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Editorial Notes

It was, I think, Alexander Pope, that master of the couplet, who wrote:

Good nature and good sense must ever join;
To err is human, to forgive divine.

No matter how meticulously the material for the *Journal* is prepared — it is carefully scrutinized at least three times — errors remain. This sad fact remains true even though computers are equipped with various devices to minimize the possibility of error. Some errors are relatively insignificant and can be overlooked. Some are very serious and require an apology.

The error to which we refer is of the latter kind. And the apology which the error requires must be made in the public forum.

I refer to the article of Rev. Bassam M. Mādany which appeared in the last issue of the *Journal*. Rev. Madany had come from Illinois to the Seminary to speak for us on the general subject of missions to the Muslims. He had given us two fine lectures, soundly rooted in the Word of God and of great help in understanding this work. We received his kind permission to publish these speeches, and proceeded to do so. The first one appeared in the Fall, 1995 issue; the second one was to appear in the Spring, 1996 issue. However, after we mailed the Spring issue we discovered, to our great chagrin, that, instead of printing the second of Rev. Madany's two fine speeches, we had reprinted the first. The second one, therefore, appears belatedly, with our apologies to Rev. Madany, in this issue. Its title is "The Christian Mission to Islam: Islam Viewed from a Biblical Perspective."

If only computers would signal such errors as well as spelling errors and typos...!

* * * *

In September of 1995 the Seminary sponsored a conference on the general subject of Reformed Church Government. It was attended by visitors from the area as well as from around the country. In the conference the fundamental principles of the Reformed system of church government were carefully developed and explained in three speeches: The Biblical Basis of Reformed Church Government; The Autonomy of

the Local Church; and The Authority of the Major Assemblies. The faculty were the speakers.

The subject of church government was chosen because of its importance in today's church world. It is very difficult to find in this country a denomination which holds firmly to the principles which are outlined in Holy Scripture. In fact, on the whole question of church government many denominations are unable to determine which way to go. Some denominations, even in the Reformed tradition, have become hierarchical. Others, as a reaction to the stifling and high-handed actions of hierarchical decisions, have abandoned Reformed church government altogether and have gone the way of Congregationalism, which, at bottom, is a denial of the biblical doctrine of the church of Christ.

To find one's way through the welter of opinions is not easy. In the hopes that a discussion of what is Reformed will help others, this conference was called and these speeches were delivered. We believe that they represent the historic Reformed position and that only with such government as this will the church of Christ be blessed. ▲

The Christian Mission to Islam

Islam Viewed from a Biblical Perspective

Bassam M. Madany

We cannot embark on mission work, no matter what tool happens to be at our disposal, unless we have a clear and biblical view of Islam. It is very clear from the New Testament prophecies that wrong doctrines and heresies will abound during this New Testament age. For examples we may consult the teachings of our Lord about the last things in the fourfold gospel, Paul's discourse during his meeting with the elders of

the Ephesian church (Acts 20), his prophecies recorded in II Thessalonians and in I and II Timothy, Peter's prophecy recorded in II Peter 2, and John's warnings concerning the Antichrist.

When we come to Islam, it is not easy to place it within a specific category. It cannot be classified as a Christian heresy, since heretical groups cling, outwardly at least, to some biblical truths as final and authoritative. Islam claims to possess the final book of divine revelation which abrogates all previous revelations. There is something mysterious about the birth of Islam. We cannot help but ask: Why this religion?

It is not possible to find an absolutely convincing reason for the rise of Islam, but we can point out certain undeniable factors which contributed to the birth of this theistic world religion. Whatever contributed to the emergence of Islam as a distinctive and unique religion is still an important factor to reckon with today. Whatever mistakes the early church made should not and must not be repeated. Church history in general and the history of the church in the East in particular are extremely important for the proper understanding of our subject. We cannot formulate sound principles of missions to Muslims today unless we are well versed in church history. Here are some of the factors which contributed to the rise of Islam:

1. The failure of the early church to acquaint the Arabs with the contents of the Scriptures.
2. The failure of the early church to maintain the purity of the faith and to grasp the redemptive core of the Bible.
3. The unique conditions which surrounded the emergence of Muhammad and the early spread of Islam in the world.

1. The failure of the early church to acquaint the Arabs with the contents of the Scriptures.

By the end of the 6th century, it seems that the church in the East had spent its force and lost its missionary zeal and vision. The Arabs who lived within the shadow of the church in Syria and Palestine were not, generally speaking, touched with the authentic gospel. It is true that some Arab tribes in southern Syria had adopted Christianity, but they had very little influence over the main parts of Arabia to the south. The church in Yemen, which had close ties with the church in Ethiopia, did not manage to spread the good news among the Arabian tribes in the

north. The saddest thing about the early church is that it failed to give the Arabs the Bible in their tongue! As J. W. Sweetman put it in *The Bible in Islam*:

Six hundred years had passed since Christ walked the earth and yet no one had put His words into the tongue of the Arab. Preachers there had been men who hesitated at no privation and no peril, like Jacob Baradaeus, Jacob of the Horsecloth, who went into the remotest places so clad to proclaim the unsearchable riches of Christ. But there was no precious Word in a known tongue and probably but a few who could have written it or read it. The Arabic language as a written language had yet to come into being. Its first letters were to be derived from Syriac and the first great book was the Quran which Muhammad brought; when it might have been so easily, as it has been in the case of so many languages for the first time reduced to writing, the Scripture of the Old and New Testaments. The characteristic name by which both Jews and Christians were known among the Arabs was the "people of the Book", which meant the people of the Bible. Yet that by which they were famous was kept as a hidden treasure, hoarded and not cast abroad like seed to bring forth fruit.

Now the early church was not inactive in the matter of Bible translation. In fact, the entire Bible was available in several languages both among the Eastern and other Christians. The Itala, the Vulgate, the Syriac, the Egyptian, and the Armenian versions are some of the translations of the Bible which took place before the rise of Islam. But somehow no one bothered to take the Word of God to the Arabs. Let us go back to the sober analysis of Dr. Sweetman:

Here is the tragedy of the Church at the time of the rise of Islam. All truth demanded that, when Muhammad's spirit was stirred with the needs of his people, he should have had in his hands the true Jewish and Christian Scriptures. Instead it was left for him to learn by hearsay from the lips of uninstructed or imperfectly instructed Christians what those Scriptures contained. That Muhammad had some knowledge of what was contained in the Bible is evident to anyone who reads the Quran. He must have thought that what he had heard from the Jews and Christians was indeed that which was contained in the Bible. But had he any sufficient guarantee of that, when Christians at least seem to have neglected the Bible and to have contented themselves often with romantic tales of our Lord?

After giving some shocking examples of how even leaders within the church gave evidence of inaccurate knowledge of the Scriptures, Dr. Sweetman continues:

What is important, and to our mind a tragedy, is that the translation of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments had to wait till more than a century at least after the experience of Muhammad on Mount Hira. The first was perhaps a translation from the Latin made in Spain by John of Seville in the early 8th century. The earliest translation of the New Testament I have ever read and handled is one made in the 11th century by a Christian of Baghdad, a piece of work marked by devotion and ability. But oh! the pity of this long delay.

Since Muhammad did not have access to the original writings of the Old and New Testaments, he could not bring to his people the gospel of the Book, nor proclaim to them the Messiah of the Book. Thus, according to Sweetman, “the apocryphal Christ emerged in the consciousness of Muhammad and not the Christ of the canonical Scriptures.” The consequences of this tragedy live with us still today, and we cannot ignore their existence. Let me again turn to the masterly work of Dr. Sweetman:

Now, after a lapse of time in which the Christian Scriptures have remained still unknown to them, Muslims came from a newly-fixed point of view to the Old and New Testament, placed in their hands by tardy Christians. It is at first a source of gratification to them, for the Quran commends the earlier Scripture.

But when they come to examine the newly discovered book they find it does not agree at all with that to which they have gradually become accustomed. “This Gospel tells how Jesus really died and so it cannot be the INJIL which Muhammad commended. That was a revelation which God gave to Jesus, a book which marked his prophethood; but this consists of several books by disciples called Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John” and so they conclude that these writings are not the original Gospel but that the Jews and the Christians have corrupted the primitive revelation.

2. The failure of the early church to maintain the purity of the faith and to grasp the redemptive core of the Bible.

When reference is made to the early church, it should not be taken

as defining the church from the days of the apostles until the rise of Islam in the 7th century A.D. The term here refers specifically to the Christian church in the two centuries which preceded the rise of Islam. After the conversion of Constantine, the rolls of the churches were filled with people who were not true converts. Many church leaders neglected the study of the Scriptures, and a false piety began to take the place of a Bible-based and Christ-centered religion. Furthermore, while trying to maintain the orthodox doctrines of Christ and the Holy Trinity, the church relied heavily on the arm of the State. Non-Chalcedonian churches were persecuted.

As a result of this sad situation, not only were the neighboring peoples such as the Arabs neglected by the church in Syria and Palestine, but the spiritual life of the Christians was weakened. The Bible became a closed book, and various tales and legends about the lives and achievements of the saints took the place of Bible stories and doctrines. It should not surprise us at all, therefore, that the founder of Islam could not and did not arrive at a true knowledge of the Christian faith. The Christians themselves had obscured their faith. They were not living out of the Bible. Often they gave the impression that Christianity consisted mainly of some metaphysical knowledge and that it had to be lived on some high and lofty level of law through the efforts of man.

Having quoted from Dr. Sweetman's book on the Bible, we shall go to him again, quoting his *Islam and Christian Theology*:

One of the results of an excessive emphasis on gnosis in the Alexandrian School particularly, but this is true to some extent of all Eastern schools, is a deficient soteriology (doctrine of salvation). Too often we find the substitution of monastic discipline and virginity and an ascetic intellectualism usurping the place of the redemptive self-giving of God. The incarnation is in the main held out as a sort of promise of the deification of man. Cosmological considerations are of more importance than the atoning grace which brings back the individual sinner in reconciliation to God. The East had too little of Augustine and too much metaphysical speculation. For the faith of trust there was substituted a faith of assent, and now when the Muslim comes face to face with the Christian, he has little to ask of the God who is Saviour and everything to ask about the problems of the Trinity, the mode of the Incarnation, the difficulties of the union of divine and human.

Theologically, Islam has not changed. It is still an anti-Trinitarian and anti-redemptive religion. We must positively set forth the truths of the Bible in the tradition of the apostles. We must preach the Messiah-Savior as the only hope of man.

3. The unique conditions which surrounded the emergence of Muhammad and the early spread of Islam in the world.

As the 7th century A.D. dawned, Arabia was ripe for a radical change. Its paganism was worn out. The inter-tribal wars which plagued the Arabian peninsula were sapping the energies of its inhabitants. Both Byzantium and Persia were seeking to enlarge their spheres of influence in the northern and northeastern frontiers of Arabia. From Africa, the Ethiopians sought to interfere in the internal affairs of eastern Arabia. In the year of Muhammad's birth, a large Ethiopian army with hundreds of elephants was defeated by the Arabs; and according to the Quran, that happened because of a direct intervention of God.

As a young man, Muhammad traveled to the north and met many people who belonged to the Jewish colonies in Arabia. He must have learned a good deal of Old Testament history from the Jews of Medina. It is very likely that he encountered some Christians in the southern parts of Palestine. Most of them belonged to some of the heretical groups which had sought refuge in the desert from the persecution of the Byzantines.

Muhammad must have been attracted by the teachings of the Arab monotheists known as the Hanifs. They were neither Jews nor Christians, but openly declared the vanity of all idols and the existence of one supreme being, Allah, "the God." Out of all these influences and forces which had become part and parcel of his life experiences, Muhammad brought into being a Unitarian and monotheistic faith which today dominates around 900 million people.

After his death, the armies of his successors, the caliphs, conquered the lands between India and southern France. These new conquerors were not simply ordinary conquerors. They were the propagators of a new and militant faith: Islam. Their creed was forceful and simple: THERE IS NO GOD BUT ALLAH, AND MUHAMMAD IS THE APOSTLE OF ALLAH.

Never has the world known a more anti-Christian faith, and never

has the church of Jesus Christ encountered a greater challenge to everything which is dear to its heart!

Having touched on the main factors which contributed to the rise of Islam, we shall turn now to our major topic:

PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL TO THE MUSLIMS

How shall the gospel be proclaimed to the Muslims of today? Part of the answer must be an acquaintance with Islamics. But this is an exceptionally complex theological-philosophical discipline; one could spend a lifetime in its study. And no Christian should embark on this task simply for the study of Islamics in isolation from the larger context of the Christian mission to Muslims.

No one can be effective in mission work among Muslims without an adequate study of Islamics. But we must bear in mind that the study of Islamics may become very dangerous if one forgets his main task, the proclamation of the gospel to the Muslims of today. We must avoid the two extremes which have manifested themselves in our century. On the one hand many have gone to Muslim lands with the hope of evangelizing Muslims without any proper knowledge of Islam. On the other hand, many who have manifested a great interest in Muslims became so fascinated with Islamics that they forgot the main goal of Christian missions. Both a knowledge of Islamics and a tremendous zeal for reaching the Muslims with the gospel of salvation are necessary for a responsible Christian mission to Islam.

Since Islam is a post-Christian religion and since the Quran has many references to biblical personalities from the Old and New Testament times, one cannot ignore theology or doctrine. And as soon as we begin our mission work among Muslims, we are involved in apologetics and polemics. We believe that the Bible is the Word of God; they believe the Quran to be the eternal and uncreated Word of God. We believe in one God who is triune; their doctrine of God is Unitarian. The Quranic Messiah is not the biblical Messiah. According to the Muslim holy book, Christ was not crucified. Man's sin resides mainly in his ignorance of the divine will. Muslims believe in sins rather than in sin; or, to put it differently, in Islam man sins due to his ignorance, and not because of his basic sinfulness. There is no original sin in Islam; nor does it recognize a general or radical corruption of the human nature.

The question which faces the missionary is: what is my approach

going to be? How am I going to relate the gospel to a people who have been formed by a thoroughly anti-Christian theology?

There are several possibilities which are available to us. Since we are not pioneering the Christian mission to Islam, we can simply go back to the past, and especially to the last two hundred years, and seek to re-use and update the approaches of the pioneers.

For example, we may begin with an attempt at proving the authenticity, veracity, and reliability of the Christian Scriptures. We believe, of course, that history is on our side and that a Muslim will have a very hard time proving that we no longer possess the authentic Bible. This approach has serious shortcomings, for while the Christian holds to the above-mentioned qualities of the Bible, he cannot "prove" them to a Muslim. The latter has been conditioned to think differently about the subject. No amount of historical evidence will convince him. Furthermore, if he has received a western education, he has most likely become aware of the devastating types of biblical criticism which have emerged among modernistic Western Christians.

How are we to proclaim the gospel to the Muslim of today? If we cannot successfully engage in apologetics and in polemics with respect to the Bible, should we shift the ground to the doctrine of God? Or, should we rather concentrate on the doctrine of the person and work of Jesus Christ? Here again, we go back to the Bible and we read it according to the authentic Christian tradition: the tradition of the early ecumenical creeds and the Reformation confessions of faith and catechisms. We proclaim a Trinitarian God and we preach a Divine-human Messiah. The Muslims' retort is immediate. They tell us that we have committed the worst sin: the sin of shirk. "You have associated someone other than God with Allah. You are on the way to hell unless you repent of your errors." Such are the answers of some Muslims whether they are said in our hearing or through their letters.

By asking these questions, I am not trying to say that we have to reduce the gospel to some bare minimum of bland theism in order to make it acceptable to the Muslims today. The gospel is not negotiable. There is only one gospel: the gospel of God, the gospel of Christ, the gospel of the Bible. "Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!" (Gal. 1:8). The whole gospel must be proclaimed to the Muslims, otherwise we have not brought the gospel to them. We cannot

keep anything back. Everything which is part and parcel of the Christian faith must be brought to the followers of Islam.

The reason behind these questions is that we must come to understand not so much the what aspect of the preaching (for we have already concluded that the whole gospel must be presented) but the how aspect of proclamation. By how I do not mean the technique or actual method, be it conventional missionary ways or in radio and literature missions.

The clue to the right answer resides in the little word "today." I have been emphasizing the word "today" throughout this lecture because the Muslim lives no longer in an isolated or insulated world. Slowly but steadily, he is coming under the impact of the world culture of western secularism and scientism. As this anti-theistic worldview works within the Muslim world, the individual will find himself challenged to the very roots of his existence. What can he say to the propagandists of the new paganism of today?

The believing Muslim is terribly offended by the challenge which comes to him from the side of the new pagans of today. He seeks to answer them from his own point of view and usually re-states the case for Islam along traditional lines. However, he fails to realize that the process of Westernization through the educational systems left by the colonial powers has exposed a big section of the population to the anti-Islamic teachings of the prophets of 20th century paganism. Islam is now being challenged more than at any time throughout its 1400 years of history!

So, when we come to consider our present-day opportunities to bring the gospel to the Muslims we must be aware of what is going on in their lands. How should we make our point as we endeavor to bring the whole gospel to the Muslims?

In presenting the claims of the Christian faith to the Muslims of our world, we should sympathetically and irenically point to one of the most glaring shortcomings of Islam: the doctrine of man. In Islam the doctrine of man is woefully unbiblical, and, therefore, totally unrealistic. Generally speaking, this is not adequately recognized by missionaries, especially if they adhere to traditions which have failed to accept the radical nature of man's fall into sin. For while the Bible clearly teaches us the awful consequences of man's fall into sin, it is only within the Augustinian and Calvinistic traditions that this biblical teaching has

been fully recognized and proclaimed.

Islam has an optimistic view of man. This faulty anthropology precludes the necessity of redemption and fortifies the Muslim against the acceptance of the biblical teaching of redemption through the work of the Messiah on the cross of Golgotha. At this point, I would like to quote the following regarding the Islamic doctrine of man and its extreme deficiency when it comes to the real needs of mankind.

In 1957, a group of Muslim and Roman Catholic scholars met in a monastery at Toumliline, a small Berber town near Meknes, in Morocco. One of the main speakers was Dr. Uthman Yahya, a scholar from Al-Azhar University (Seminary) in Cairo, Egypt. The title of his paper was: "Man and His Perfection in Muslim Theology." These are some excerpts from an English translation published by the quarterly journal, *The Muslim World*.

The Quran confronts us with man in two distinct states: the first in his original constitution, the prototype created in the image of God, the second man in his actual condition. In the primordial state man was created in entire harmony. He was perfectly constituted. The Quran gives us this description: "He created man in the most noble form."

As contrasted with his ideal prototype man in his actual state is feeble (Surah 4:28), despairing (11:9), unjust (14:34), quarrelsome (16:4), tyrannical (96:6), lost (105:2), etc. It is true that Muslim theology does not speak of original sin and of its transmission from generation to generation. But we see clearly in the light of these quotations that there are two distinct states of man: that of his original nature and that of his actual fall.

The possibility of man's deliverance and the way to follow have been indicated by the Quran in its address to sinners, fathers of the human race: "Go forth all of you from hence and if there comes to you guidance from Me then he who follows my guidance shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they know distress" (Surah 2:38). By this solemn affirmation God Himself takes action (*entre en acte*) for the salvation of man in the path of right. Islamic tradition then has the means to lead man to final perfection, the effect of which is liberation from the fear and from the sadness which prevent man from attaining that eternal blessedness which is life in God and for God.

In commenting on the paper of Dr. Yahya, the then editor of *The Muslim World* wrote:

Dr. Yahya's exposition of Muslim theology and its concepts of man and his salvation raises several deep questions. The Christian must always be perplexed about its ready confidence that 'to know is to do,' that man's salvation happens under purely revelatory auspices and that through the law given in the Divine communication is the path that man will follow once he knows and sees it. The whole mystery of human recalcitrance and "hardness of heart" seems to be overlooked. (*The Muslim World*, Volume 49, No. 1, January 1959)

In other words, the Muslim view of man and the Muslim understanding of the nature of the Fall do not leave any room for a divine Savior. Such a Savior is not needed, since man needs *only to know in order to do the will of Allah*.

Islam has never recognized realistically the consequences of man's rebellion against God. While admitting the fall of Adam as a historical event, Islam does not possess the biblical realism which makes us acknowledge the seriousness of man's sinfulness. It readily admits the sins and shortcomings of man, but Islam does not really admit the sinfulness of man. As a Tunisian listener once wrote to me: "I can well understand you when you talk about sins in the plural, but I cannot comprehend you when you speak about sin in the singular."

Modern history, from the early holocaust of the Armenian Christians in World War I, to the other ugly one that took place against the Jews and others under Nazi Germany in World War II, as well as the events in Cambodia twenty years ago, does not support any optimistic view of man nor of his so-called native goodness. Much has taken place within Muslim countries as well to show that man is desperately wicked, and that man's depravity is general or total.

Since the Islamic doctrine of man is the most vulnerable one, what are its implications for the Christian mission to Islam today?

Whether the Christian is explaining the Scriptures to a Muslim audience, or preaching on a certain passage of Scripture, or proclaiming the Word in a topical message, or simply reflecting on the problems and issues of contemporary life, he must always bear in mind the biblical doctrine of the radical nature of sin and the devastating consequences of the fall. By doing this, he is not imposing a certain non-biblical scheme on the Christian proclamation of the gospel. He is simply witnessing to one of the main themes of God's special revelation. Furthermore, he is preparing the ground for the biblical doctrine of redemption by the

vicarious death of the Lord Jesus Christ.

What we must always remember is this: the Muslim does not only reject the historicity of Good Friday's main event — the crucifixion of Christ, but his theology does not believe in the necessity of redemption. According to its teachings, man does not need to be redeemed by a divine act. In Islam, perfection or salvation is achieved by doing what one learns from God's revelation! So, it is only after a Muslim has seen the necessity of divine redemption due to the radical nature of sin, that he is ready to consider the claims of Christ.

But here we must be very careful in our statement of the case. The Christian missionary must always begin with the Bible and with biblical history. The work of Christ on the cross is a *fait accompli*. God planned it from all eternity. He executed it in the fullness of time. Our argument is not based on human logic but on divine action which took place in real history and which is inerrantly recorded and explained in Holy Scripture. We should never give the Muslim the idea that our doctrine of salvation has come into being as a result of our own theologizing.

Certainly God's way of salvation by the blood of Christ shed on our behalf on Calvary's cross is exactly what we needed. There was no other way of salvation. Man's case was desperately hopeless. There was no other way of escape except God's way. But when we speak in such terms we are not sitting on some neutral ground and arriving at these truths on the basis of a so-called autonomous human logic. We must impress the Muslim that when we speak of salvation and redemption, we are testifying of what God has planned from eternity and what He has accomplished in the fullness of time. The Christian faith is objectively true, whether people believe it or not.

Furthermore, when the Christian missionary speaks of the gospel, he speaks as one who has already tasted the salvation of the Lord. We who are called to go to Muslims with the message of the gospel have already experienced the Lord's redemption. But He does not redeem us in some vaguely mystical way, but by the application of the work of Christ in our hearts through the Holy Spirit. When we go to Muslims we go as those who are commissioned to proclaim the Word of God and as those who have already experienced the saving work of God in our hearts. We go as witnesses not as logicians.

These words are not the fruit of some abstract reflection on the Christian mission to Islam. Rather, they have been written as a result

of a Christian reflection on the subject carried on during a busy and pioneering ministry of radio and literature missions to the Arabic speaking world. God's Word is not bound, it reaches Muslims everywhere, and liberates them by the power of the Holy Spirit and makes them members of the Body of Christ. ▲

The Biblical Basis of Reformed Church Government

Robert D. Decker

That we have a conference on this subject is a commentary on our times. For well over three hundred years it was assumed, taken for granted, that the rules, stipulations, and regulations of the Church Order of Dordt and the Westminster Assembly Directory for Church Government were squarely based on sound, biblical principles. In both traditions no one questioned this. Had someone asked me thirty years ago, when on Oct. 1, 1965 I was ordained a minister of the Word and sacraments in the Protestant Reformed Churches, or had someone asked me twenty-two years ago, when I began teaching Church Polity in the Seminary, "Do you think, Robert, that you will ever be asked to speak on the subject, The Biblical Basis of Reformed Church Government?" I would have replied, "Of course not! Who among us doubts the biblical basis of the Church Order of Dordt?"

This is not the case today. Accompanying the widespread departure from biblical doctrine and practice among much of the church is a rejection of the biblical principles of Reformed church government. That departure takes the form of one or the other of two evils, *viz.*, hierarchy and independentism. Hierarchy is the view that the church is ruled by her clergy, from the top down. In the Roman Catholic

tradition, the church is ruled by the pope (the Vicar of Christ, according to Rome), the cardinals, archbishops, bishops, and parish priests. In the Anglican tradition the church is ruled by her bishops. In the Reformed tradition among those committed to a hierarchical church government, the church is ruled by her synods and synodical boards and officers.

Perhaps the greater evil, at least among the more conservative branches of the Reformed churches, is that of independentism or congregationalism. According to this view each congregation stands by itself and is completely independent of other congregations. Local congregations are only very loosely connected. There are really no broader gatherings, there is no denominational structure.

It is our firm conviction that Reformed church government steers a straight biblical course between these two evils. By Reformed church government we mean those principles which find their expression in the Reformed confessions (Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession, Canons of Dordt, and the Westminster Confession and Creeds) and more particularly in the Church Order of Dordt and the Westminster Directory for Church Government. We shall limit ourselves to a study of the Church Order of Dordt (hereafter, Church Order) because of time constraints and because we are more familiar with it.

Reformed church government is founded on two great, precious, biblical principles, *viz.*, the *autonomy* of the local church and her *calling to manifest the unity of the body of Christ*. By the autonomy of the local church we mean that biblical truth that each local congregation of believers and their children, with the officebearers, is a complete manifestation of the body of Christ. Only the local congregation has the right to preach, administer the sacraments, and exercise Christian discipline. These autonomous congregations have the calling to manifest the unity of the body of Christ. Therefore they join with other congregations of like precious faith in a biblically structured federation. They do this to manifest the unity of the church of Christ, for mutual counsel, and to perform that work of the church which no local congregation is able to do by herself.

There are two other matters we need to note by way of introduction. The matter of church government is for us (and I mean for both those in the Dordt and those in the Westminster traditions) a *confessional* matter. The Reformed Creeds, especially the Belgic and the Westminster Confessions, bind us to our form of church government. This means, to

be more specific, that we believe the Church Order reflects the will of Christ revealed in Scripture for the rule of His church. And, therefore, these rules and regulations are not optional, but mandatory. Christ commands that thus His church shall be governed and thus His church shall serve Him.

Let us also note that we do not find in Scripture a Church Order, but we find the *principles* by which God would have His church governed. These principles are woven into the very fabric of the Church Order of Dordt. The Church Order is divided into four main sections dealing with: 1) the offices of the church, 2) the assemblies of the church, 3) the worship of the church, and 4) the discipline of the church. In its introductory Article the Church Order insists that these four are necessary to maintain good order in the Church of Christ.

Following the outline of these divisions we speak on “The Biblical Basis of Reformed Church Government.”

The Offices of the Church

The fundamental principle of Reformed church government is this: Christ is the Head of the church. Robert Breckinridge, a 19th century pastor and theologian in the Presbyterian Church U. S. A., in his address, “Presbyterian Government, Not a Hierarchy but a Commonwealth,” delivered to the Synod of Philadelphia in 1843, put it as well as anyone could:

God has established a kingdom in this world wholly distinct from all secular kingdoms and entirely independent of all civil magisteries; the visible church of Jesus Christ is that kingdom, and he, the Lord Jesus, is its only head and king, its sole lawgiver, its sole priest, and by his Word and Spirit its only infallible teacher and the only safe, certain, and entire rule of faith and practice is contained in sacred Scripture. That to this kingdom, thus set up, held forth, and guided, the Lord Jesus has given an outward government and permanent offices, our standards clearly teach (*Confession of Faith*, 31:1).¹

That Christ is *the* officebearer of the church the Scriptures clearly

¹David W. Hall, Joseph H. Hall, editors, *Paradigms in Polity: Classic Readings in Reformed and Presbyterian Church Government* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), p. 506.

teach. In Matthew 28:18 Jesus said, “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.” In the following verse the Lord instructs the church to teach and baptize all nations. The word “power” could better be translated “authority.” Christ has been given all authority in heaven and in earth. This means that Christ alone has the right to preach the gospel, administer the sacraments, and exercise discipline. Christ alone possesses the right to govern the church. Ephesians 1:20-23 teaches that God, when He raised Christ from the dead, set Him at His own right hand in heavenly places, far above all principality and power and hath put all things under His feet and gave Him to be the Head over all things to the church. I Peter 2:25 tells us that Christ is the “Shepherd and bishop of our souls.” Jesus teaches us in John 10:11, 14-16 that He is the officebearer in the church, when He says, “I am the good Shepherd.” The good Shepherd, Jesus explains, gives His life for the sheep, He knows His sheep, the sheep hear the voice of the good Shepherd and they follow Him, and to them the good Shepherd gives eternal life. I Peter 5:1-4 teaches that Christ is the Chief Shepherd who rewards faithful elders with a crown of glory.

The Reformed confessions beautifully reflect this great truth. The Belgic Confession teaches that Christ is the eternal King of His church (Art. 27), that all are bound to join themselves to the true church, “bowing their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ” (Article 28), that in the true church Jesus Christ is “acknowledged as the only head of the church” (Art. 29). The Canons of Dordt teach that God from eternity has “appointed Christ the only Mediator and Head of the elect, and the foundation of salvation” (I, 7). In similar fashion the Heidelberg Catechism teaches that Christ sits at the right hand of God “that he might appear as head of his church, by whom the Father governs all things” (L.D. 19) and that it is the Son of God who gathers the chosen church out of the nations (L.D. 21).

According to Scripture and the confessions Christ is the only Head and King of His church.

Inseparably related to this first principle is the second, *viz.*, that Christ governs His church through men, lawfully called by Him. No one, I trust, disputes this. In the Old Testament era of the types and shadows Christ spoke His word through the prophets, ministered His mercies through the priests, and ruled through the kings. In the early New Testament church the exalted Christ cared for His church through the

special office of apostle. Jesus assured the apostles that He would make them “fishers of men” (Luke 5). He promised to give them the Spirit of Truth who would lead them in all the truth, reminding them of everything Jesus taught them (John 14-16). Jesus, just before His ascension, told them to go and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the triune God. And, He promised to be with them even to the end of the age (Matt. 28:19). The exalted Christ appeared to Paul on the Damascus road, making him a chosen vessel unto Himself to bear Jesus’ name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel (Acts 9). That the apostles were deeply conscious of their being called by Christ is obvious from the salutations to their epistles to the churches and people of God.

Though the office of apostle ceased with the death of the apostle John, Christ still calls men to the special offices of minister (pastor), ruling elder, and deacon. When the Grecian widows were neglected in the daily ministrations, the apostles instructed the congregation to select qualified men “over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer and the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:1-7). Scripture lays down the qualifications necessary for one serving in the office of deacon (I Tim. 3:8-13). Christ gives pastors and teachers to the church for the work of the ministry (Eph. 4:11ff.). Romans 10 teaches that one cannot call upon the name of the Lord in faith and be saved without hearing Christ through a preacher who is sent. Timothy is exhorted to preach the Word of the inspired Scriptures (II Tim. 3 and 4). Christ calls elders to rule the church in His name. Their qualifications are given as well in I Timothy 3 and in Titus 1. They are called to shepherd the flock of God and are promised the crown of life by the Chief Shepherd (I Pet. 5:1-4). The church is exhorted to esteem them very highly in love (I Thess. 5:12-13), to count them worthy of double honor (I Tim. 5:17), and to remember and obey them (Heb. 13:7, 17).

Again, the Reformed confessions teach these great truths clearly. The Belgic Confession teaches that there must be ministers, elders, and deacons in the church (Art. 30) and that these men must be lawfully called by Christ through the church to these holy offices (Art. 31). The Canons of Dordt teach that God mercifully sends messengers of the joyful tidings of the gospel that men may be brought to believe (I, 3), and that the Lord preserves His work of grace in the elect by means of the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments (V, 14).

Likewise the Heidelberg Catechism makes clear that: the Holy Spirit works faith by the preaching of the holy gospel and confirms it by the use of the sacraments (L.D. 25), the preaching and Christian discipline are the keys by which the kingdom of heaven is opened to believers and shut to unbelievers (L.D. 31), and God will have His people taught not by dumb images but by the lively preaching of the Word (L.D. 35). The Form for the Ordination of Ministers of God's Word teaches that God uses the ministry of men for the gathering of His church. This same Form asks the ministerial candidate if he is convinced that through the lawful call of the church Christ Himself calls him to the holy ministry.

These principles are expressed in the rules and regulations of the first section of the Church Order which speaks of the offices of the church (Arts. 2-28). In this section the Church Order speaks of the necessity of the officebearers being lawfully called and it describes of what the lawful call consists. The Church Order also speaks of the minister's being bound to the ministry for life, of his being in a fixed charge, and other related matters. The section also speaks of the church's duty to support the ministers and to provide for the need of emeriti ministers and their widows and orphans. These articles also set forth clearly the duties of the ministers, elders, and deacons. Here as well the Church Order speaks of the equality of the offices.

All of these rules/regulations are based on the explicit teaching of Holy Scripture, or, at the very least, these are clearly implied in Scripture.

One does find in this section, as well as in the entire Church Order, rules/regulations which are neither required nor forbidden by Holy Scripture. Examples of this are how often a consistory or council shall meet or how long a minister must be in his present pastorate before he is eligible for a call from another church. These kinds of rules/regulations are based on sanctified wisdom and may vary according to the times and circumstances in which the churches find themselves.

Those rules/regulations based on Scripture, however, obviously must be observed. Why do we insist with Article 3 on the necessity of the lawful call? Because Scripture requires this! For this reason too a particular point of the Church Order may be changed only when it is proved to be in conflict with Scripture and, then too, only by a synod by way of a *gravamen* or overture from a consistory or individual member via his consistory and classis.

The Church Order carries no authority by itself. Its authority is derived from Holy Scripture. But it is for that very reason to be observed. We have no options. We must abide by the Church Order.

The Ecclesiastical Assemblies

The second section of the Church Order deals with the Ecclesiastical Assemblies (Arts. 29-52). These are necessary for the maintenance of good order in the church. In this section are set forth two great principles of Reformed church government, *viz.*, the *autonomy* of the local congregation and the calling of the churches to manifest the unity of Christ's Body in a *biblically structured federation or denomination*.

Articles 29-36 contain general rules which Scripture enjoins concerning the assemblies of the church. The assemblies are four: the consistory, the classis, the particular synod, and the general synod. Because we do not have particular synods in our churches we have three kinds of assemblies.

Three articles of this introductory section are of special importance. Article 30 carefully distinguishes the proper sphere of the ecclesiastical assemblies. Only ecclesiastical matters (those matters having to do with the church and her calling) may be treated by the assemblies. And these ecclesiastical matters must be transacted in an ecclesiastical manner. Article 30 also speaks of the fact that only such matters as could not be finished in the minor assemblies may be dealt with by the major assemblies. Article 31 emphasizes the supreme authority of the Word of God. A decision is "settled and binding, unless it be proved to conflict with the Word of God...." At the same time this article protects the sanctity of the individual conscience of the believer. He always has the right of appeal. Article 36 speaks of the jurisdiction of the three assemblies. The classis has the same jurisdiction over the consistory as the synod has over the classis. Noteworthy in this connection is what the article does not say, *viz.*, that the classis has the same jurisdiction over the consistory as the consistory has over the congregation.

Articles 37-52 contain the rules governing the ecclesiastical assemblies. Several important biblical principles form the basis for these articles and are expressed in these articles. The deepest principle of all church federation is the unity of the body of Christ. The elect are one in Christ. The church is called by God to give expression to this

unity in institutional form as much as possible. This unity in Christ has a common life principle: the one faith, one hope, one doctrine, one calling (Eph. 4:1-14). Each congregation is itself a complete manifestation of the body of Christ and, therefore, is autonomous. The autonomous congregations federate in order to: manifest the unity of Christ's body in the way of confessing together the one truth of the gospel, fight the battle of faith together, encourage and assist one another in the work and life of the church (notably in Christian discipline), and accomplish those aspects of the church's calling which each is unable to do by herself, e.g., the training of men for the ministry, inter-church relations, and mission work.

Since all these matters are the subjects to be treated by my two colleagues, Professors Engelsma and Hanko, we take leave of them at this point.

The Worship of the Church

For the maintenance of good order in the church it is necessary that there should be "supervision of doctrine, sacraments, and ceremonies." This, the worship of the church, is the subject of the third section of the Church Order (Arts. 53-70).

The biblical principle at work in this section of the Church Order is again the unity of the body of Christ. The church confesses the *one* truth of Scripture. That truth of Scripture is summed and set forth in the Three Forms of Unity, the confessions of the church. Therefore the Church Order stipulates that the officebearers must sign the Formula of Subscription thus promising to defend and teach this truth and to reject all heresies repugnant to this truth. The ministers in particular must in all their preaching, teaching, and pastoral labors ward off false doctrines and errors. This calling of the officebearers and ministers is set forth in Articles 53-55.

Still more, because God is a Spirit and must be worshiped in spirit and in truth (John 4) the Church Order in Articles 56-60 lays down the rules and regulations concerning baptism, and in Articles 61-64 the rules and regulations for the administration of the Lord's Supper. The rules for the latter are several. Only those who have made a confession of the Reformed religion and are reputed to be of a godly walk shall be admitted to the Supper. The Supper must be administered according to the teachings of God's Word and for the edification of the congregation.

The Holy Supper shall be administered at least every two or three months. And the Supper must be administered under the supervision of the elders during an official worship service and with the Form adopted by the Reformed churches. The rest of this section deals with funerals, special worship services, Heidelberg Catechism preaching, Psalm-singing, and marriage. The biblical principle here is that we must worship the Lord not according to that which is pleasing to us, but only as God Himself instructs/commands us in His Word.

Censure and Ecclesiastical Discipline

The last section of the Church Order deals with what is called the third mark of the church, Christian discipline (Articles 71-86). The principles are that discipline is done by means of the preaching of the Word and by means of the rule of the elders of the church.² The purpose of Christian discipline is the salvation of the penitent and the hardening of the ungodly, impenitent. In this way the church is kept pure and the name of God is glorified.

Thus in this section the Church Order carefully sets forth the rules/regulations for the reconciliation of the sinner — how this shall take place in the instance of secret sins (Matt. 18), and how this shall take place in the case of public sin. This section also deals with the steps to be followed in the application of discipline as these finally end with the extreme remedy, excommunication.

Finally, this section treats the deposition of the officebearers. These must be suspended and deposed if they remain impenitent concerning public, gross sins. Again, the steps involved in all this are carefully laid out for the church.

Conclusion

Just two points need be made in conclusion. The first is this: the churches voluntarily agree to live by this Church Order because they are convinced that these are the principles and the rules/regulations required by Holy Scripture and the confessions. God teaches us that thus we shall live together as churches.

The second is this: This Church Order has been around for a long,

²See: Heidelberg Catechism, L. D. 31 and Matthew 16:18-19, both of which speak of the “key power” Christ assigns to the church.

long time. In its more primitive form it dates back to the 16th century Reformation in Geneva. John Calvin reformed the church at that time, bringing her back to her biblical moorings also in the maintenance of good order. Hence, in a real sense the Church Order has existed in one form or another from the very beginning of the history of the church in Bible times. For this reason, and because the Lord says all things must be done decently and in good order (I Cor. 14), we are bound by this Church Order.

But there is another consideration in this connection. Over the centuries the Church Order has been studied and revised in the light of Scripture and the confessions by countless synods, including our own Protestant Reformed synods. It is our firm conviction, therefore, that anyone of any Reformed church which ignores all this Reformed church polity tradition is foolish and does so at his own ecclesiastical peril. ▲

The Autonomy of the Local Church

Herman C. Hanko

Introduction

The Reformed system of church government is unique. It cannot be compared with any system of government in this world. It is not, e.g., a democracy where final authority rests with the people, even though matters in the church are decided by majority vote. Nor is it a monarchy or oligarchy where one man or a few men rule, even though elders have authority to rule in the church. The unique character of the government of the church is derived from its biblical origin. As the Scriptures are the only rule for the faith and the life of the saints and of the church, so they are the rule for the government of the church.

The unique character of the government of the church is most evident in its delicate balance, both on the local and denominational level. Within the local congregation the rule of the church is a balance between the office of believers and the special offices of minister, elder, and deacon. On the denominational level, the balance is between the autonomy of the local congregation and the necessary authority of the

broader assemblies such as Classis or Synod — or, as they are sometimes called, Presbytery and General Assembly.

This balance is not so easy to maintain. Failure to recognize the special offices in the local congregation leads to a democratic form of rule in the church, repugnant to Holy Scripture. Failure to recognize the office of all believers leads to tyrannical rule and dictatorial power in the special offices of the church.

The same balance is difficult to maintain on the level of church federation. Failure to maintain the principle of the autonomy of the local congregation leads to hierarchy; failure to recognize the authority of the broader assemblies leads to independentism. Both are wrong. Both are equally condemned by Scripture.

Two conditions must be present in the church of Christ for the balance of Reformed church polity to succeed. Where these two conditions are not present a Reformed church polity cannot long last. The history of the church is often characterized by a (sometimes wild) swinging of the pendulum from one extreme to the other. The proper balance can be maintained only when, in the first place, those within the church are willing to submit to the instruction and direction of Scripture. This must be emphasized because submission to Scripture is submission to Christ Himself who is the Head and Sovereign in the church. Church government is nothing but an implementation of Christ's rule in the church. The proper balance can be maintained in the second place, only when within the church is found a mutual trust among the members. Only when there is mutual trust and a mutual desire to seek the welfare of the church will Reformed church government be observed and maintained. Such church government as Scripture requires is not something which can be imposed upon a church; nor is it something which will work itself out on its own power; nor can even the strictest observance of rules bring it about. Trust is the key element. Without it all fails.

What Is Meant by Autonomy?

In this article we are interested in one aspect of Reformed church government, namely the autonomy of the local congregation.

It is necessary first to define terms.

The word "autonomy" comes from two Greek words which mean "itself" and "law." The simple and direct meaning of the word autonomy

is, therefore, to be a law unto oneself. That which is autonomous makes, executes, and enforces its own laws and does so without outside interference.

But, of course, the very nature of the church requires that the word autonomy be applied to the church in a limited way. No church or congregation is absolutely autonomous. The church belongs to Christ as His possession. Christ rules in the church. The laws by which the church is governed are made, executed, and even enforced by Christ Himself. He is sovereign within the church. The church is subject to the law of Christ. But the autonomy of the church means that the church is *directly* under the law of Christ; that no other body or institution may come between it and Christ; and that it is responsible only to Christ in determining the will of Christ and enforcing Christ's rule.

The word "autonomy" therefore, as applied to the church, means, "self-governing under the rule of Christ." Because the church is given to Christ from eternity by God the Father; because Christ purchased the church as His possession with the price of His own blood; because the church is called into existence by the irresistible call of the gospel; because the church is preserved and protected by Christ's power until the church is brought to live with Christ in glory — because all this is true, the autonomy of the church is *under Christ*. No kings or princes may rule the church. No ecclesiastics, prelates, popes, or bishops may sway their scepter in her life. No councils or synods may dictate to her. No ecclesiastical body may determine her calling.

So jealously is this to be guarded by the church that the saints of God were ready to die for this truth at the hands of the enemy and suffer cruel tortures inflicted by those who would take Christ's rule in their hands. The very life of the church depends upon her autonomy.

What Is Meant by the Church?

The New Testament Scriptures use the word "church" in two different senses.

The word is used to refer to the church in its entirety, the church as the body of Christ, the whole company of the elect. This is the sense in which the term is used in the Heidelberg Catechism, Q. & A. 54, where the article in the Apostolic Confession concerning the church is explained: "What believest thou concerning the 'holy catholic church' of Christ? That the Son of God from the beginning to the end of the world,

gathers, defends, and preserves to himself by his Spirit and word, out of the whole human race, a church chosen to everlasting life, agreeing in true faith; and that I am and forever shall remain, a living member thereof." This church, the body of Christ, is sometimes referred to as the church organism.

But Scripture also uses the word "church" to refer to a local congregation.¹ In no single place is the word "church" used to describe a group of individual churches or congregations, or to groups of individual believers.² The Protestant Reformed denomination has always insisted on its proper name, Protestant Reformed *Churches*, and has insisted on that name out of the principle of the autonomy of the local church.

When, therefore, we speak of the autonomy of the local church, we are referring to an individual congregation where believers and their children gather under the rule of officebearers to worship God through the preaching of the gospel, the administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of discipline. In this congregation Christ is present in the fulfillment of His own words: "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."

De Ridder writes:

The church is not in the first place a holy institution, but the body of Christ. The essence of the church is thus invisible and spiritual. However, that church becomes visible wherever true believers in Christ are found. These believers must in turn appear in the visible institute of the church. The invisible church of Christ does not become visible therefore by establishing some external kind of priestly service. The principle for Rome and in part also for the Lutherans is: if there is a priest present, then the church is present that brings the sacrifice or, according to Lutheran principle, that administers the Word and Sacrament, whether there are believers present or not. According to the Reformed principle, believers must first be present, otherwise the offices cannot be instituted

¹ A few of the texts are Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Rev. 1:4, 11, 20, 2:7, 11; Acts 5:11, 11:26; 1 Cor. 11:18, 14:19, 28, 35.

² The only possible exception is Acts 9:31, but the reading which uses "church" in the singular to refer to the different churches in Palestine is from the WH text; the plural reading is the reading of the TR, and is undoubtedly the correct reading.

and the church cannot become visible. The unchangeable position of the members of the congregation is bound up with this principle.³

The relation between the whole church as organism and the local congregation is close. The one great, universal, catholic, church manifests itself in this world in the local congregation. From a certain viewpoint, a local congregation is a microcosm of the whole church. It possesses all the attributes of the whole church: oneness, holiness, catholicity, apostolicity; it is itself Christ's body, Christ's elect, organized into an institution for a specific purpose and calling.

That local church or congregation is autonomous.

What Is Meant by the Autonomy of the Local Church?

In order to understand the principle of the autonomy of the local church, we must first of all consider that the autonomy of the local church is directly connected with the marks of the church.

At the time of the Reformation every branch of it was compelled by its own historical circumstances to define the distinction between the true church and the false church. This had to be done by virtue of the fact that the Reformation itself had to be justified over against the charge that it was creating schism in the body of Christ. It had to be shown that the Roman Catholic Church was the false church, and that the Reformation was a re-institution of the true church of Christ. This was necessary to justify the Reformation against the charges of Rome, for a description of the marks proved that Rome was the false church and that the churches of the Reformation were the true church of Christ.

Articles 28 & 29 of the Confession of Faith most clearly define those marks of both the false church and the true church; but these articles do so, not abstractly, but in the very real context of a solemn word to all God's people that it is their calling to separate from the false church and join the true; that, indeed, this is so important that nothing or no one may prevent them from doing so. Those marks of the true church, so the Confession maintains, are the pure preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments according to the command of Christ, and the exercise of Christian discipline.

³De Ridder, Richard R., *Ecclesiastical Manual*. Unpublished syllabus from Calvin Theological Seminary, 1982.

Now it is not our purpose to discuss those marks as such in this article; but it is our purpose to point out that these marks of the true church are exactly the same as the church's calling in the world. They are the reasons why Christ has established the church. They are the reasons for its existence as the church. They constitute the marching orders of Christ the King. The church has no other calling than this.

It is somewhat in passing that we remark at this point that the church of today seems to have little understanding of its Christ-given calling. The church is quick to take on all sorts of tasks, some of which are frivolous and nonsensical. The church considers it its business to solve the social problems of the world, to meddle in politics, to engage in medical work, etc. But, while the energies of the church are wasted in work that does not belong to it, the true work of the church goes undone.

But, however that may be, Christ has formed His church into an institute here in the world for the purpose of preaching the gospel, administering the sacraments, and exercising discipline. The church has no other calling than this. For this purpose the church is formed into an organization with its own constitution, its own officers, its own members, and its own *raison d'être*.

Only a few moments' thought will show how this calling of the church stands related to the autonomy of the local congregation. Only the local church can have the marks of the true church; but those marks of the true church are also at the same time the calling, the task, the work assigned by Christ to it.

Only the local church may perform these tasks which at the same time constitute the marks of the church. No other body may preach the gospel. No para-ecclesiastical organization, e.g., may preach. No Classis or Synod may administer the sacraments. And no broader assembly may exercise discipline. These things are the task of the local congregation alone. When para-ecclesiastical bodies do this work, non-authorized bodies usurp the task of the church of Christ. When broader assemblies engage in administering the sacrament or exercising discipline, hierarchy results.

When the local church fulfills the calling which Christ has entrusted to it, then Christ Himself is present in the church. The fulfillment of His promise, "Lo, I am with you alway even to the end of the world," takes place when a local congregation preaches, administers

the sacraments, and exercises discipline. Then when two or three are gathered in Christ's name, Christ Himself is present.

The principle of the autonomy of the local church goes back to the very beginning of the history of the Reformed churches. These churches expressed the principle in a very firm, yet practical way. At the Synod of the Walloon Churches, held in Paris in 1559, it was decided as a rule in the church that, "No church may assume primacy or domination over another."⁴ This same principle was repeatedly set forth. It was expressed in the French Confession of Faith and in the Netherlands Confession of Faith. The Synod of Emden expressed the principle in the very first article of its Church Order: "No church shall lord it over another church, no minister of the Word, no elder or deacon shall lord it over another, but each one shall guard himself against all suspicion and enticement to lord it over [others]." And that principle has been incorporated into the Church Order of Dordrecht, which is the church order used by Reformed churches throughout the world. It defines the principle of autonomy.

Richard De Ridder calls this the fundamental principle of Reformed church polity — bearing in mind, as he makes clear, that the most fundamental principles are the work of God in gathering His church, and the Headship of Christ over the church. One writer calls the principle of autonomy, "The Golden Rule of Reformed Church Polity." De Ridder defines this rule as

the protestant position over against the Roman Catholic Church which at the Council of Trent had clearly stated that there was only one church to which all believers must belong and within which there is a divinely ordained hierarchy of office holders. If the Reformed are not granted this principle and the right to organization apart from the Roman Church, the entire church polity of the protestant churches is done away with and such churches have no right to claim either separate organization or existence.⁵

In the Netherlands, this principle of autonomy was further expressed in the earliest gatherings of the church by giving to each

⁴The material which follows is taken from De Ridder, *Ecclesiastical Manual*, pp. 44ff.

⁵*Ibid.*

congregation the right to call and ordain its own officebearers. And so the principle has been zealously guarded and kept, and the church flourishes only in those places where it is studiously maintained.

Autonomy and the Offices in the Church

Christ is present in the church through the work which the church is given to perform. From this it follows that Christ is present in the church through the offices of the church. Christ establishes His church, but He also establishes the offices; and through these offices Christ does the work which the church is called to do. That is, Christ gathers, defends, and preserves His church, to use the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, through the offices, which offices in turn are responsible for the preaching the Word, the administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of discipline.

It is for this reason that we must now turn to the idea of offices in the church.

Louis Berkhof, in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, writes:

Who are the first and proper subjects of Church power? To whom has Christ committed this power in the first instance? Roman Catholics and Episcopalians answer: to the officers as a separate class, in contradistinction from the ordinary members of the Church. This view has also been held by some eminent Presbyterian divines, such as Rutherford and Baillie. Diametrically opposed to this is the theory of the Independents, that this power is vested in the Church at large, and that the officers are merely the organs of the body as a whole. The great Puritan divine, Owen, adopts this view with some modifications. In recent years some Reformed theologians apparently favored this view, though without subscribing to the separatism of the Independents.⁶ There is another view, however, representing a mean between these two extremes, which would seem to deserve preference. According to it ecclesiastical power is committed by Christ to the Church as a whole, that is to the ordinary members and the officers alike; but in addition to that the officers receive such an additional measure of power as is required for the performance of their respective duties in the Church of Christ. They share in the

⁶It is sad that also today some who have been trained in Reformed church polity and its biblical principles have, out of fear of hierarchy, gone in the direction of Independentism.

original power bestowed upon the Church, and receive their authority and power as officers directly from Christ. They are representatives, but not mere deputies of the people. Older theologians often say: "All Church power, in *actu primo*, or fundamentally, is in the Church itself; in *actu secundo*, or its exercise, in them that are specifically called thereto." This is substantially the view held by Voetius, Gillespie (in his work on Ceremonies), Bannerman, Porteous, Bavinck, and Vos.⁷

The office of believers stands at the very heart of the autonomy of the church, and the final authority of the congregation rests with the office of all believers.

Believers hold the office of prophet, priest, and king within the church, that threefold office which Adam lost in Paradise, which was pre-figured in the Old Testament, and which is restored through Christ and by Christ's Spirit.

Christ is the Officebearer of God who accomplishes all the purpose of God with respect to the church. But Christ bestows His divine office upon the members of the church through His Spirit which He poured out upon the church at Pentecost. This is the clear teaching of Q & A 32 of the Heidelberg Catechism. The Catechism asks in Q & A 31 concerning the significance of the name "Christ" as a name for our Mediator. And the answer is given that "He is ordained of God the Father, and anointed with the Holy Ghost, to be our chief Prophet and Teacher, ... our only High Priest, ... and our eternal King...." But then the Catechism, in a penetrating question, asks: "But why art thou called a Christian?" That is, Why do you bear the name of Christ? And the answer is given: "Because I am a member of Christ by faith, and thus am partaker of his anointing....," and then goes on to explain that as partaker of Christ's anointing I have the Holy Spirit as well, and can, by the power of the Holy Spirit, live as prophet, priest, and king under God.

Thus, because the office of believer is the most basic office in the church, all the work of Christ in the church is through the office of believer. We must understand this if we are to understand Reformed church government. The office of believer preaches, administers the sacraments, rules and exercises discipline, and distributes alms as testimonies of the mercies of Christ. In other words, the office of

⁷P. 583.

believer performs all the work which Christ has assigned to the church. The local congregation, therefore, which is the gathering of believers and their seed, is the manifestation of the body of Christ and the instrument through which Christ accomplishes His purpose in the world in the gathering, defense, and preservation of His church.

At the same time, the church of Christ in the local congregation is not a democracy. That the church is a democracy is basically the position of all Congregationalism or Independentism. The rule of the congregation rests with the [male] members, and they periodically elect a "Board of Trustees" of a "Board of Deacons" to which is entrusted the affairs of the church, but who are always answerable to the congregation itself. Such notions have been consistently abhorrent to Reformed church polity, and have been strenuously and rigorously rejected by all who wish to be Reformed.

Although the office of believers is the basic office in the church, the believers always perform their tasks *through the special offices*. Christ has ordained that in the church are to be found ministers (who carry the office of prophet), elders (who are the church's kings), and deacons (who reflect in their work the office of priest). At congregational meetings, the male members meet together to elect those who shall hold the special offices.⁸ But those who are elected are called by Christ Himself to serve in their offices because Christ calls through the office of believers. All officebearers in Reformed Churches are asked to answer in the affirmative the following question: "Do you feel in your hearts, that you are lawfully called of God's church, and consequently of God himself, to your office?"

In describing this aspect of Reformed (or Presbyterian, which means, "rule by elders") church polity, De Ridder writes:

Furthermore, the presbyterian system demands that all three offices must be instituted in the congregations. And that is in direct contrast to all hierarchy. No church can have only a minister of the Word. Besides

⁸While we cannot get into the question here, Reformed church polity holds that this responsibility is reserved for the *male* members only. The right to vote implies the right to rule. And only male members may be officebearers in the church of Christ on the basis of the principle of male headship laid down in Scripture. A Reformed church ignores these principles to its spiritual peril; i.e., a church which repudiates these principles commits spiritual suicide.

the minister there must be elders, who with him constitute the consistory, and the deacons, who are called to the ministry of mercy. There is no overlording by the ministers, and among the ministers there is complete equality. In various ways care is taken so that there is no such thing as clericalism. At the level of the higher assemblies there are as many elders as ministers (when there are vacant churches in a classis, then there is a greater number of elders). All have equal voting rights. This development of offices is seen only among the Reformed. All other systems (except the Congregational) are more or less clerical in orientation.⁹

And so the believers preach through the called and ordained ministry; they rule through the elders; and they distribute Christ's mercies through the deacons. But, more importantly, Christ does all this work — through the believers who in turn do it through their officebearers.

It is true that the office of believers continues to function in its own right. It does not, having elected its officebearers, sit down in a rocking chair and twiddle its collective thumbs. Believers witness to the truth of the gospel in the world. They admonish one another with the Word and encourage one another in the faith. They participate in discipline by the approbation of the work of elders and have responsibilities towards the penitent or impenitent sinner. They bestow their own goods to feed the poor and comfort their suffering and sorrowing brothers and sisters. But they do the official work of the church through the offices which Christ has instituted.

And so those who have been appointed to the special offices are appointed by Christ and answerable to Him. In fact, the believers within the congregation are called by Christ to submit to their officebearers.

This is the delicate balance of which I spoke earlier as one element in the genius of biblical and Reformed church polity. The office of believers is the basic office, and yet the ones holding this office submit to their officebearers (for whom they vote and who hold an office of authority over them.) Scripture is clear on this matter of submission: "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you" (Heb.

⁹De Ridder, *op. cit.*, pp. 11, 12.

13:17). “And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; and to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake” (I Thess. 5:12, 13). These are but two of the many passages which speak of or imply the same truth. When believers submit to the rule of their officebearers, they submit to Christ, because Christ is present in the congregation through the officebearers. Christ comes to dwell with His people. He comes with His Word and Spirit to speak to them through the ministers. He comes through the elders to rule over them by His grace and power. He comes to them in His tender mercies in their need through the deacons. And the believers, receiving their officebearers from Christ, receive Christ and live under His gracious and loving care.

This is the fulfillment of Christ’s promise to be with His people always. Christ saves them through the church so that the local congregation becomes the mother of the saints who gives them birth, nourishes them, cares for them, disciplines them, and prepares them for heaven where they may be with Christ forever.

The Purpose of the Autonomy of the Local Congregation

By virtue of the autonomy of the local congregation, Christ’s sovereign authority is exercised in and over the saints.

This does not negate or nullify the authority of the broader assemblies in the church.¹⁰ The federation of churches is important, and Independentism is anathema to a Reformed man. Churches of like precious faith *must* join together that they may work together in the cause of Christ and express the unity which they have in Christ.

Berkhof writes:

Thus the Reformed system honors the autonomy of the local church, though it always regards this as subject to the limitations that may be put upon it as a result of its association with other churches in one denomination, and assures it the fullest right to govern its own internal affairs by means of its officers. At the same time it also maintains the right and duty of the local church to unite with other similar churches on a common confessional basis, and form a wider organization for doctrinal, judicial, and administrative purposes, with proper stipulations of mutual obliga-

¹⁰In another article in this *Journal* Prof. Engelsma speaks to this issue.

tions and rights. Such a wider organization undoubtedly imposes certain limitations on the autonomy of the local churches, but also promotes the growth and welfare of the churches, guarantees the rights of the members of the Church, and serves to give fuller expression to the unity of the Church.¹¹

But the authority of the broader assemblies is fundamentally different from the authority of the local congregation. No broader assembly may do the work of the special offices in the church: preach the gospel, administer the sacraments, and exercise discipline. It may advise on all these things, and it is good that it does. But its authority is advisory. It may not usurp this calling which the local congregation alone possesses.

All authority is vested in Him who is the Head of the church and the Savior of the body, and that authority which belongs to Christ, He Himself has received from God. The authority over the church is given to Christ to save the church by His blood, to do all that needs to be done that the church may become God's everlasting possession, and to bring God's just judgments upon the wicked so that the church may be delivered from the clutches of evil.

Christ accomplishes all the purpose of God *for* the church by all His work. Christ accomplishes all the will of God *in* the church by His rule over the church through the offices which He has ordained for the church. Christ calls them (through the preaching) out of darkness into the light of salvation. Christ exercises the sovereign discipline of grace (through the keys of the kingdom) so that the church may be preserved and protected in the world of countless and powerful enemies. Christ cares tenderly (through the alms of the diaconate) for the church in all the needs of the saints. Kept safely within the church, God's people are preserved until they arrive at their eternal destination, the house of their Father.

After all, the church is, to use the words of Isaiah, a hut in a garden of cucumbers, a very small remnant, a besieged city. It is a small group surrounded by enormous and powerful enemies from the world and from hell. It is a little band of huddled sheep out in the vast, howling wilderness surrounded by ravening wolves. No earthly reason for her

¹¹Berkhof, *op. cit.*, p. 584.

continued existence can be found. But she belongs to Christ! And Christ cares for His church, protecting her, guarding her, saving her, preparing her for glory. That is the work of the officebearers in the church. And it all takes place through and in the local congregation.

Paul, in his letter to Timothy, calls the church “the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15b). The church is established in the world that the truth may be made known here below in this world filled with sin and the lie. By that truth, upheld and maintained by the church, the elect are called out of darkness into light — both on the mission fields of the world and from the covenant seed of believers. This truth is the means by which the elect are saved, the means by which they come under the discipline of the Scriptures, the means of keeping the saints from erring or bringing them to repentance, the means for comforting them in their sorrow, strengthening them in their weakness, arming them for the battle of faith, encouraging them when their hearts falter, reprimanding them when they stray — in short, the truth is all the church needs, for in possession of the truth, the church possesses Christ who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. But this church which is the pillar and ground of the truth is the local congregation. Historically, to Timothy, it was the church of Ephesus in the midst of which Timothy had to behave himself wisely (1 Tim. 3:15a). Throughout the ages it is each local congregation.

David Wells, in castigating evangelicalism for its failure to be faithful to its calling, writes: “The church is the pillar and ground of the truth, not a place to market the gospel in the name of growth.” And, quoting Niebuhr, Wells castigates the church and the gospel it preaches: “The church’s gospel is ‘a god without wrath bringing people without sin into a kingdom without judgment through a Christ without a cross.’”¹²

Christ’s rule is through the local church. That local church stands, therefore, for the cause of truth and righteousness. It is a witness to Christ and His truth, to Christ and His righteousness in a world gone mad with sin. It is a witness to the cause of Christ which shall ultimately triumph. It may seem as if the church goes down to defeat. And, indeed, in the days of Antichrist, the church shall exist no longer as a congre-

¹²David E. Wells, *God In The Wasteland* (InterVarsity Press, 1994).

gation. The church as institute disappears, destroyed by the beast. But God's people need never fear, for the destruction of the church institute in those days is only because it has accomplished its purpose in the world and is needed no more. The last elect has been born and nourished at her bosom. The time is ripe for Christ to come to take His whole church into glory to be with Him forever.

Conclusion

Neither a hierarchical form of church government (as practiced, e.g., by Rome and apostate Protestantism) nor Congregationalism (as practiced in Congregational or Baptist Churches) is able to preserve the autonomy of the church. The only ways to avoid unbiblical and un-Reformed methods of church government of all sorts is to guard jealously the great truth of the autonomy of the local church.

The Authority of the Major Assemblies

David J. Engelsma

When I speak of the major assemblies and their authority, I refer precisely to stated gatherings of ministers and ruling elders from a number of united congregations for the purpose of dealing with ecclesiastical matters. The decisions of these gatherings are authoritative so that all the churches and members represented by the gatherings are to receive the decisions as “settled and binding.” In these major assemblies is instituted and ordered the denomination of churches. The major assemblies are denominational assemblies. For the sake of brevity, I speak in this article of synod — the broadest assembly of a Reformed denomination of churches and the assembly that is the final court of appeal on earth for an aggrieved Reformed believer or consistory.

In order that there be no confusion, I make clear that I do not mean by major assembly a mere get-together every so often, as the spirit moves them, of ministers and elders, whose decisions have no binding author-

ity, but are mere recommendations that the congregations are free to take or leave at their pleasure. These are the gatherings of the congregational, or independent, churches. The congregationalists will call these gatherings “synods.” This is what, in fact, they do call them in their chief church orders, the Cambridge Platform and the Savoy Declaration. The Cambridge Platform states, “Synods orderly assembled and rightly proceeding according to the pattern, Acts 15, we acknowledge as the ordinance of Christ....”¹

The Savoy platform of church polity, “Of the Institution of Churches, and the Order Appointed in Them by Jesus Christ,” includes a reference to synod:

In cases of difficulties or differences, either in point of doctrine or in administrations, wherein either the churches in general are concerned, or any one church in their peace, union, and edification, or any member or members of any church are injured in, or by any proceeding in censures, not agreeable to truth and order: it is according to the mind of Christ, that many churches holding communion together, do by their messengers meet in a synod or council, to consider and give their advice in, or about that matter in difference, to be reported to all the churches concerned....²

But a get-together of ministers and elders without authority is not a synod, or major assembly, in the Reformed and Presbyterian sense. It is merely an association, or conference. That their gatherings lack authority, the congregational church orders make plain. The Cambridge Platform denies that the meeting which it calls synod may exercise “any ... act of church authority or jurisdiction. ...”³ Article XXVI of the Savoy platform of polity quoted above continues:

... howbeit these synods so assembled are not entrusted with any church-power, properly so called, or with any jurisdiction over the churches

¹Chapter XVI, 1, in *The Cambridge Platform*, ed. Darrell Todd Maurina (Lawrence, MI: The Reformed Tract Publication Committee, 3rd printing 1993).

²Art. XXVI, in Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, repr. 1960), p. 407.

³*The Cambridge Platform*, Chapter XVI, 4.

themselves, to exercise any censures, either over any churches or persons, or to impose their determinations on the churches or officers.⁴

It is not my purpose in treating of the major assemblies, or synod, to *establish* either that the major assemblies are a necessary element of Reformed church government or that these major assemblies have real authority. For this has been established. The major assembly has been solidly established by more than 400 years of the history of all Reformed and Presbyterian churches everywhere in the world. The major assembly has been officially established by the Reformed creeds. Article 29 of the Church Order of Dordt declares: "Four kinds of ecclesiastical assemblies shall be maintained: the consistory, the classis, the particular synod, and the general synod." Article 36 of this same, venerable church order ascribes authority to the major assemblies mentioned in Article 29: "The classis has the same jurisdiction over the consistory as the particular synod has over the classis and the general synod over the particular."⁵

The Presbyterian churches are in agreement with their Reformed sisters. In the Westminster Confession of Faith, they maintain:

For the better government ... of the church, there ought to be such assemblies as are commonly called synods.... It belongeth to synods ... ministerially to determine controversies of faith ... to receive complaints in cases of mal-administration and authoritatively to determine the same: which decrees and determinations, if consonant to the Word of God are to be received with reverence and submission, not only for their agreement with the word, but also for the power whereby they are made, as being an ordinance of God, appointed thereunto in his word (31.1,3).

No one in the Reformed churches has proved that this creedal stand on biblical church government is erroneous. No one has even tried to prove this. Of late, there have been many, vehement attacks on the major

⁴Walker, *Creeds*, p. 407.

⁵These articles, and the entire Church Order of Dordt, are found in the book of church order of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America, *The Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches*. The book is available from the office of the Stated Clerk, 4949 Ivanrest Ave., SW, Grandville, MI 49418.

assemblies by men who have recently left Reformed denominations, particularly the Christian Reformed Church in North America and the Reformed Church of America. But no one has presented a *gravamen* to his consistory, classis, and synod objecting to the major assemblies as unbiblical.

Synod, therefore, *is* an element of Reformed church government. Rejection of synod is, by virtue of this fact, the renunciation of Reformed church government. The government that results may be better than Reformed church government, or it may be worse. One thing it is not, and that is, Reformed, or Presbyterian.

Defense of Synod

My purpose is not to establish the major assembly as an element — a prominent element — of Reformed church government, but to explain and defend the major assembly.

Defense is necessary because there is at this hour a massive, concerted, determined attack on synod within nominally Reformed circles. Many readers of this journal are aware of the assault on, and rejection of, synod by many, if not most, of those who have recently left the Christian Reformed Church. From their own reports, they are busy drawing up a new church order for a new polity that deliberately and rigorously rules synod out.

But the repudiation of the major assemblies is more widespread than this. In his startling book advocating an aggressive evangelical ecumenicity regardless of the doctrinal differences of the denominations, the well-known Presbyterian theologian John M. Frame has written, “Denominational governments are unscriptural in my view....”⁶

The widespread disparagement of synod, indeed, rejection of synod, is part of a growing disaffection with denominations. “The denomination is a dinosaur,” we are told. The local church is everything, or the para-church organization, or, as is usually the case, the local church and the para-church organization together.

I mention in passing that I regard this temporary evangelical rejection of the denomination, which also appears among those who are

⁶John M. Frame, *Evangelical Reunion: Denominations and the Body of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), p. 32. Frame assures us that denominational governments are “better than nothing.”

reputed to be Reformed, as a step in the process of gathering all these present foes of the denomination into the most rigid denomination of all, the Roman Catholic Church. The tactic of Satan, whose war against the church is church political as well as doctrinal, is the weakening of all denominational attachments in order then to rescue the people from the resulting disorder and isolation into the institutional bosom of mother Rome.⁷

A need of the hour, therefore, is the defense of synod.

It is curious that a defense of synod in the Reformed community arises from the Protestant Reformed Churches. Really, this is as surprising as would be a defense of the federal government by the State of Virginia, were the northern states to advocate the dissolving of the union.

For more than 70 years, the Protestant Reformed Churches have asserted the autonomy, though never the independency, of the local congregation. All these years, they have warned, sometimes stridently, against a hierarchical abuse of its authority by synod. This was occasioned by the history of the Protestant Reformed Churches in their beginnings. Their origin was due to a synod's decreeing extra-confessional and binding doctrine that compromised the truth of sovereign, particular grace. This was attended by the major assemblies' exercising discipline upon those who opposed the novel dogma, deposing officebearers and entire consistories. Adding to the injustice, and aggravating the agony, these same major assemblies stripped consistories and whole congregations of their properties.

Today, when former champions and practitioners of the hierarchical abuse of synodical power undergo dramatic conversion (although without repentance) and begin to assail the very right of synod to exist, it is the Protestant Reformed Churches that must defend synod.

⁷No one should lightly dismiss this warning as reactionary. Joseph H. Hall opens up the recent, excellent study of church government, *Paradigms in Polity*, with these words: "Theodore Beza once pointed out the strategic nature of good church government by considering it as Satan's chief opposition: Satan 'hopes that it is easier to overthrow it (i.e., the government of the church) than to overthrow the foundation which is doctrine.'" See *Paradigms in Polity: Classic Readings in Reformed and Presbyterian Church Government*, ed. David W. Hall & Joseph H. Hall (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 3.

Recently, the periodical *Outlook*, leading voice of the reputedly conservative Reformed folk, published in three installments one of the most ferocious attacks on the major assemblies that I have ever read. Not only did the articles advocate the baldest congregationalism, but also they urged revolution within the Christian Reformed denomination and, by implication, within any and every Reformed denomination. From *Outlook*, there came not one word of editorial rebuttal, nor one word in defense of synod against this attack. Neither did a defense of synod come from any other Reformed quarter in North America, although the articles published in *Outlook* were surely known to all the conservative Reformed and Presbyterian bodies and theologians in North America.

The rebuttal of the attack on synod and the defense of the major assemblies fell to the *Standard Bearer*, the magazine associated with the Protestant Reformed Churches.⁸

That the defense of synod comes from the Protestant Reformed Churches is curious, perhaps, but not inexplicable. The Protestant Reformed Churches want to be Reformed. They want to be Reformed in church polity. They oppose hierarchy as fiercely as any Protestant church, but they also oppose independency. They consider themselves called to honor and defend the kingship of Jesus Christ in His church both in the rule of the elders in the local congregation and in the jurisdiction of synod over the local churches.

The Reformed and Presbyterian Tradition

To the charge that has become popular in Reformed circles, almost overnight, that synods are unbiblical, our first response is, "Have all the Reformed and Presbyterian churches and theologians been mistaken all these years?" Did both Dordt and Westminster err? Did the French Reformed churches blunder when they formed a synod already in 1559? Were the Dutch Reformed churches ignorant when they federated synodically at Emden as early as 1571? What about the Presbyterian

⁸The three articles in the *Outlook* assailing synod were entitled, "Synodocracy: Cause and Cure." They appeared in the March, April, and May, 1991 issues. The author was Dr. Lester DeKoster. The response defending synod in the *Standard Bearer*, by the editor, also consisted of three articles. They were entitled, "Church Unity, Reformed Synods, and Independency." They ran in the February 1, February 15, and March 1, 1992 issues.

churches in Scotland and Northern Ireland? Beza, Knox, Bogerman, Twisse, Gillespie, Kuyper, Bavinck, Rutgers, Bouwman, Cunningham, Bannerman, Thornwell, Hodge, and a host of others — were all our spiritual, church-political fathers fools or ignoramuses?

These churches and men who saw Reformed church polity, particularly the major assembly, as "*ius divinum*," divine law, the rule of Christ the king revealed in Holy Scripture — were they all blind to the lack of biblical warrant for the major assembly?

Are we really to suppose that after almost 500 years of Reformed church government Reformed Christians must now construct a new and different polity altogether?

In his fine article, "The Pastoral and Theological Significance of Church Government," David Hall calls Reformed churches to build on and benefit from the work done in the area of polity by the Reformed church in the past.⁹ This call is compelling. It is foolish, if not arrogant, to think that we must at this late date reinvent the wheel of biblical church polity.

The Issue: the Unity of the Church

The Reformed churches and theologians in the past saw clearly the biblical evidence for the major assembly. This evidence is not, first of all, one particular passage, Acts 15, but the doctrine of Scripture everywhere that the church, like her head, is one. The major assembly in Reformed church government is demanded by the unity of the church.¹⁰

⁹David W. Hall, "The Pastoral and Theological Significance of Church Government," in *Paradigms*: "Likewise, we can benefit from those who have already pioneered some of these paths for us. Or we can disregard their work, presuming that we are sufficient to discover all biblical truth by ourselves in our own generation. In what other academic discipline would such folly exist as in the field of polity to ignore so consistently the history of our development? A rediscovery of the paradigms of our past is sorely needed in our own day. Such theological giants, polity examples, and confessions could teach us much" (p. 21).

¹⁰H. Bouwman spoke for the Reformed faith on the Continent when he said that "the Reformed ... viewed ... this (church) connection (synod — DJE) as necessary on account of the unity in Christ" (*Gereformeerde Kerkrecht*, vol. 2, Kampen: Kok, 1934, p. 10; the translation of the Dutch is mine). James

The oneness of the church, although spiritual — a unity, as the Belgic Confession teaches in Article 27, that consists in “the power of faith, in one and the same Spirit” — must be manifested as much as possible institutionally. In John 17, Jesus prayed that those whom the Father has given Him be one, “that the world may believe that thou hast sent me” (v. 21). The spiritual oneness of the church comes to manifestation: the world can see the oneness in its outward expression.

One expression of the unity is the peaceful, cooperative life of the local congregation as the members submit to the kingly rule of Christ through the body of elders. But just as no one congregation exhausts the church, the unity Jesus prayed for comes to expression also in a federation of congregations that are one in the truth of the Word of God. The Spirit binds these congregations together in a church-bond.

“Federation” is a fitting term for this church-bond, since it derives from the Latin *foedus*, which means ‘covenant.’ The life of the churches together is covenant-life. It is nothing less than the outworking among themselves of the fellowship that each church has with God in Christ by the Holy Spirit. This ecclesiastical covenant-life means peace, strength, joy, and cooperation in a great work, but it also means mutual responsibilities and the calling to submit to each other in the Lord. Denominational federation is not a loose association, a tenuous alliance of convenience, but a firm bond. Although each church enters the federation willingly, it is bound to the other churches by the Spirit of their mutual head.

The institutional bonds of this covenant-life are the major assemblies — classis and synod, or presbytery and general assembly — with the church order that rules them. These are the organizational expressions and demonstrations of the unity of the church of Christ. By them, the churches govern their life together; indeed, by them Christ rules the churches in that aspect of their life that is lived in the federation and in specific aspects of the life of each congregation.

Henley Thornwell spoke for Presbyterianism worldwide when he gave as the very first of “the principles of Presbyterian church-government,” “the unity of the Church,” and when he gave as the second, “that unity is realized by representative assemblies” (“Presbyterianism and the Eldership,” in *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, vol. 4, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, repr. 1974, pp. 135, 136). Note well: “necessary” and “principle”!

So far is synod from being a hopeless evil, that it is a covenant-assembly. So far is the denomination from being a dinosaur, that it is the contemporary means of the unity of the church.

New Testament Evidence of Federation

There is evidence in the New Testament of such covenantal, federative oneness among the many congregations. There was a bond among all the New Testament congregations that bound one doctrine upon them all and that guarded against the intrusion of false doctrine. With specific reference to the doctrine concerning marriage, divorce, and remarriage, the apostle wrote in I Corinthians 7:17, "And so ordain I in all churches."

There was a bond that bound one order of public worship on all the churches. In I Corinthians 14:33, the apostle declared concerning certain rules for worship that he was laying down for the Corinthian church, "God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints." The next verse makes plain that one rule making for peace that God authors in all the churches alike is that "your women keep silence in the churches" inasmuch as they are to be "under obedience" (v. 34). When, therefore, the Christian Reformed Church, having decided that women may be preachers and ruling elders, attached the stipulation that sections of the denomination were permitted to exclude women from these offices, they added the sin of dividing the church to the sin of disobeying Christ's prohibition against female ministers and elders. A denomination must have one church order whose rules, especially its rules concerning the offices, bind all alike.

There was a bond that bound all the churches of the apostolic era to help each other materially. There is in the New Testament *diaconal* indication of federation. In II Corinthians 8 and 9 it is not so much the point that the other congregations ought to help the needy church in Jerusalem as it is that this help is "fellowship" (II Cor. 8:4). It is in the unity of the church that the prosperous congregations share in the lack of the needy church and that the needy church shares in the abundance of the congregations that are well-off.

The churches set before us in the New Testament were not independent, but united. Although they were autonomous, they were subject in important respects to an authority that was over them all. That which united them externally and organizationally and that which

governed them was the office of the apostle. That office is no more. But the power to unite the churches institutionally and the common authority over all the churches remain. These now reside in the churches themselves, and the churches exercise this power and this authority by the synod.

The Jerusalem Synod

That synods would serve for the manifestation of unity after the passing of the office of apostle is made plain in the history of Acts 15. Acts 15 is the main biblical proof for the Reformed synod, or Presbyterian general assembly, and it is conclusive. This is the passage that the Reformed churches and theologians heeded when they wrote the major assemblies into their church orders. To say it differently, Acts 15 establishes the spiritual polity of King Jesus requiring synod.

Although the Jerusalem assembly does not correspond to our synod in every detail, as regards the principles and nature of that meeting it was the same as our synod. Commenting on Acts 15:6, Calvin wrote:

Let us know, that here is prescribed by God a form and an order in assembling synods, when there ariseth any controversy which cannot otherwise be decided.¹¹

A doctrinal controversy erupted that could not be settled in the local church at Antioch. Appeal was made to a broader gathering, not of apostles only but of apostles, ministers, and elders. Verse 6 speaks of "the apostles and elders." It was a deliberative assembly. There was debate, searching of the Scriptures, and testing of conflicting positions. The ecclesiastical gathering reached a decision that clarified and upheld the truth of the gospel of grace, specifically the truth of justification by faith alone. The decision was of the greatest help, not only to the congregation at Antioch but also to all the churches. Basic to its being of help to all the churches was that the decision was binding upon all the churches. Acts 16:4 relates that Paul and Silas went through the cities and "delivered them the decrees for to keep, that were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem."

¹¹John Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, repr. 1957), p. 44.

From this significant account it is clearly evident that the local churches are joined, not independent. Their union is an assembly of officebearers that is broader than the rulers of one congregation. To this assembly belong matters that cannot be completed in the local church, especially issues of doctrinal controversy. This major assembly takes decisions that hold for all the churches. And this assembly is a powerful and beneficial means by which Christ rules the churches: the assembly can say, "It seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us ..." (v. 28).

Christ's Spirit is present in the major assembly, working the will of the sovereign Christ.

The Worth and Necessity of Synod

To regard synod as intrinsically evil, or at least dangerous, is, therefore, unbiblical. This is, to be sure, the spirit of the present age among Reformed people. "Synod-ocracy!" "Synod is the Great Bogey, the Grand Tyranny!" "All our woes will be solved, if only we exclude the major assemblies from the church order!"

Was the Jerusalem synod an evil?

Was the Council of Nicea an evil?

Was the Council of Chalcedon an evil?

Was the Synod of Dordt an evil?

Was the Westminster Assembly an evil?

Were the countless classes and synods that have rendered judgment, defended sound doctrine, delivered the aggrieved and oppressed, aided troubled congregations, promoted the work of Christ's church denominationally, and displayed in action the oneness of the body of Christ evil? Shall we say in the amazing wisdom given to us suddenly at the end of the 20th century that they were all "synod-ocracy," that they were all "hierarchy"?

Let him say this who will, as for us we dare not.

On the contrary, synod has worth. Christ uses synod for the defense, maintenance, and development of sound doctrine in the churches. This was the accomplishment of the Jerusalem synod. With this comes peace — real peace — in the churches, the peace of oneness in the faith. This was the benefit of the Jerusalem synod (Acts 15:31; 16:5). In addition, the worth of synod is the empowerment and promotion of the common work: missions; the training of men for the ministry; the care and supervision of all the congregations in the federation. In all of this,

synod's worth is the display of the unity of Christ's disciples in answer to His prayer. For synod is not some alien body, but the churches themselves acting in concert.

Synod is necessary. Christ the King commands it. The oneness of the congregations of apostolic time as instanced above, the Jerusalem assembly of Acts 15, and the prayer of Jesus that His people be one so that the world might see, constitute a command to like-minded congregations to unite synodically.

This command does not remain an external order on the pages of the Bible and in the old Reformed church orders. It becomes an inner, spiritual compulsion within a local church to draw near to the other true churches of Christ and to have the oneness of synodical federation. This is the very nature of the working of the Holy Spirit in the church.¹²

This is the reason why in 1568 the Reformed churches of the Netherlands meeting at Wesel sought and formed a classis:

... for the establishing and preserving of consensus in doctrine, ceremonies, and church discipline, and for common actions and mutual consultation in matters of importance regarding common interests.¹³

The unity of the church!

This is the reason why in 1571 the Reformed churches of the Netherlands meeting at Emden federated for the first time synodically: "... to institute the unity of the churches in external form had been the goal of the organizing of the churches at the synod at Emden."¹⁴

¹²The Reformed scholar in church polity, H. Bouwman, wrote: "The origin of the synod is to be sought in the consciousness of the unity of the congregation in Christ. The believers are all members of the one catholic Christian church and are called to employ their gifts willingly and with joy for the profit and salvation of other believers. Every local church is autonomous (Dutch: *zelfstandig*) and has the right to establish order and rule for its own congregation. But since the churches are one in Christ, their Head and King, they are also bound, in subjection to the Word of the Lord, to seek and preserve the unity of faith with other churches . . . (*Geref. Kerk.*, p. 188; the translation of the Dutch is mine).

¹³Cited in G. Van Rongen and K. Deddens, *Decently and in Good Order* (Winnipeg: Premier, 1986), p. 58.

¹⁴Bouwman, *Geref. Kerk.*, p. 60 (the translation of the Dutch is mine).

The unity of the church!

Refusal by a congregation to federate is disobedience and folly. Christ judges this refusal by realizing “the perils of independency” upon that congregation. There is the peril of tyranny — tyranny by a majority, or even a vocal minority, of the congregation; tyranny by a popish minister; tyranny by a lordly consistory, or even one lordly elder. No appeal to a broader assembly is possible. The result is oppression and misery, or strife and division that may very well tear the congregation apart.

What shortsightedness that some react against admitted synodical hierarchy by overlooking that also congregations, elders, and preachers can be hierarchical. If there is “synod-ocracy,” there can also just as well be “*dominie*-ocracy,” “consist-ocracy,” and “demo-ocracy.”

There is the peril of drifting away from the truth. A main purpose of the synodical bond is the maintenance of sound doctrine by all the congregations.

There is the peril of the independent congregation’s becoming fascinated with itself as though the church of Christ in the world, if she does not exhaust herself in the particular independent congregation, certainly centers on it.

Synod has worth. It is necessary. Jesus Christ the king rules His church also through synod.

This holds, of course, only for a synod that has authority, a real synod.

Authority over the Consistory

The major assembly has authority over the consistory of the local church. This is indisputable in light of the Reformed church orders. Dordt is representative: “The classis has the same jurisdiction over the consistory as the ... synod has over the classis” (Art. 36). The Latin original for “jurisdiction” is *auctoritas*, ‘authority,’ that is, the ‘right to rule.’ The Dutch is expressive: *zeggen*, that is, ‘say-so.’ The classis has “say-so” over the consistory, and the synod has “say-so” over the classis.

The authority of the major assemblies over the consistory comes out in many ways in the life of the Reformed denomination, as prescribed by the church order of Dordt. Two examples must suffice. Both are chosen to show that the authority of the major assemblies concerns the most important aspects of the life of the local church. First, the local

church may not call a minister without the advice of classis (Articles 4, 5, 8, 9, 10). Second, the local church may not excommunicate members without the advice of classis (Art. 76).

“Settled and Binding” Authority

Such is this *“auctoritas,”* this *“zeggen,”* of the major assembly that its decisions on issues are to be considered “settled and binding” by all the churches and all the members in the federation, *by virtue of the majority vote of the major assembly.* This rule — Article 31 of the original church order of Dordt — is decisive for an authoritative, that is, real synod:

If anyone complain that he has been wronged by the decision of a minor assembly, he shall have the right to appeal to a major ecclesiastical assembly, and whatever may be agreed upon by a majority vote shall be considered settled and binding, unless it be proved to conflict with the Word of God or with the articles of the church order, as long as they are not changed by a general synod.

What is done with this article, particularly the phrase “settled and binding,” will determine whether the new church order presently being drawn up by the churches that seceded from the Christian Reformed Church is a genuinely Reformed church order, and whether the church formation that adopts it is a genuine federation. If “settled and binding” is dropped, or qualified in such a way as to make the authority of major assemblies dependent upon the ratification of its decisions by the consistory, the new church order will not be a Reformed church order, but a congregational “platform,” and the contact of congregations on the basis of this church order will not be a Reformed federation, but a congregational association.

“Settled and binding” is the *homoousios* of Reformed church government at the present time.¹⁵

The decisions of a synod are settled and binding for a consistory, not on the condition that the consistory solemnly ratifies the decision but simply by virtue of the synod’s taking the decision. No Reformed

¹⁵At the time of this writing, as when I gave the speech of which this is the expanded text, I have not seen the draft of the new church order that is to be proposed to the secessionist Christian Reformed churches.

consistory may “ratify” decisions taken by the major assembly. This would be to deny the authority of synod. It would be to turn the rule of Article 36 of the church order of Dordt on its head: the consistory now has authority over the synod. Ratification implies that the decisions of synod, as such, have no authority whatever. They depend for their authority upon the ratification of them by the various consistories. The sole authority in the denomination is the consistory. Synod is a toothless tiger.

Since Article 31 of the church order of Dordt does not specify the consistory as the body in the denomination that is to consider decisions of the major assembly settled and binding but, in fact, refers to the individual member (“anyone”), the notion of ratification leads straight to the conclusion that decisions of the major assembly are not settled and binding for any member until he personally ratifies them in his own judgment. Thus we come to the individualism of independency. Chaos lurks in the wings.

The important qualifying clause, “unless it be proved to conflict with the Word of God or ... the church order,” does not mean that synodical decisions depend for their validity and force upon the approval of them by each consistory and by each member personally. So some explain: “If I judge that a decision is contrary to the Word or church order, the decision is not to be considered settled and binding by me!” What is this but rejection of the authority of synod, in order to make each member the ultimate authority in the denomination?

There is the right of appeal against the decision of a major assembly. Synods can err. Synods can err grievously. Often synods are themselves to blame for the contempt in which they are held by members of the denomination and for the flight from synod into congregationalism. When synod not only does not uphold and defend the truth, but introduces false doctrine into the denomination; when synod not only does not maintain righteousness, but decrees unrighteousness; when synod not only does not hear and deliver the aggrieved, but treats the godly, concerned believer shamefully; when synod not only does not make Scripture, the Reformed creeds, and the church order the basis of its decisions, but corrupts the Scripture, contradicts the creeds, and changes the church order — then synod, which ought to be the bond of unity, becomes the agent of schism and itself the cause, why synod is evilly spoken of.

But the fact that synods can and do err does not imply that the qualifying clause in Article 31 of the church order of Dordt means that the decisions of synod depend for their authority upon the ratification by the consistory and, indeed, by each member. Consistories also can err, but not even the most ardent advocate of independency among those who claim to be Reformed would conclude from the fallibility of consistories that the authority of consistorial decisions depends upon ratification by each member of the congregation.

The clause does not suspend the settled and binding nature of synodical decisions upon the approval of them by the consistories or upon the personal judgment of each member in the denomination. But it states that the decisions are to be considered settled and binding unless they be "*proved*" to conflict with Scripture and the creeds. One proves something to another, not to himself. An aggrieved consistory or member must prove that a synodical decision is in error to the next synod. Failing in this, the consistory or member either acquiesces in the objectionable decision, or, if this is impossible in good conscience before God because the gospel is at stake, leaves the apostatizing denomination.

The major assembly has real authority. Nor is the exercise of authority by the major assembly inherently hierarchy. The Reformed churches in the Netherlands were anti-hierarchical. This was expressed in Article 84 of the church order of Dordt: "No church shall in any way lord it over other churches, no minister over other ministers, no elder or deacon over other elders or deacons." The first regular Reformed synod (Emden, 1571) made this the very first article of the church order. So lively was the consciousness of these churches, just saved from the bondage of hierarchical Rome, of the wickedness and wretchedness of hierarchy. But these same churches were ready to ascribe "*auctoritas*," "*zeggen*," to the major assembly over the consistory and to require that the decisions of the major assemblies be considered "settled and binding."¹⁶

That synod has authority over the consistory is indisputable on the basis of the account of the Jerusalem synod in Acts 15:1-16:5. First, the

¹⁶On the correct understanding of Article 31 of the church order of Dordt, see also my article, "The Binding Decisions of a Reformed Synod," in the *Standard Bearer*, June 1, 1991, pp. 389-392.

synod “delivered them (that is, all the local churches — DJE) the decrees for to keep, that were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem” (Acts 16:4). The synod did not offer advice to be accepted or rejected; it did not present decisions for local ratification. But it delivered “*decrees*” (literally, “dogmas”) to be *kept*. The decisions were to be considered “settled and binding” by the local churches by virtue of the synodical action in accordance with the gospel of the Scriptures.

Second, even as regarded the prohibitions that had to do with love for the weaker brothers, e.g., abstinence from food offered to idols, these prohibitions were a “burden” that the synod laid upon the churches, not a suggestion that the churches should adopt (Acts 15:28).

The Nature of Synodical Authority

As to the nature of the authority of the major assembly, there are two characteristics of this authority, in my judgment, that are of greatest importance. First, it is the authority of Jesus Christ the King of the church by which He governs His church in the world. Nothing less! It must be this, if it is real church-authority. In this sense, the authority of the major assembly is the same as the authority of the consistory.

It is not of any decisive importance to note at this point, as is often done, that the authority of a consistory is original and direct, whereas that of the synod is derived, namely, from the consistories. For even so, it is the authority of Christ that is derived, not some other authority. The authority derived by the Christian school and its teachers from my wife and me is parental authority, not some other kind of authority altogether.

Synod, I repeat, is the churches themselves exercising the authority that Christ has given them to rule their common life and work.

Neither is it to the point to say, “Synod’s authority is for serving, not lordship.” Of course! And so is all authority in the church, as Christ teaches in Matthew 20:25-28: “... the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them ... but it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister....” Paul commented that even apostolic authority was for construction, not destruction (II Cor. 13:10).

The fundamental difference between the authority of the consistory and the authority of the major assembly concerns the scope and sphere of the exercise of their authority.

Accordingly, the second important characteristic of the nature of

synodical authority is that it is rigorously restricted. An article in the Dordt church order whose significance is sometimes overlooked is Article 30:

In major assemblies only such matters shall be dealt with as could not be finished in minor assemblies, or such as pertain to the churches of the major assembly in common.

The sphere of the authority of the major assembly is severely restricted. The rest of the church order sheds light on the restriction in that it never gives to the major assembly the right to preach or exercise discipline, but does find these keys of the kingdom in the consistory of the local church.¹⁷

The authority of synod over the local church is not totalitarian. It refers only to matters that could not be finished in the local church and to matters that by their very nature belong to the denomination. This is a very limited scope in comparison with the scope of the authority of the local church.

The explanation is a basic truth of the biblical doctrine of the church, namely, that the local congregation is the instituted church of Christ, a complete manifestation of the body of Christ in a certain place. The major assembly is not the church, but the gathering of the churches for their common work in the unity of the body of Christ.

To speak a practical word to the current uproar in Reformed circles over synod and its alleged inherent (and total) depravity, let the consistories and the members of the congregations see to it that synod

¹⁷The complete omission of the church order of Dordt to ascribe the power of discipline to the major assembly, while locating this power always in the consistory, gave even such a champion of the unbridled powers of the major assemblies as Christian Reformed minister G. Hoeksema some difficulty. When he came finally to answer the question, "Can the *Classis* depose?" he was forced at the very outset to say, "It must be admitted, of course, that the Church Order does not say this in so many words. ...the Church Order does not specifically and literally give to a *Classis* the right to depose a consistory." See G. Hoeksema, *Can a Classis Depose a Consistory?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1926), pp. 58, 59. The purpose of the booklet was to justify the discipline of Herman Hoeksema and his consistory by the classis of the Christian Reformed Church.

sticks to its limited sphere. Let them also see to it that synod decides on all matters in its proper sphere according to Scripture, the Reformed confessions, and the church order.

May Synod Discipline?

May the major assembly discipline? May it depose officebearers? May it depose whole consistories?

This is a controversial question.

There has been a significant tradition in the history of the Reformed churches in the Netherlands that taught and practiced the disciplinary power of the major assembly. Synods immediately after Dordt deposed Remonstrant (Arminian) consistories. The notable G. Voetius participated. The Synod of Assen (1926) deposed J. G. Geelkerken and his consistory. Just prior to the deposition of H. Danhof, G. M. Ophoff, and H. Hoeksema by classes of the Christian Reformed Church in 1925, a classis of the Christian Reformed Church had deposed H. Bultema and his consistory.

Another mind in the tradition of the Dutch Reformed churches held that it is the consistory of the local church to which Christ has given the key-power of discipline. Voetius gave strong expression to this conviction so that the Dutch state church sourly called him an "Independent."¹⁸

It is to be regretted that the secessionists from the Christian Reformed Church do not view their troubles with hierarchical synods as the occasion to reexamine some of these church political issues in consultation with others who are deeply concerned about them and might have some insights into them. As it is, the recent secessionists merely react by adopting independency. There is no church-political

¹⁸Although H. Bouwman defended the right of the major assembly to exercise discipline on officebearers and consistories, he recognized that "as a rule, and under normal circumstances, the exercise of discipline, excommunication, and deposition of ministers and members of consistory should take place, not without the approval of the congregation," that is, the rule is that the consistory of the local church exercises discipline. The major assembly, Bouwman continued, steps in to perform discipline "in extraordinary cases (Dutch: *in buitengewone gevallen*)" (*Geref. Kerk.*, p. 81; the translation of the Dutch is mine).

development. There is no thorough-going reformation. There is merely unfruitful reaction. From the frying pan of hierarchy, they jump forthwith into the fire of independency.

Reformed Church Polity in the PRC

In any case, I make bold to put forward the church polity that has taken form, and is being practiced with great benefit, in the Protestant Reformed Churches.

The local church alone preaches and disciplines, although the discipline is subject to the authoritative advice of classis. That the classis and synod do not exercise discipline is in accord with the fact that the church order of Dordt never assigns this power to the major assembly. It is noteworthy too that the Jerusalem synod did not discipline the heretics even though it regarded them as “subverting your souls” (Acts 15:24). In addition, the New Testament commands the local church to discipline wicked members (I Cor. 5).

The Protestant Reformed Churches practice a church polity in which synods stick closely to the restricted sphere laid out by Dordt: matters that could not be finished in minor assemblies and matters that pertain to the churches in common.

Synodical decisions are received by all as settled and binding, although all have the right of appeal.

The restriction of synod’s authority is maintained by the fact that the denominational work is carried on by committees governed by constitutions. These committees mostly implement synodical decisions and always present all their actions to synod for approval.

Regarding recalcitrant or otherwise wicked consistories, the extent of synod’s authority would be to declare that consistory outside the covenant-bond of the denomination. This would not be discipline in the formal sense. But given the nature of the denomination as expressing the unity of Christ’s church, this would be serious enough. The congregation would now be outside the blessed fellowship of the covenant-life of true churches of Christ in the world. This should shame a schismatic congregation into repenting and returning.

Honoring the Major Assemblies

The Reformed Christian is not to despise the major assembly, but to honor and uphold it. If the assemblies of his denomination have

become corrupt — trampling on the Word of God, riding roughshod over Reformed church order, oppressing the saints, and dishonoring the head of the church — and if reformation proves impossible, he must break with that denomination and join a denomination that is sound.

But he must not throw out the baby with the bathwater. If a minister becomes heretical or falls into gross sin, we do not, therefore, despise the ministry. If a consistory becomes tyrannical, we do not, therefore, repudiate eldership. If a father abuses his family-headship, we do not, therefore, renounce fatherhood. Neither may we reject the very idea of synod because certain synods have become hierarchical.

In order that the synod not become corrupt, let every church in the denomination be faithful to the Word of God as set forth in the Reformed confessions. The unity of the churches is their spiritual oneness in the doctrines of the Reformed confessions. If they lose this, if they lose this at the local level of consistory, minister, and congregation, ere long there will be hierarchy and promotion of the lie at synod. But then the local congregation should not blame synod, at least not as though the synod is the sole cause of its misery, for much of the blame lies at the feet of the local church itself. The local church long ago lost its first love of the truth and for a long time ignored its calling to discipline the heretic in the denomination.

Synod itself bears responsibility to preserve its honor in the churches. It must conduct its business in the “ecclesiastical manner.” Scripture, the creeds, and the church order decide all issues. The debate must set forth the issues in the light of Scripture, creeds, and church order. The decision must be determined by the evidence.

Synods destroy themselves when the majority vote their will, regardless of the evidence that has obviously been presented from Scripture, creeds, and church order, evidence that was never answered by those of a contrary mind and, in some cases, evidence that the majority did not try to answer because it knew that it could not.

There may be no partiality at synod, only a singleminded seeking and doing of Christ’s will as His will is clearly made known in the Bible.

What I plead for is the virtue remarked by Morton H. Smith in James Henley Thornwell, chief among the mighties of Southern Presbyterianism:

One of the most admirable of his qualities ... was his transparent honesty.

He was no intriguer; had no by-ends to accomplish; never worked by indirection. His heart was in his hand, and every man could read it.... None doubted his sincerity.... Straightforward himself, he dealt honestly with his colleagues; and if he could not carry his point by fair argument, he was content to fail.

Smith adds:

Would that there were more of this in Church courts today. The maneuvering that often takes place behind the scenes of the Ecclesiastical Courts has often served to disillusion the young minister or the ruling elder, inexperienced in such things.¹⁹

Yes, and how this must displease Christ, who thus is once again afflicted by the unrighteous behavior of scheming ecclesiastics.

If synod would be honored, and it ought to be both as the churches' bond of union and as the rule of Christ, let it behave honorably. Let every delegate resolve, on his election, to behave so as to bring honor on the rule of Christ and the unity of the church: the Reformed synod. ▲

¹⁹Morton H. Smith, *Studies in Southern Presbyterian Theology* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962), p. 125.

Book Reviews

Calvin's Authentic Calvinism, A Clarification, by Alan C. Clifford. Norwich: Charenton Reformed Publishing, 1996. 94pp. £5.95 (paper). [Reviewed by Herman Hanko.]

Although this book arises out of the author's doctoral thesis, *Atonement and Justification*, published by Oxford University Press in 1990, the subject is nothing new, but belongs to a whole spate of books which have appeared in the last century or so and which attempt to persuade us that Calvin taught a universal atonement. Already William Cunningham, in his important work, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation*, first published in 1862, faced this question brought up by opponents of Calvinism, and, we might add, completely refuted it.

It seems as if the author is unaware of the controversy that has gone on over the subject because, although he adds little new, he confidently writes: "It is hoped that these two issues (Calvin's view of the atonement and Amyrauldianism) will now be settled once and for all..." (p. 10). That Mr. Clifford connects Amyrauldianism to the question is not

new either: Cunningham spoke of the two as inseparably related; i.e., Amyrauldianism requires a universal atonement.

Amyrauldianism was a system of doctrine developed in France in the school of Saumur shortly after the Synod of Dort and was influential throughout Europe and particularly in the British Isles. It taught a hypothetical universalism and a conditional predestination. With respect to the atonement, it taught that the atonement is rooted in God's revealed will and therefore makes salvation available to all. This atonement is efficacious and is provided for all conditionally, i.e., upon condition of faith. This became the theological foundation for the well-meant offer of the gospel.

It was consistently condemned by orthodox theologians beginning with Turretin, a contemporary of the School of Saumur, and including English theologians such as Cunningham, Hodge, and many others, and Dutch theologians such as Kuyper and Bavinck.

Clifford tips his hand when he dedicates this book to Moise Amyraut, the father of Amyrauldianism, and he is true to this heretic whom he admires when he

takes the position that Amyraut agreed with Calvin and represents true Calvinism, while those who hold to limited atonement are the ones who have diverged from the teachings of the Reformer of Geneva.

Although the book is filled with copious references to and quotations from Calvin, the author completely fails to make his case. The passages from Calvin referred to can be generally categorized into three groups. The first group consists of Calvin's references to the fact that Christ's sacrifice on the cross was for "the world," for "all," for the human race. These terms are completely biblical and Calvin uses them in the biblical sense; but every student of Scripture knows beyond a shadow of doubt that these terms can never be taken as referring to all men head for head.

The second group of passages consists of those times when Calvin uses the word "condition." Although this is indeed rather frequent in Calvin, the author fails entirely to recognize that Calvin uses the word in the sense of "way" or "means." When Calvin speaks, e.g., of acceptance of the gospel as the "condition" of salvation, he means, in every case, that acceptance of the gospel by faith is the way God saves or the means of giving salvation to the elect.

The third group of passages are those where Calvin speaks of the general proclamation of the gospel and the general presentation (offer) of Christ to all who hear the gospel. He insists that these passages too prove that Calvin believed in a universal atonement.

There is an irony here which ought not to escape us. Clifford sees clearly that if by an offer of salvation is meant God's desire to save all who hear the gospel (a view taught by Amyrauldians, Arminians, and all present-day defenders of the well-meant offer), then truly Christ had to die for all men. But Calvin did not teach a well-meant offer in that sense, as is clear to anyone who reads his "Treatise on the Eternal Predestination of God."

While many others have refuted this spurious claim of Clifford, we refer the reader to Cunningham's important work, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (Banner of Truth, 1979, pp. 395ff.). We quote here a few excerpts. After examining the arguments of those who assert otherwise and after paying close attention to the claims of Amyrauldianism, he concludes:

There is not, then, we are persuaded, satisfactory evidence that Calvin held the doctrine of

a universal, unlimited, or indefinite atonement. And, moreover, we consider ourselves warranted in asserting, that there is sufficient evidence that he did not hold this doctrine.... The evidence of this position is derived chiefly from the two following considerations.

1st. Calvin consistently, unhesitatingly, and explicitly denied the doctrine of God's universal grace and love to all men, — that is, *omnibus et singulis*, to each and every man, — as implying in some sense a desire or purpose or intention to save them all; (note Cunningham's strong repudiation of the contention that Calvin taught a gracious and well-meant offer. HH) and with this universal grace or love to all men the doctrine of a universal or unlimited atonement, in the nature of the case, and in convictions and admissions of all its supporters, stands inseparably connected. That Calvin denied the doctrine of God's universal grace or love to all men, as implying some desire or intention of saving them all, and some provision directed to that object, is too evident to any one who has read his writings, to admit of doubt or to require proof....

2d. The other consideration to which we referred, as affording some positive evidence, though not direct and explicit,

that Calvin did not hold the doctrine of a universal atonement, is this, — that he has interpreted some of the principle texts on which the advocates of that doctrine rest it, in such a way as to deprive them of all capacity of serving the purpose to which its supporters commonly apply them....

Cunningham refers to two passages in Calvin in proof of his assertion: Calvin's commentary on I Timothy 2:4 ("Who will have all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth"), where Calvin refers the expression "all men" to "all kinds of men." And I John 2:2 ("And he is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but for the sins of the whole world"). In commenting on this verse, Calvin writes:

Here a question may be raised, how have the sins of the whole world been expiated? I pass by the dotages of the fanatics, who under this pretence extend salvation to all the reprobate, and therefore to Satan himself. Such a monstrous thing deserves no refutation. They who seek to avoid this absurdity, have said that Christ suffered sufficiently for the whole world, but efficiently only for the elect. This solution has commonly prevailed in the schools.

Though then I allow that what has been said is true, yet I deny that it is suitable to this passage; for the design of John was no other than to make this benefit common to the whole Church. Then under the word all or whole, he does not include the reprobate, but designates those who should believe as well as those who were then scattered through various parts of the world. For then is really made evident, as it is meet, the grace of Christ, when it is declared to be the only true salvation of the world.

Those who, with Clifford, follow this old and oft refuted line of argumentation undoubtedly do so because they would like to claim the support of Calvin for their heresies. They are uniformly unsuccessful. It would be better if they would simply repudiate Calvin, teach their heresies, and admit that they stand outside the stream of historical Calvinism and that their views are, after all, aberrations.

The book includes several appendices, two of which are intended to refute the cogent arguments of men who have defended limited atonement: Roger Nicole and Jonathan Rainbow. ■

Old Testament Evangelistic Sermons, by D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth

Trust, 1995. Pp. xxxii-268. \$25.95 (cloth). [Reviewed by Robert Decker.]

David Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981), the great preacher at Westminster Chapel in London from 1938 to 1968, distinguished three types of sermons. Evangelistic sermons, which he called *kerygma*, were intended to reach the nominal Christian and the unconverted. This type of sermon Lloyd-Jones preached on Sunday evenings. A second type of sermons Lloyd-Jones preached were instructional-experimental sermons, which he called *didache*. His Sunday morning sermons were of this type and were intended for the converted, the believers among his congregation. The third type of sermons, purely instructional sermons, were preached to his Friday night Bible classes. The collection of twenty-one sermons in this volume were, as the title of the book indicates, of the first type, evangelistic or *kerygma* sermons intended for the unconverted.

It is the conviction of this reviewer that Lloyd-Jones certainly ranks as one of the pulpit giants of the twentieth century. Anyone interested in understanding what good preaching ought to be could do much worse than carefully studying his book, *Preaching and*

Preachers (Zondervan, 1972). Preachers can learn much from a study of his many published sermons as well. For this reason Lloyd-Jones' *Preaching and Preachers* is included in the Select Bibliography and required reading list for this reviewer's Homiletics class.

Nevertheless, Lloyd-Jones is less than Reformed in his conception of the church and congregation. He regarded the congregation as consisting of converted and unconverted people. He did not conceive of the congregation in the Reformed (biblical) sense as the gathering of believers and their children, a manifestation of Christ's body in a given place and time. He would address them as "hearers" or "my dear friends," but not as "Beloved in the Lord Jesus Christ." His view of the congregation gave rise to his view of the three types of sermons.

With this caveat we heartily recommend this volume of sermons to the reader. As noted above, preachers will benefit from a study of these sermons. The lay reader will find them to be excellent material for his personal devotions.

Indeed there is "powerful stuff" in them. In the two sermons Lloyd-Jones preached on II Kings 5:1, 8-16 we read,

The first thing which we gather

from this passage is that *sin is something which spoils life*. Listen to it: "Now Naaman, captain of the host of the king of Syria, was a great man with his master, and honourable, because by him the Lord had given great deliverance unto Syria; he was also a mighty man in valour." Such is the citation — a man who has been honoured by the king, and honoured because he was a remarkable man, a man of natural abilities and powers, possessed of great prowess and highly successful in conducting his campaigns. So he was "a great man with his master." As we read of him, he seems to be rising from step to step and to be well-nigh perfect. Then comes this little word "but" — "*but* he was a leper." In just that phrase you really have got everything that the Bible tells us about sin for it is conveyed perfectly by this picture of leprosy. Leprosy in the Old Testament, and in the New, ever stands as a kind of type of sin, an illustration of sin.... There are so many things that are good about life.... But nobody says that everything is all right. This fatal "but" seems to come in, it is always there and it has been there throughout the centuries (pp. 114-115).

Lloyd-Jones' convictions are clearly evident in these sermons.

He firmly believed the Bible to be infallibly inspired, the only rule for the faith and life of the Christian. He believed that sin is the source of all the world's and all the individual's problems. He was convinced that the only cure for sin is the cross of Jesus Christ, and he was equally convinced that the natural man could do absolutely nothing to save himself. Salvation, according to Lloyd-Jones, is only "by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, and that not of ourselves, it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8). He spent an entire lifetime tirelessly preaching these great biblical themes. His sermons were 45 minutes to an hour in length, and his congregation at Westminster numbered over two thousand souls!

Lloyd-Jones used no gimmicks, conducted no "evangelistic campaigns," and allowed no special music or choirs in the worship services. He simply expounded holy Scripture twice a Sunday and on Friday nights at Westminster Chapel. In addition he often preached elsewhere.

The book is enhanced by an excellent introduction, written by Lloyd-Jones' biographer, Iain H. Murray.

Get the book and read it and profit from the sermons of this great servant of God. ■

Leading in Prayer: A Workbook for Worship, by Hughes Oliphant Old. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995. Pp. xi-370. \$19.99 (paper). [Reviewed by Robert Decker.]

This is a very good book on a much needed subject. While the emphasis of the book is on the public prayers a minister is called to offer in the worship service, the author has a good deal to say about worship in general.

Prayer is an art, i.e., it is a gift from God. All God's servants in the ministry must have this gift to one degree or another or they cannot function in the ministry of the Word. But the gift of prayer can be developed. This book will help ministers to do precisely that.

In the introduction Old makes several important points. The first is that spontaneity in prayer, something to be desired in the minister's public prayers, too often lacks content. It may be sincere, but often not very profound. Hence, according to Old, spontaneity must be balanced by careful preparation and thought. Spontaneity in prayer must also be supported by an intense prayer life on the part of the minister. "One can hardly lead if one does not know the way oneself. Spontaneity

ity has to arise from a profound experience of prayer" (p. 5).

Leading in prayer, Old rightly stresses, belongs to the office, the official work to which Christ calls His ministers. To support this point, Old cites William Perkins, a late 16th century Puritan theologian, who taught that the office of the ministry consisted of two functions, "First was preaching and teaching the Word of God to the people of God; second was presenting the needs of the people before their God. ...as Perkins saw it, prayer was a prophetic ministry that demanded the same gifts of discernment and inspiration that preaching demanded" (pp. 5-6). One is reminded of Article 16 of our Church Order which lists prayer before the ministry of the Word and the dispensing of the sacraments as the work of the office of the ministry! Old points to the Puritans as worthy examples for us today. They prepared to lead their congregations in prayer by private prayer and by studying the prayers of Scripture.

In this connection Old points to the truth that, "Prayer does have its own language, its own vocabulary, and its own imagery. This language is not simply a matter of style ... prayer uses biblical language" (p. 7). Closely related to this, Old correctly reminds us that

the Bible provides what he calls "a prayer typology." By this Old means that the recorded prayers in Scripture are given by God as examples (paradigms) of how ministers ought to lead in prayer.

In the first chapter Old contends that the worship service ought to begin with an Invocation because this is a profoundly biblical form of worship. "This invocation names the God to whom the prayer is addressed. One might therefore define an invocation as a prayer that begins worship by calling on God's name. The Latin word *invocare* means to call upon, to appeal to, or to invoke in prayer" (p. 11). The Invocation includes the following elements: 1) It, as Jesus taught His disciples and us, ought to be offered in the name of Jesus. 2) It must include the hallowing of God's name. 3) It must claim God as *our* God. 4) It must include the petition that our worship be inspired of the Holy Spirit and received through the intercession of Christ. In this connection Old stresses that Christian worship is Trinitarian. 5) It should conclude with a full Trinitarian doxology. The chapter concludes with a listing of some thirty-six Invocations selected by Old and all based on Scripture. In our churches the "Invocation" consists of the votum taken from Psalm 124:8,

"Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth," followed by the salutation.

Chapter two is an excellent presentation of "The Psalms as Prayer." Old points out that the Psalms were used as both prayers and songs by the ancient church. This usage was lost in the Middle Ages, but restored by the 16th century Reformation. This was true of both the Lutheran and Calvinistic branches of the Reformation. The Lutherans of Augsburg published a psalter as early as 1531, while in 1537 the Calvinists produced the *Strasbourg Psalter* which contained vernacular versions of all 150 psalms. Psalm singing continued for the next 200 years, but lost popularity at the end of the 19th century. It ought to be restored, Old contends, because, "the psalms are the prayers and songs of the Holy Spirit" (p. 57). Regular use of the psalms in worship teaches the congregation the biblical language of prayer and, therefore too, the psalms should be "the core of Christian praise" (p. 58).

Chapter three deals with "Prayers of Confession and Supplication," elements which we include in our congregational prayers. Pointing to Psalm 51 as an example of this kind of prayer, Old concludes that two things stand out in this Psalm, a deep feeling of

lament and the assurance of pardon. Worship, Old correctly emphasizes, must include recognition of our sin. Without this our worship lacks integrity. God is offended by sin and yet He accepts sinners.

Again, the Reformation restored this type of prayer. Martin Bucer composed such a prayer for the Reformed Church at Strasbourg which became a model for the Prayer of Confession used in Geneva as well as for Thomas Cramner's *Book of Common Prayer* of the Church of England. Matthew Henry, at the beginning of the 18th century, in his *Method of Prayer*, emphasized that the Prayer of Confession should confess both our sinful nature and our particular sins. Reformed Christians recognize that this profound thought occurs much earlier in the Heidelberg Catechism, Q & A 56.

In Chapter four Old discusses the Prayer for Illumination. This is a brief prayer offered by the minister just before preaching in which he asks the Lord to illumine the preacher and open the hearts of the people of God to receive the preached Word. This reviewer is convinced that this is something which must be included in every congregational prayer. It would be even better to have a separate brief prayer for illumination just before

the reading and preaching of the Word.

Old offers compelling theological reasons for this prayer. God reveals Himself, and revelation is an act of grace. Unless the Lord Himself enables the minister correctly to expound the Word, and unless the Lord Himself opens the hearts of the congregation, the Word can neither be preached nor received with faith and repentance.

This prayer too was lost in the Middle Ages and revived by the Reformers. Old includes in this chapter beautiful prayers for illumination composed by Bucer, Calvin, and Zwingli.

The Prayer of Intercession, what we would call the congregational prayer, is the subject of chapter five. Characteristic of biblical prayer is that it begins and ends with praise and thanksgiving.

The congregational prayer has strong theological foundations. Belonging to the theological foundations are the doctrine of the Trinity (God is a covenant God who speaks to and fellowships with His people in prayer), the doctrine of Christ (prayer must be in His name and is possible only on the basis of His efficacious atonement), and the doctrine of the church (especially the communion of the saints).

This prayer dropped out of the liturgy of the mass, but was

restored by the Reformation. Included in this section are excerpts of some of the prayers of the Reformers.¹ Old concludes the chapter with sound advice, "What is important is that the minister regularly give time and thought to preparing for this ministry. Spontaneity and preparation should complement each other" (p. 183).

Since we are bound to the use of adopted forms, we refrain from comment on the next two sections of the book which deal with Communion prayers. It is interesting to note, however, that many of the petitions in our Communion prayers are found in the *Didache*, a first century collection of the prayers of the early church! In this section Old makes the interesting comment that the offerings ought to be simple and without ostentation and properly belong at the end of the worship service.

The last section of the book deals with Hymnody, Benedictions, and The Ordering of Public Prayer. Those of us who are committed to exclusive psalmody will be interested to know that psalmody per-

¹Unfortunately Old omits large sections of the beautiful prayer of Martin Bucer. The complete text of this prayer may be found in *Liturgies of the Western Church*, by Bard Thompson, pp. 175-177.

sisted from the Reformation until the middle of the eighteenth century in virtually all branches of the Reformation including the Anglican. The revivals of the mid-1700s introduced hymns.

Old concludes with a lament that, "For at least a generation we have experienced a sort of atrophy in public prayer" (p. 361). He challenges us to revive the art of prayer in worship. With Calvin, Old thinks the congregational prayer ought to follow the sermon. We ought to give this some serious consideration. Prayer, after all is not something we offer to God, but is the fruit of the Holy Spirit's application of the Word in our hearts.

All in all this is an excellent book on the subject. It will be helpful to ministers, and through them it will be beneficial for our congregations. ■

Gospel and Mission in the Writings of Paul: An Exegetical and Theological Analysis, by P. T. O'Brien. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993. Pp. xiv-161. \$9.99 (paper). [Reviewed by Robert Decker.]

O'Brien's thesis is that the apostle Paul is not only an example to be emulated in regards to his goals, attitudes, and behavior as a

Christian, but Paul is also a "missionary paradigm." The apostle, in his preaching and teaching the gospel to the nations, is the norm, the standard, the model/example for the church and her missionaries today.

As the book's title indicates, the author supports his thesis by a careful, exegetical analysis of several passages in the epistles of Paul. O'Brien begins with a study of Galatians 1:11-17 and Ephesians 3:1-13. He concludes on the basis of the Galatians passage that the origin of the gospel Paul preached was not man, nor was Paul taught the gospel, but it came from God's revelation to him. God was the Revealer and Christ was the content of the gospel Paul preached. Paul's authority, therefore, lay in the fact that God set him apart before birth and graciously called him to preach to the Gentiles.

The author points out that according to the Ephesians passage God made known to Paul "the mystery of Christ," viz., that the Gentiles would be gathered into the church and with the Jewish Christians be altogether one body, one church. Whether this is the proper exegesis of "the mystery of Christ" is open to question. "The mystery of Christ" may very well be a reference to the gospel itself. The gospel is the "mystery of

Christ" in the sense that it can only be understood by the gracious work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of God's people. At any rate, the statement that God made known to Paul that the Gentiles would be gathered into the one church is certainly true. Further, God commissioned the apostle to preach this mystery to the Gentiles. God did this in His grace to Paul. God thus enabled the apostle to carry out the work. In Paul's work God was fulfilling the promise made centuries earlier to Abraham, "in thee shall all nations be blessed."

In his discussion of the subject, "The Amazing Success of Paul's Mission" (pp. 27-51), O'Brien finds Romans 15:14-33 teaching several "distinguishing marks of Paul's mission." There was the "priority of God's grace" in Paul's missionary career. God's grace provided the source and power for the whole course of the apostle's ministry. The content of that ministry was "the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God." The purpose of Paul's ministry was that "the offering of the Gentiles might be acceptable to God." This clearly implies that Paul's ministry was "out in the world" and designed "for the obedience of the nations." This missionary calling was fulfilled by what Christ accomplished through Paul by word

and deed and by the power of signs and wonders by the Holy Spirit. The results of Paul's work were extraordinary, for he affirms that Christ's dynamic activity through him led to the result "that from Jerusalem, and round about unto Illyricum, I have fully preached the gospel of Christ" (Rom. 15:19). And finally there is the distinguishing mark of Paul's ministry that he had an all-consuming passion to proclaim the gospel where Christ had not been acknowledged or worshiped. This last feature was in fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah, chapter 52, verse 15.

Are these "distinguishing marks of Paul's missionary activity" unique to the apostle and, therefore, not to be applied directly to the endeavors of contemporary missionaries, as O'Brien contends? In a sense this is true, but in another sense it is not. The apostolic office belongs to the very foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20). God inspired the apostles. But surely Christ still accomplishes the work of gathering the church out of the nations by means of the ordained ministry of the church. And God's grace is the source and power of this missionary work today just as well as in Paul's day.

There is a good bit of repetition in chapters 3-5, where O'Brien treats the subjects: "The Logic of

Paul's Gospel" (Rom. 1:1-17), "Paul's Ambition and Ours" (I Cor. 9:19-23; 10:31-11:1), and "The Pauline Great Commission" (Eph. 6:10-20). This repetition is especially true of O'Brien's discussion of the goal of Paul's ministry, the content of his preaching, and the purpose of the gospel Paul preached. The author could better have blended this material with his exegesis and theological analysis of the passages treated in the first two chapters of the book. He does make, however, two very important points in these chapters. 1) "The saving power of the gospel needs to be understood against the background of man's terrible plight outside of Christ" (p. 75), and 2) Paul's ambition to "by all means save some" by being a "slave to all" and by "being all things to all men" must be the ambition of the church and her missionaries today.

Chapter 6, as its title, "Con-

cluding Remarks," indicates, is a summary of O'Brien's exegesis and theological analysis of the several selected passages from the epistles of Paul.

To anyone familiar with the epistles of Paul there is nothing new in this book. Nevertheless, the point that we must derive both our missionary principles and practice from sacred Scripture and especially from the ministry of the apostle Paul certainly bears emphatic repeating in our day. This, not secular, cultural anthropology, must be where Christ's church begins, continues, and ends in her striving to be obedient to her Lord, who said, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen" (Matt. 28:19-20). ▲

Book Notice

A New Testament Greek Primer, by S.M. Baugh. Presbyterian & Reformed, 1995. viii, 240pp. (paper). [Reviewed by Herman Hanko.]

Although the market is cluttered with New Testament Greek Grammars, the author justifies yet another book on this subject in a unique way. He was educated in Greek through the use of the well-

known and highly-respected work on New Testament Greek Grammar by J.G. Machen — the book which I used for years in our Seminary. And, while he does not deprecate Machen's classic book, he does believe that the times call for another grammar to replace Machen. The reasons are two: 1) Most students no longer know Latin, which Machen's grammar presupposed; 2) New methods of teaching a language have been discovered.

I am not persuaded by these arguments, although Machen's Grammar, in my experience, has one weakness: a lack of instruction in Greek syntax. I have had to prepare an additional syllabus to supplement Machen in this area.

Nevertheless, the book has some good things about it. As to format, it is printed in such a way that it can be inserted into a three-ring notebook. It has excellent exercises in it, an improvement over Machen. The author makes a good and usually successful effort to give students a "feel" for the Greek, something crucial to an understanding of the language. And Baugh's treatment of Greek syntax, while still inadequate, is more complete than that of Machen.

I see no reason why it cannot be used as a substitute for Machen's book, although the author is mistaken when he insists that learning accenting is unimportant. ■

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