

Historical Perspective on Church Unity

Office Bearers' Conference

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Well, Pastor Bill, because you gave the item that went two extra minutes, I hope that you can add them to my speech if I should need it.

Oh brothers, it is my task to talk about some historical examples of church union and if I were to do that, then I would have to mention so many efforts that have been made in the past and I don't think I can cover that in half an hour so I selected only one example of a proper biblical way of uniting with other churches and that is the one that took place in the 19th century in 1869 that was the union, or rather the reunion of two branches of the secession that had split.

Not long after the Secession of 1834, the serious differences of opinion arose among the seceders. One very controversial issue concerned the so-called Petition for Freedom of Assembly. Many saw in this action a denial of the kingship of Jesus Christ and a selling out to the government merely in order to escape persecution. Also, the demand of the government to give up the name "Reformed" as a condition for freedom was unacceptable to them.

There were also doctrinal differences that led to a separation. Right from the beginning, there had been a stream of thought, the so-called ?? which held to a view of the church covenant and election that differed from many others in the Secession church and as it developed, there were the ?? and the ?? and and I can't go into details here but they had distinctly different views on a whole range of issues, primarily centering in the difference of opinion as to the free offer of the Gospel. The ?? people tended to deny or at least restrict the offer of grace to those who were already regenerated and so the promises of the covenant were to be embraced only by those who showed evidence of their regeneration, whereas the men from ?? believed that the promises of the Gospel came to all the congregation, believers and their children. However it is not so easy to determine what exactly the majority thinking was on any doctrine during those early years following the secession. There was a great variety among the leaders of the movement and different schools of thought emerged. Years later, certainly by 1850, it seems that Reverend de Cock's position had become the dominant one and it was his contribution, by the grace of God, to be able to combine the two extremes and come up with a mid-position which preserved the experiential aspect and also at the same time the more

objective tools of the Gospel regarding the covenant of grace being made with the whole congregation, with believers and their seed.

At any rate, those who later became known as the Churches Under the Cross, they leaned toward a view that today has crystallized as the Netherlands Reformed position. Now, let me just say this: that when the secession took hold, then the differences became so severe that at long last by the 1840s a group of people left the Secession churches and they organized as the Churches Under the Cross and they held to the rather restricted view of the offer of salvation.

Well, there were three issues then that caused them to separate. The petition to the government for freedom, then also the strong adherence to the church Order of Dort, and lastly there was the issue of the offer of salvation. But during the years of their separation, that's my main focus here, during the years of their separation, they did never lose their desire to re-unite with the Secession church, and by the same token, the remainder, the remaining people in the Secession movement, they never really gave up their hope that one day they might be reconciled and move together, united in one denomination.

So while the Church Under the Cross made a definite separation and lived in a separate denomination for many years, for about 30 years, there were soon attempts made already to seek contact with each other. On June 11, 1840, a meeting was held in Mastenbrook where various congregations from the ?? district were represented. At this meeting, some brothers were ordained as ministers among whom were W. W. ?? and ?? and ?? and four years later the various Congregations Under the Cross, as they were called, united as one federation at the General Synod of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands. They adopted the three forms of unity and the unchanged church Order of ?? . During that same assembly, the lay preacher, Cornelius ?? of Rotterdam was examined and declared eligible for a call according to Article 8 of the church order. The now Reverend W. ?? ordained him as minister in Rotterdam and it's interesting but they had no ministers to begin with and so as elders they thought they could ordain each other to the ministry and that happened several times.

The Reformed Church in the Netherlands and the Christian Seceded Congregations, that was the name of what later became the Christian Reformed Church, the Christian Seceded Congregations they viewed each other with suspicion and animosity. Children baptized by ministers of the rival denomination were sometimes rebaptized because the legitimacy of the ordination of these ministers was questioned. One historian observed that members of both denominations suffered more from each other than they had endured from government persecution.

Yet despite considerable animosity and suspicion, all along there was still a hope that the breach might be healed. As early as 1849, the Synod of the Seceded churches extended an invitation to the Reformed Congregations Under the Cross and now I quote, "It was an invitation to come to this Synod in order that we may talk about reunion." In reply, the Cross churches wrote a letter in which they defended their right to exist, accusing the

seceders of having sacrificed the principles of secession and declaring that for that reason they could not unite with them. The Synod then decided to respond in kind. Referring to themselves as the true church, that's the Christian Reformed Church, they addressed the Cross churches in these words, "Your behavior, your ecclesiastical position is directly in conflict with God's word, our forms of unity as well as with our liturgy and church order. For this reason we must declare with sadness that you have rendered yourselves guilty of public schism, intrusion upon the holy ministry and profanation of the sacraments while increasing your guilt as long as you continue in this way. Therefore we are not allowed to unite with you lest we bring upon ourselves the Lord's displeasure, but we pray and advise you, confess your sins before the Lord and before men, fearing him for with the Lord there is forgiveness. Return to the communion of the church in order that we may rejoice with you and because of you." Now, that was quite a harsh approach but despite this sharp rebuke, the Congregations Under the Cross remained willing to seek closer contact with the churches which they had left. Three months prior to receiving the aforementioned letter, they had even given permission to their vacant churches to call ministers from among the Christian Seceded Congregations in order that also in this there might be a preparation in God's way unto a closer bond of brotherly communion and ecclesiastical union.

The Seceded church from her side, put out feelers again in 1851, inviting brothers from the Cross churches to attend the forthcoming meeting of their provincial Synod of ?? in North Holland to, quote, "in order to deal with union." The tone of this letter was much milder than the one of 1849. This time no mention was made of any intrusion upon the holy ministry and the Synod now was prepared to leave the matter of their sending, and that was an expression meaning the legitimacy of their ordination into office, they were willing to leave that not to their own responsibility. Included in this letter was an expression of sadness that so many years had already been spent in alienation from each other.

Yes, that was a hopeful sign. Although the tone of this communication was milder, it was still made clear that the Cross churches had to return to the Seceded churches. For them to do so would imply an acknowledgment that they had been wrong all those years since 1838. For the time being, this proved to be too much for the Cross churches to do. Yet at its general assembly in ?? in 1851, the Reformed Church in the Netherlands expressed its desire to see an end to the split. The major stumbling block that needed to be removed before a reunion could take place was the Petition for Freedom and the name Christian Seceded Church. If they would revoke that petition, then they would be willing to re-join and take back the name Reformed. They wanted the Secession churches to take back the name Reformed which they had sacrificed in order to escape persecution.

A committee was appointed to discuss the matter of union further with the committee of the Christian Seceded Church. The latter church was more than willing to negotiate and several fruitful discussions were held. But other roadblocks appeared, for instance, the matter of the laying on of hands. That became a major stumbling block. The Seceded church insisted that when reunion would take place, ministers of the Cross churches had to be re-ordained by the ministers of the Christian Seceded Church.

Another sticking point concerns the validity of baptism administered by Cross church ministers. After many discussions, an agreement on this matter was reached. The Seceded church would recognize such baptisms but anyone joining the Seceded Congregations from the Cross churches who was in doubt whether his baptism was valid and who for that reason considered themselves unbaptized, would be permitted to be rebaptized.

Meanwhile, contacts continued locally and that's important too, local contact, and in some places Reformed Congregations Under the Cross even joined the Christian Seceded Church. The breakthrough came in 1869. On June 8 until the 10th, the general assembly of the Reformed Church Under the Cross met in Rotterdam while the Synod of the Seceded church was about to convene on June 16 in ???. The synodical committee of the Seceded churches had officially invited the Reformed Church to try to achieve union of the two ecclesiastical bodies. This invitation was accepted and a committee was appointed and charged with the preparation of a proposal regarding the manner in which the Seceded church or Synod should be approved.

Now, to make a long story short, they had the following statement, the following conditions should be presented.

1. The Christian Seceded Church must recognize unconditionally the ordination of our ministers and the legitimate existence of our congregations.
2. The Christian Seceders must change their name and manifest themselves toward the outside as well as the inside as the historical Reformed Church with or without recognition by the state.
3. In secondary matters they were to bear with one another fraternally and wherever a merger was not feasible, the congregations were to continue their separate existence alongside each other.

Now, back-and-forth they discussed these matters but eventually they came to an agreement and the agreement was that if they would join with the Christian Seceded Church, then that church would allow the ministers that had been ordained in a questionable manner, they leave that to their responsibility. They did not have to be reordained. They could come to the agreement that there were no doctrinal or church orderly grounds left that would justify their continued separate existence. And finally, if the union could be effected on the above grounds, then they would move together with the Lord's blessing and come to a healthy denominational life based on the word of God and the three forms of unity.

Now, this took place in 1869. The meeting rejoiced greatly in what had been accomplished by the grace of God and said here that the Reformed Church in the Netherlands and the Christian Seceded Congregations, which was the name adopted by the Secession churches under pressure from the government for many years, that name was changed to Christian Reformed. That satisfied the Cross churches because the name

Reformed was back and so they went together. And there was great joy expressed. It's said that, I'm really skipping here a lot because my time is running out, there was great joy expressed at the reunion of those two groups that were at one time so opposed to each other.

Now, brothers, let me just apply this to our situation here. Some of you may not realize but we are all of us here present descendants of the – no, not all of us, there are a few exceptions – but most of us come from the Secession church background and those who joined the Cross churches, they eventually became the Netherlands Reformed Church because those who rejoined the Christian Reformed Church, they of course, they stopped being Churches Under the Cross. But there were also many individual congregations who did not go along with it, they continued a separate existence until they were reunited by the efforts of Reverend ?? in 1907 and that is where most of the Heritage Reformed people come from. You may have forgotten your background but that is indeed the Reformed Church out of which many of you came, that you are really basically that descendants of the Secession and the Cross churches.

Now, in the Netherlands in the 1920s, attempts were made by the Christian Reformed Church and the Netherlands Reformed Church to have discussions with a view to possible reunion, but that came to nothing. The differences were seen to be too great; this whole issue of two or three covenants and so it didn't work. But now here we are in 2014 and we are still separate, but you have also gone through separation from the Netherlands Reformed Church and I believe on the basis of my experiences with you, you are in discussions and also listen to each other's sermons, that there is a great deal of unity now and I think that centers basically in the view on the free offer of the Gospel. Other issues as well but we have found in our contacts with each other that we are basically the same on these issues and that looks very promising for an eventual union, or I could also speak of reunion. In the providence of God, the Lord has brought us to North America where now unexpectedly because we did not have this prospect years ago, but mainly also through the seminary that we work together there, we have come to recognize each other and I certainly hope that we may come to a time with the Lord's blessing without rushing things, but that we may recognize that we do belong together.

The text was mentioned several times from John 17 that Jesus there prayed, "That they all may be one as we are one." And during the conference last year or earlier this year in Grand Rapids, there was a speaker from Africa, some of you know his name maybe, I could not pronounce it, but it was Conrad Mbewe. Do you know that? Now, he didn't address this issue during the conference but there was on the book table a book by him which I picked up. It was called "The Foundations for the Flock," and brothers, we can learn from these African people too. We sometimes are so inclined to feel superior to them but they also have something to contribute. He said, for instance, that in John 17, Jesus is praying for organic unity in this new body that he was about to institute, the church. He wanted the unity that is enjoyed in this body to be precisely the same as that which is enjoyed in the Godhead between himself and the Father. This unity was also to be enjoyed between Christians and God himself. Jesus prayed, "That they all may be one;

as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that the world may believe that thou hast sent me." That was referred to already this morning.

The implication of this profound statement is that all true Christians are one. You cannot separate a child of God from God, you cannot separate him and cannot separate him or her from other Christians. He says we must strive to be one, but first of all that organic union that has to be the premise upon which we can hope to ever be united with others. But he does also say that we are often so satisfied with the fact that we are already one in Christ, meaning the invisible church, that we are not making many efforts towards union also organizationally and that is wrong, he says. We should not be satisfied with the status quo, thinking that as long as we all belong to the invisible church, any visible unity can wait until the hereafter. Clearly this is wrong, he says. Whether it is doctrinal and especially spiritual unity, we should prayerfully seek the Lord's blessing and then we can expect also that the Lord's church will be a witness to the world.

May God help us as we take further steps. Maybe some years from now we will regard this meeting here this morning as an important step towards eventual union. May the Lord grant it to us.