

Biblical Principles of Church Unity

Special Committee Report of the Reformed Church in the United States (1999)

The attribute of unity in the church is a necessary doctrine because God has constituted the church to be the undivided body of our Lord Jesus Christ. The necessary unity of the body of Christ is analogous to the union of the members of the human body. In describing that analogy, the Apostle Paul declares, "As the body is one, and has many members; and all the members of that one body being many are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free, and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many" (1 Cor. 12:12–14). It is the will of God "that there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffers all the members suffer with it; or one member be honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular" (1 Cor. 12:25–27).

Our Lord Jesus Christ prayed for the unity of the church in His intercessory prayer when He petitioned His heavenly Father, saying, "Neither pray I for these alone but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou has sent me" (John 17:20–21).

Therefore, it is the duty of the individual church members as well as congregations and denominations to strive for unity in the body of Christ, based upon Biblical principles, "endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all" (Eph. 4:3–6).

It is the desire of the Reformed Church in the United States to endeavor "to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" so that unity of the church may become a reality in the church today. The 251st Synod of the RCUS resolved, "That a special study committee be formed by Synod to study the Biblical doctrine of the unity of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ and to formulate a statement of principles on the unity of the church to be used by the Reformed Church in the United States to govern the establishment of relationships with other churches and that this completed work be presented to the 252nd Synod of the RCUS" (1997 Abstract, p. 57).

The task of the special committee as mandated by the RCUS Synod is twofold: (1) to study the Biblical doctrine for church unity as set forth in the Holy Scriptures, and (2) to formulate a statement of Biblical principles to govern the establishment of relationships with other churches.

Upon studying the doctrine of church unity, your committee has formulated five Biblical principles to govern the establishment of relationships with other churches.

The first principle of church unity requires an understanding of the nature of the church as set forth in the Scriptures. There are many societies in the world that assume to themselves the name of the church, but have become the very synagogues of Satan.

PRINCIPLE 1: In establishing relationships with other churches, there must be a mutual agreement regarding the fundamental nature of the church, including the three marks of the church as set forth in the Word of God.

In defining the fundamental nature of the church the Belgic Confession states, "We believe and profess one catholic or universal church, which is a holy congregation of true Christian believers, all expecting their salvation in Jesus Christ, being washed by His blood, sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit...."

"Furthermore, this holy church is not confined, bound or limited to a certain place or to certain

persons but is spread and dispersed over the whole world; and yet is joined and united with heart and will, by the power of faith, in one and the same Spirit" (Art. 27).

"We believe that we ought diligently and circumspectly to discern from the Word of God which is the true church since all sects which are in the world assume to themselves the name of the church. But we speak not here of hypocrites, who are mixed in the church with the good, yet are not of the church, though externally in it; but we say that the body and communion of the true church must be distinguished from all sects that call themselves the church."

"The marks by which the true church is known are these: If the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if it maintains the administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ: if church discipline is exercised in punishing sin; in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the church. Hereby the true church may certainly be known, from which no man has a right to separate himself" (Art. 29).

The church, which is the body of Christ, has two distinguishing aspects. The first is its invisibility and the second is its visibility.

The Westminster Confession of Faith has accurately defined the invisible church as "the whole number of the elect that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof, and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of him that fills all in all" (ch. 25:1). On the other hand, the visible church is defined as that which is "catholic or universal under the gospel, (not confined to one nation, as before under the law) and consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children, and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation" (ch. 25:2).

The visible manifestation of the church, according to a pamphlet published by the Reformed Church in the United States, is "a covenant society consisting of professing believers and their children organized into particular congregations and groups of congregations (denominations). For this earthly organizational form of the church there is a divinely ordained government consisting of scripturally chosen officers (elders and deacons) who represent Christ, the King of the church. These officers rule over the local congregations and the denomination by administering the Word of God authoritatively. We believe there is to be a plurality of elders and deacons in each congregation who constitute the governing council. See Eph. 4:4; 5:23; Titus 1:5–9; 1 Tim. 5:17; 3:8–13."

"Several congregations are bound together through their elder-representatives in a broader organization called a classis or presbytery (1 Tim. 4:14). Several classes are in turn bound together in a still higher government called a synod. The book of Acts, chapter fifteen, records the gathering of the council or synod at Jerusalem, which proves that church government extends beyond the local congregational level."

"To the visible, organized church are committed the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. The former signifies and seals entrance into covenant relationship with God and is therefore administered only once. The infant children of believers, being partakers of the covenant blessings are also given this sign of church membership (1 Cor. 1:16). The sacrament of the Lord's Supper, which signifies conscious fellowship with the Christ of the covenant and seals the benefits of His death to the participants, is observed repeatedly by the self-conscious, confessing members of the church. See Gen. 17:7; Matt. 19:14; Ps. 22:10; Acts 2:49; 1 Cor. 11:23–25."

"We believe that it is the duty of every Christian to join and support that denomination of the visible church which maintains the purest preaching of the Word of God; which properly administers the sacraments and which practices discipline by faithfully overseeing the doctrine and practice of its members, and eliminating from its membership by excommunicating those members who refuse to be corrected in either doctrine or life. See Titus 3:10–11; 1 Cor. 5:12–13" (The Reformed Church in the United States, pamphlet, pp. 5–6).

In working toward the reality of a Biblical church unity with other denominations it must be remembered that the words of our Lord Jesus in John 17:21, "... that they all may be one ..." refer to both the invisible church and the visible church. Our Lord's desire for the unity of all the elect in the invisible church is evident from these His words, "Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word" (John 17:21). The invisible, not the visible church is composed of all those that "shall believe." However, our Lord did not exclude the visible church in His petition for church unity, because He also prayed for the church that visibly exists in the world today when He requested of the Father, "that the world may believe that thou has sent me" (John 17:21).

John 17 is the premiere passage enlisted to prove organizational unity among all believers. The issue in John 17:21 concerns whether the oneness of the invisible and visible church is horizontal or vertical. Is this a command for all Christians to be so united that they strive to create one worldwide church (i.e., the Reformed Catholic Church!), or is the unity primarily with the Triune God? Three significant features emerge: (1) The unity of John 17 is not organizational unity since the unity envisioned is compared to the union of God the Father and God the Son (vv. 11, 21, 22). John 17 is not teaching organizational unity between the Father and the Son. (2) Christ is clearly not praying for horizontal unity but the vertical. The thrust is not that believers may be one with one another. Rather, it is that they may be "kept" (vv. 12, 21). John 17 is fundamentally a prayer for the preservation and thus perseverance of the saints by virtue of their unity with God. (3) It is impossible to consign all Christians in every era into the same visible organizational body. If this is what "all may be one" really means, then Christ's high priestly prayer will never be answered. However, if it means that believers are "kept" by God the Father and God the Son, it is beautifully answered time and time again and in every generation. In every generation of Christians those "kept" are kept because of their union and communion with God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, the high priestly prayer of Christ is not a prayer for organizational unity. The world will believe that God has sent Christ not because of a horizontal unity among churches but because of the church's union with the Triune God. R.B Kuiper concurs:

Glibly they quote the Savior's prayer for the unity of believers in support of the wholesale wiping out of denominational boundaries. But even he who runs may see that Jesus was thinking primarily of the spiritual unity of believers. He prayed that they might be one as he and the Father are one. No doubt, He also desired that this unity might become manifest, for He added: "That the world may believe that thou has sent me"; but that in no way alters the fact that the unity for which He prayed was specifically spiritual (The Glorious Body of Christ, p. 42).

The second passage that is cited to prove organizational unity between denominations is Ephesians 4:3–6. This passage reads: "Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all, and in you all." Is this a command for organizational unity? Again, Paul's premise is that the church is already one. Thus, on the basis of this oneness he exhorts the church to cultivate peace. Also, what is clearly in view is that the present unity of the church is based squarely on the fact that we worship one God. Again, organizational unity does not seem to be in the picture here.

Within the visible church on earth today there is great diversity. One Reformed writer states that diversity "... is the inevitable and designed result partly of the separation of the human race by seas, continents, civil governments and diversity of languages, partly of the excusable limitations of the human understanding, and partly of the sinful prejudices of the heart; prejudices which although not justifiable, will assuredly continue to operate as long as man's nature is only partially sanctified" (Robert L. Dabney, Discussions: Evangelical and Theological, Vol. 2, p. 437). There is also diversity of gifts in the church without disunity. The important thing is the "same Lord" and the "same God who works all in all" (1 Cor. 12:4–6). However according to the commandment of Scripture the church is now no longer to be divided according to the diversity of race, culture, or gender. Every member of the visible church has been baptized into Christ, and "there is neither Jew nor Greek,

there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

In a special committee report to study and defend RCUS polity, the RCUS views diversity in the church as multiformity with a true uniformity. The report states, "For any church or group of churches on earth, or in a nation, or in a locality to say that they alone may be called 'the true church' fails to understand the fallibility of human beings or even their churchly organizations. No visible church can claim to exhibit the marks of the church perfectly. Therefore, there are levels of purity in earthly churches (See Rev. 2, 3; 1 Cor., and the Westminster Confession of Faith 25:4). This means that the church on earth is multiform. However, within this multiformity there is a true uniformity among true believers and their churches (1995 Abstract, p. 120). Because of the church's multiformity, denominations are not (necessarily) abominations.

PRINCIPLE 2: In pursuing the unity of the visible church it must be remembered by all faithful denominations that within the multiformity of the visible church there is a true uniformity, and that multiformity does not per se obscure the unity of Christ's church. Therefore, it is not absolutely necessary to unite the visible church on earth into a single church government by merging all faithful denominations into an organic union.

As the individual parts of one entity do not destroy the whole, so also we may correctly view denominations as the several parts of the whole visible church without destroying its unity (See 1 Cor. 12, esp. v. 13). R.L. Dabney writes, "Under the old dispensation, the candlestick or lamp which symbolized the church as one. In Revelation there are seven (1:20), 'And the seven candlesticks which you saw are seven churches.' The nomenclature of the New Testament is significant of the same truth. So long as the word 'church' is employed as the name of the spiritual body of the redeemed, it is always in the singular number; and when applied to a visible society of Christians living in one city, and capable of having actual communion with each other in public worship, the word is also in the singular number. But the moment it is used to denote a wider aggregation of Christians in organized bodies, it always, save Acts 9:31, becomes plural. We read of the seven churches of Asia, not of the church of Asia; of the churches of Galatia, the churches of Macedonia, the churches of Judea; but the New Testament says nothing of any visible national church" (Dabney, pp. 437– 38).

An instructive example of necessary multiformity in our own history occurred in 1792 when the German Reformed Coetus separated from Holland and organized a Synod in 1793. There were four reasons: (1) Geography: the Coetus was so far away from the mother church that communication was difficult. Letters were lost in transmission and the Coetus had to wait for months, sometimes years, for important decisions to be made. This caused inconvenience and confusion. (2) A constitutional reason: the Coetus had not been given the right of ordination by the Dutch fathers. Sometimes, in extreme cases, they took it upon themselves to ordain men to the ministry without waiting for the permission of the Dutch church. (3) A national reason: the Coetus felt the effects of the War of Independence. Americans were uneasy about any foreign control. This affected the church, too. Plus, the Coetus was feeling its own inherent strength, deducing that she did not need any foreign help, even including financial aid. (4) Education: the Coetus had prayed for many years for an educational institution where their own young men could be trained for the ministry. The Dutch Reformed of New York and New Jersey had founded Queens College for this end. Also, some of the men that the Dutch in Holland sent over proved to be scandalous in life. The Coetus felt it could raise up better men at home. When Franklin College was raised up in 1787, there was great rejoicing. Furthermore, it seems that because the Dutch church paid no attention to their requests, the Coetus became dissatisfied.

Thus the Coetus acted in 1792, declaring its independence, saying "inasmuch as we have not yet received a reply to our last letters and proceedings, it was resolved by a majority of votes that for the present we will transmit to our fathers in Holland only a letter and not our proceedings." Thus, despite the fact that there was complete creedal harmony between the Coetus and the Dutch mother church, the Coetus was motivated to separate from the Dutch in order to do the work of the Lord more effectively.

One of the problems with the multiformity paradigm is that it has been used to justify schism. But schism is sinful and can never be justified. To leave a denomination in order to start another is a very serious matter. It must not be shrugged off cavalierly. Yet, it must be admitted that there are creedal and practical differences between even Presbyterian and Reformed churches. Are these differences due to sin or to some other factor such as spiritual immaturity? To declare that every creedal difference between Reformed denominations is always caused by sin is brash and harsh. The reason is that the church of Christ must "grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ" (Eph. 4:15). The church is always growing up! This means that not every creedal statement of a denomination always reflects maturity. There is a difference between doctrinal poison and Gerber's Baby Food! For example, the Second Helvetic Confession (1566) seems to teach the perpetual virginity of the virgin Mary (ch. 11). The Westminster Standards teach that on the Lord's Day "the whole time" should be taken up "in the public and private exercises of His worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy," forbidding all needless "works, words and thoughts, about our worldly employments and recreations" (21:8 and LC 119). The Westminster divines no doubt perceived that their Lord's Day theology was an improvement over Calvin's and sought to creedalize it. Others on the continent may argue that the Westminster's sabbatarianism was a retreat from the momentous changes that accrued in the New Covenant and which was articulated by the Second Helvetic Confession's declaration that "we celebrate the Lord's Day and not the Sabbath as a free observance" (ch. 24). Also, the Westminster's sabbatarianism might lead a church into making the Sabbath a "religious workday." Do we brand these differences as heresy, or do we explain them in terms of differences of sanctification and spiritual maturity? The latter of these, and not willful rebellion against God, is the occasion for creedal multiformity among Reformed churches. Yet, such differences must not be swept under the proverbial carpet either. Reformed denominations should not pretend that no differences exist. On the other hand a spirit of love must also prevail among Reformed Christians. It is especially by love that the world will know that we are the united disciples of Christ (John 13:34–35). Paul's statement to the Philippians (often quoted by Augustine) is always worth citing: "Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded and if in anything ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you" (Phil. 3:15). Thus even creedal multiformity does not necessarily reflect division; it may reflect differences of sanctification and maturity.

Again, the prayer of our Lord Jesus in John 17 was more for a spiritual unity by confessing and believing the true faith. That our Lord's prayer was for a unity of confessing and believing the true faith, He prays "for them also which shall believe on me through their word" (John 17:20). Also, when Peter confessed that Jesus is the Son of God, our Lord said to Peter, "Upon this rock [the confessions of the confessing Peter] I will build my church" (Matt. 16:18). Clearly, the unity of the body of Christ is a unity in confessing the true faith.

PRINCIPLE 3: When establishing an ecclesiastical relationship with another denomination, the primary consideration is the other church's faithfulness to the doctrines of Scripture and practice of the true Christian faith. Ecclesiastical fellowship must never be established with an unfaithful church.

We note that the distinguishing traits of a faithful church are as follows:

- 1) The faithful church believes the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the inspired and inerrant Word of God, and the only infallible rule of faith and practice for the lives of individual church members, as well as the corporate body of Christ (2 Tim. 3:16–17; 1 Thess. 2:13; 2 Pet. 1:21).
- 2) The faithful church possesses the governmental marks of the true church which are: first, the faithful preaching of the pure gospel; second, the faithful administration of the sacraments as instituted by our Lord Jesus Christ; and third, church discipline that is faithfully exercised according to the Word of God (Gal. 1:6–9; Matt. 18:15–20; 28:19–20; 1 Cor. 5:1–8; 11:23–29).
- 3) The members of the faithful church embrace with a believing heart all the articles of the Christian faith as revealed in God's Word and expressed in the orthodox Protestant confessions of faith such as the Three Forms of Unity, the Westminster Standards, etc. (Rom. 16:17–18; 2 Thess. 3:14; Phil.

1:27; 2 John 10).

4) The essential parts of public worship in the faithful church are regulated by the Word of God alone, so that all things not commanded as well as all things contrary to the Holy Scripture are rejected (Deut. 4:2; Acts 2:42; Matt. 28:20).

5) The government of the faithful church is a spiritual polity established by our Lord Jesus Christ in His Word: "Namely that there must be ministers or pastors who meet the Biblical qualifications to preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments; also elders and deacons, who, together with the pastors, form the council of the church; that by these means the true religion may be preserved and the true doctrine everywhere propagated" (Belgic Confession, Art. 30; 1 Tim. 3:1–13; Titus 1:4–11; Heb. 13:17).

PRINCIPLE 4: Ecclesiastical unity with other churches may be achieved by entering into a corresponding or fraternal relationship where Biblical counsel may be given and received by an exchange of delegates at Presbytery/Classis meetings, as well as at the General Assembly/Synod meetings.

Since there is widespread multiformity and diversity in visible churches in historical circumstances, usages, practices, languages, culture, etc., organic union may not be advisable with some denominations, although they may confess the same articles of the true Christian faith. In such circumstances unity may be achieved by entering into a corresponding or fraternal relationship where Biblical counsel may be given and received by an exchange of delegates at Presbytery and Classis meetings, as well as at the General Assembly and Synod meetings. By entering into fraternal relations, faithful denominations may achieve the visible spiritual unity expressed by our Lord Jesus in John 17. However, when denominations enter into fraternal relations it is important that certain rules be agreed upon to solidify the relationship. At the 246th Synod of the RCUS (1992), the Synod adopted the following five rules that must be agreed upon before the RCUS will establish fraternal relations with another denomination:

1. Agree to take heed to one another's doctrine, liturgy and church government, that there be no deviations from the Holy Scriptures or from the Reformed confessions.
2. Will exchange delegates at one another's assemblies or general synods and invite them to participate as advisors.
3. Will inform one another of the decisions taken at their assemblies or general synods by exchanging minutes or at least by forwarding decisions which are relevant to the churches concerned.
4. Will inform one another in case of changes in or additions to confessions, church order or liturgical forms, if these are of a doctrinal nature. The denomination concerned will notify the other denomination of these changes so that consultations can take place if considered necessary.
5. Will inform one another regarding new relationships with third parties and membership in ecumenical organizations.

The spiritual unity expressed by our Lord Jesus in John 17 may also be achieved by entering into Reformed and Presbyterian councils. The RCUS is a member of the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC), which is comprised of six other member denominations. The unifying basis of the council is stated in the NAPARC Constitution as follows:

"Confessing Jesus Christ as only Savior and Sovereign Lord over all of life, we affirm the basis of the fellowship of Presbyterian and Reformed churches to be full commitment to the Bible in its entirety as the Word of God written, without error in all its parts and to its teaching as set forth in the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Dort, the Westminster Confession of Faith, and the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms. That the adopted basis of fellowship be regarded as warrant for the establishment of a formal relationship of the nature of a council, that is,

a fellowship that enables the constituent churches to advise, counsel, and cooperate in various matters with one another and hold out before each other the desirability and need for organic union of churches that are of like faith and practice."

"The purpose and function of NAPARC is to:

1. Facilitate discussion and consultation between bodies on those issues and problems which divide them as well as on those which they face in common and by the sharing of insights communicate advantages to one another (Institutes IV, 2, 1).
2. Promote the appointment of joint committees to study matters of common interest and concern.
3. Exercise mutual concern in the perpetuation, retention and propagation of the Reformed faith.
4. Promote cooperation wherever possible and feasible on the local and denominational level in such areas as missions, relief efforts, Christian schools, and church education."

PRINCIPLE 5: Organic union with other denominations is desirable if the denominations are separated by unessential differences, and when unity may be accomplished without surrendering Biblical and creedal convictions.

When denominations are in agreement regarding their confessions of faith, discipline, government and worship, and are divided only on unessential differences of usage, it may be advisable to organize under one government in one denomination. When this can be done peaceably, without surrendering Biblical convictions, it will greatly strengthen the testimony of the Reformed faith in the world. However, before that organic unity becomes a reality, honest and sincere consultations between the denominations on the issues that divide them must be resolved to the complete satisfaction of each denomination.

Whether denominations move toward unity through fraternal relations, membership in church councils, or organic union, it must always be unity in the true faith, because the church is "the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). Unity for unity's sake, or unity at all costs is certainly not what our Lord meant when He prayed, "that they all may be one; as thou, Father art in me and I in thee, that they also may be one in us." The Word of God declares, "Whosoever transgresses and abides not in the doctrine of Christ, has not God. He that abides in the doctrine of Christ, he has both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him Godspeed" (2 John 9–11). Therefore, the fundamental principle that governs church unity with other denominations must be a unity in the true faith so that the Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in all things.

Recommendations:

1. That each one of the five principles of church unity be submitted seriatim to Synod for ratification. [Each of the five principles was affirmed by the 253rd Synod — Stated Clerk.]

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