ignores others in isolation is missing out on a great blessing of the Lord, or worse, it is living in self-righteous isolation. We do not have the option of ignoring each other but have moral and spiritual obligation to unite. At the same time, the formation and functioning of a federation is also for the well-being of the church because a church that exists all alone as one church that is faithful to the Lord is yet a faithful church of Christ and complete under him, having all the gifts that he wants it to have. Each church is a local manifestation of the very thing that the church is. It has the very faith by which all churches in the federation are united.

Prop: a beautiful frond of an Australian fern tree to illustrate fractal patterns. At the end I could go back to the frond and hold its point, to state that the federation is for the well-being of the church inasmuch as the little point is fully a church in itself already.