

Changes in the manner of dealing with differences: a post-modern approach – coming to Australia?

By John Vantil

The relationship between the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) and the Canadian Reformed Churches (CanRC) has a long and difficult history. Serious concerns about who is admitted to the Lord's Supper and whether members are bound to the confessional standards of the church in the OPC were expressed by nearly every CanRC General Synod from 1965 through 1998. These serious concerns were an obstacle that prevented the CanRC from entering into a sister church relationship with the OPC.

A major change to this approach was enacted by the CanRC General Synod Neerlandia 2001, when it went ahead with a relationship of ecclesiastical fellowship with the OPC (see *Acts*, Article 45) and stated that these outstanding matters could be resolved within a sister church relationship. Although a number of appeals of this decision were sent to following General Synods, these have all been denied, and the change in the manner of dealing with these important differences has now become a settled matter in the CanRCs. Despite all the discussions which have taken place, there is no evidence that the OPC has made any changes to its practice of an open Lord's supper table or to its practice of accepting members who do not agree with the confessional standards of the church.

Concerns in Australia

The change to this approach has not escaped the notice of the CanRCs' sister church, the Free Reformed Churches of Australia. At Synod Legana 2009 Deputies for Sister Church Relations received a mandate to "*(a) Monitor developments within the CanRC for mutual benefit according to the established rules and keep the churches informed;*" and "*(c) Seek clarification about and discuss the changing manner in which they deal with significant differences with other church federations in their unity discussions.*" As grounds for part (c) of their mandate Synod stated, "*(e) The changing manner in dealing with significant differences in inter-church relations is substantial and worthy of discussion (e.g. Confessional Membership, Fencing of the Lords Supper etc.)*" (see *Acts*, Article 40, IV.2.a,c and IV.3.e)

In accordance with this mandate, the following statement was made in a speech by one of the Australian Deputies, Br. W. Pleiter, to the CanRC General Synod Burlington 2010:

Speaking of changes brothers, there are some other changes that we wish to speak about – and we wish to do so carefully. Synod Legana mandated the deputies 'to seek clarification about and discuss the changing manner in which they [CanRC] deal with significant differences with other church federations in their unity discussions.' (Article 40, IV. 2.c.) Reading through the Acts of various

Synods over the past years, it is clear to us, that some confessional issues, once held and defended dearly (like Fencing of the Lord's Table, Confessional Membership, and third party relationships – cf. Acts of Synod Lincoln 1992) are no longer obstacles to entering sister church relations. Of interest is the proposed change to include the new classification of "Associate Churches" in which you might formalize a relationship with numerous church federations – unbeknown to us, and to your own churches. Brothers, perhaps we are missing something; tell us what you have learned – help us to understand you more clearly in these matters. (see Appendix 3 of the Acts of General Synod Burlington 2010, pages 307-308).

The Australian Deputies have a good understanding of the problem. But what answer did they get to their question? We quote the following excerpt from their report to Synod Armadale 2012:

Deputies were given opportunity to discuss this matter with the Officers of Synod Burlington 2010 regarding the manner in which differences are dealt with during unity discussions with other church federations. Obviously delegates cannot speak on behalf of past Synods, however they provided a brief background to the situation, particularly as it related to their relationship with the OPC. Essentially the question was; can you recognize a church federation as true and faithful and continue to be 'apart' while discussing significant differences (in fencing of the Lord Supper and 'Confessional' membership). With the OPC this had be [been] the case since 1977, however Synod Neerlandia 2001 made a significant shift in the approach by becoming a sister church with the OPC and stated that these differences can be discussed in the context of Ecclesiastical Fellowship (EF) under Rule 1. Synod Neerlandia 2001 accepted the (joint) committees' principle agreement of the Lord's Supper and Confessional membership and stated that all further discussions could continue within the sister church relationship.

A similar approach was taken when entering a sister-church relationship with the Reformed Churches of Quebec (ERQ). However Synod Burlington emphasized that 'the differences should not be simply forgotten. Working toward a more unified position on matters of mutual concern remains one of the goals of EF.' Synod Burlington also noted that 'although the practices in the ERQ and the CanRC are not identical, the position mirrors what the CanRC have agreed to in discussions with the OPC, and that in this respect there is an agreement on the same principles.' Further, Synod Neerlandia [read 'Burlington'] also noted that the 'relationship of EF is working well and is bearing positive results. There has been a good exchange of views and a willingness to hear each other' (Reference was made here to Article 74, Considerations 3.2, 3.3, and 3.4 of the Acts of General Synod Burlington 2010 of the Canadian Reformed Churches).

While not judging this approach, deputies are of the opinion that the above provides sufficient explanation of Synod's mandate in this matter. Deputies note that Synod Burlington emphasized that these differences should not be forgotten and thus we should monitor the outcome of this changed approach.

Does this settle the matter? How were the concerns of the Australian deputies dealt with?

Concerns addressed?

Br. Pleiter put his finger right on the problem. As he put it, *"Reading through the Acts of various Synods over the past years, it is clear to us, that some confessional issues, once held and defended dearly (like Fencing of the Lord's Table, Confessional Membership, and third party relationships – cf. Acts of Synod Lincoln 1992) are no longer obstacles to entering sister church relations."* Later he makes a plea, *"Brothers, perhaps we are missing something; tell us what you have learned – help us to understand you more clearly in these matters."*

How did the delegates to General Synod Burlington 2010 explain these changes to the Deputies from Australia? They couldn't. They stated that *"delegates cannot speak on behalf of past Synods"* They pointed to General Synod 2001 which stated that *"these differences can be discussed in the context of Ecclesiastical Fellowship (EF)...."* However they could not explain **why**, and no grounds were given for this decision.

Their reference to a similar approach that was taken when entering into a sister-church relationship with the Reformed Churches of Quebec (ERQ) is not convincing. How does entering into a premature sister church relationship a second time justify entering into one the first time? Eleven years have gone by since the original 2001 decision. There has been no evidence of meaningful progress on resolution of the differences between the CanRC and the OPC. Does it really make sense to continue discussion of these differences?

General Synod Burlington 2010 considered that, *"Since Synod Neerlandia 2001 established EF with the OPC, it is not proper to speak of the topics of confessional membership and supervision of the Lord's Table as 'outstanding divergencies.' Neither would it be proper to belabor these issues in discussions with the OPC."* (*Acts*, Synod 2010, Article 34, Consideration 3.4).

As quoted earlier, Australian Deputies state that, *"While not judging this approach, deputies are of the opinion that the above provides sufficient explanation of Synod's mandate in this matter."*

The Australian Synod Armadale 2012 appears to agree. A proposal from one of the Australian churches, "*That Synod expresses to the Canadian Reformed Churches its concern that the differences between the Canadian Reformed Churches and other churches (OPC, URCNA, ERQ) were not resolved before entering a sister relationship with them*" is defeated without any grounds (*Acts*, Article 35). A second proposal from the floor of Synod, "*To add to deputies' mandate item 2.f: 'Deputies continue to monitor the outcome of the changed approach of the CanRC regarding resolving differences in their sister church relations' (as per deputies report, point 2)*" is also defeated without any grounds (*Acts*, Article 36).

Instead the Australian Synod continues the relationship with the CanRCs on the ground that, "*The Canadian Reformed Churches give evidence of continuing faithfulness to the Word of God, maintaining the Reformed Confessions and Church Order*" (*Acts*, Article 49, Grounds 1).

If deputies admit that they have "*not judged this approach,*" what basis do they and the delegates of Synod Armadale 2012 have for coming to this conclusion?

A Post-modern Approach

We are left with Br. Pleiter's plea, "*Brothers, perhaps we are missing something; tell us what you have learned – help us to understand you more clearly in these matters.*" The deputies were looking for new light, but did they receive any? What is the justification for the conclusion "*that the above provides sufficient explanation of Synod's mandate in this matter*"?

Further, what are the consequences of entering into an agreement which leaves open the matters of fencing the Lord's supper and the binding to the Reformed confessions? If there is "liberty" on the question of confessing the fundamentals of the Christian faith as summarized in the confessional standards of the church, what implications does that have for both the doctrinal purity of the church and the unity of the church that is expressed at the Lord's supper?

Concerns have already been expressed about the lack of true confessional binding. As Rev. Retief writes, "*The church member who endorses postmodernism may still subscribe to the Reformed Confessions if the church requires him to do so. He will do so with his fingers crossed. And he may feel no remorse. There are not many who will be quick to realize that he has signed the confessions in a different way.... Finding himself to be a member of an old-fashioned church he may stay on – as long as the progress towards relativism does not take too long. And as far as possible he will help to put the pressure on.... And the church must make room for him, if it does not want to lose his membership.*"

"When postmodernism has entered the church, than the theology of yesterday has become outdated. And it is impossible for the postmodern theologian to stick to the boundaries of 'old' confessions. To stick to old 'truths' is viewed as stagnation; it will make the church irrelevant for our own time and circumstance. And thus the chase is on after ever changing relative truth, not for the sake of truth itself, but in order to stay relevant." ("Discerning the Times," Una Sancta, September 8, 2008 issue).

Is there anything new under the sun? Consider church life in the Netherlands prior to the Secession of 1834. As Br. G.W. van der Wal writes, "... *Even the best confessional statements are of no benefit whatever if a church does not **adhere to and live in accordance with its confessions.***" (see "Church History" in Una Sancta, October 27, 2012 issue, p.32). And then also today, "*It is more difficult however, to accurately assess whether the church being investigated is indeed **acting in accordance** with those confessions. And that needs to be the decisive factor when considering a sister church relationship.*" (Una Sancta, December 8, 2012 issue, p.103).

Now let us compare these words to the answer of the Australian deputies. "*While not judging this approach*" In other words, they did not judge this approach in order to come to their decision. They accepted the CanRC answer even though they had no basis for it. They accepted as fact that confessional membership need not be required in sister churches, without any grounds. Perhaps the Australian deputies reasoned in this way: "We want to get along with our CanRC sister churches. We need to stay relevant in our post-modern world. However in our own federation we need to maintain the binding to the confessions, otherwise we might have a number of upset church members. We will have to wait for an opportune time before we can practice this kind of 'unity' within our own federation of churches."

However, do the Australian deputies realize the consequences of their decision? If attestations are accepted from members of sister churches that do not maintain the binding to the Reformed confessions, then the Three Forms of Unity do not function anymore as confessional standards in the church. For example, this can occur when a member of the OPC who does not adhere to the practice of infant baptism becomes a member of the CanRC, or when an OPC minister accepts a call to the CanRC and does not teach the binding character of the doctrine taught in the Three Forms of Unity to the members of his new congregation. If the Three Forms of Unity no longer function as forms for unity, does that not affect both the truth that is proclaimed from the pulpit and the unity that is expressed at the Lord's supper? If the CanRC no longer requires that members of its sister churches be bound to the Reformed confessions, what justification do they have for demanding that their own members do so? Is not this a double standard?

And if this is what is now happening in Canada, what is going to happen to the churches in Australia when they receive attestations from the CanRC? How can the

Australian churches ensure that the CanRC member adheres to the Three Forms of Unity? What you permit your sisters to do, do you not do this yourself? One only has to consider the outcome of this approach on the sister churches in the Netherlands (the GKV) to see what the devastating consequences will be!

For if the members are no longer required to make a credible profession of their faith in accordance with the confessional standards of the church, then the church loses its reason to exist. As Rev. Van Dellen and Prof. Monsma in their book The Church Order Commentary (3rd edition, page 251) write:

*It should be plain however that a Church, if its members are admitted without confessing the Reformed fundamentals, cannot remain Reformed. After all the individual members, and not the clergy and the eldership, constitute the Church. And **the confessional standards of a Church can only be Forms of Unity when the membership confesses these standards** [emphasis added - JVT]. If the members of a Church do not confess its standards to be Biblical the Church loses its power and also its *raison d'être* [reason for being]. A Church which does not require of its members that they agree with its doctrinal tenets opens the doors to those who advocate false doctrines; heresy is bound to enter in, and eventually modernism may even predominate."*

The consequence of these General Synod decisions is a major shift in direction for the CanRCs as well as the Australian churches. These General Synod decisions deviate from the scriptural principles set out by the Synod of Dort 1618-1619. This major shift undermines the confession of the Reformed faith as summarized in the Three Forms of Unity as well as the testimony of more than 400 years of Reformed church history.

The Acts of Synod Armadale 2012 will be reviewed and discussed by the Australian consistories. The consistories will have to determine whether they can hold these decisions of Synod as settled and binding. May our Lord provide them with the foresight to see the implications of these decisions on their churches, as well as the courage to deal with them in a scriptural manner.