

“Let's just be friends for now”

A Personal Assessment of the new CanRC-URC Relationship

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Often in the world of inter-church relations, the metaphor of courtship and marriage is used. Churches are said to be "getting to know each other," "courting," etc., with a view to an eventual union. In our relation with the United Reformed Churches of North America, such terms have also arisen. While metaphors of this sort are certainly limited, they can be helpful. In that vein, while the Canadian Reformed General Synod of May 2010 wrote to the URCNA synod and expressed its commitment to the eventual union, the URCNA General Synod of July 2010 responded and basically suggested that the two federations should "just be friends" for a while. There was no clear commitment to eventual union, neither was there a clear breaking off of the relationship. That's the way it goes when a courtship breaks down. People are not really sure where to go from there.

Now let me point out that no synod ever put it quite like that. This is only my interpretation. Let me also point out that I am writing this purely as private opinion. I had some official roles to play in the last while and therefore was present at this last URCNA synod for several days; I will explain those below. Still, the opinion expressed below is my own. The official report will be written later by our official fraternal delegates. The issue however is weighty and urgent enough for me to voice an opinion already now.

A Role

In various ways in the last number of years, I have been involved in the process. As a professor of the Theological Seminary and as a minister without pastoral responsibilities, I regularly preach on URCNA pulpits and have as a result certainly become acquainted with many fine URC brothers and sisters. I rejoice in them and their commitment to the truth.

Last January, I became more involved when our Committee for Church Unity asked Dr. Jason Van Vliet and myself to travel to California and appear before the Classis Southwest of the URCNA in order to answer specific questions that the Classis had about the Canadian Reformed Churches. Most of these questions had to do with our understanding of the Federal Vision controversy, the views of K. Schilder and our general theological approach. Those questions and answers have since been published and can also be found online at <http://www.pupilsOfChrist.com>. The response to the answers given, by the way, was all very positive. The visit went a long way towards removing misconceptions and wrong impressions of the CanRC churches. It is noteworthy that subsequently there were no formal objections raised by this Classis.

More recently, the CanRC Synod mandated Dr. Jason Van Vliet and myself to attend the URCNA synod and, if invited, answer on their floor questions that the URC churches might still have. This was a reciprocal arrangement, as members of the URC CERCU committee were also given the same privilege at the Canadian Reformed synod in May 2010. The questions that Dr Van Vliet and I were asked to answer were considerably less weighty than the questions raised in California; the issues had to do with views on creation, degree of uniformity, nature of preaching, approach to communion and discipline, admonition of youth. There were also questions that had to do with perceptions about excessive drinking, immodest dress, and lack of Christian behavior on the hockey arenas. Judging by the response thereafter, however, many URC delegates were clearly uncomfortable with these last questions as a great number of delegates apologized to us as they felt that the same kind of charges could be leveled at them. Our response to these questions, by the way, was that while we recognized that these things happen, do not condone them, continue to preach and admonish on these points, we should not be surprised. The nature of a covenantal community is such that those who are weak in the faith and less eager to put it into practice are also among us in the hope that sometime in the future the Lord will cause them to work out all the consequences of the Christian faith more fully. The challenge in our day, I suggested was to remain faithful to the justification by faith alone as well as to the Reformed position of children and youth in the covenant. Let us not, in reaction to the former point, move in a baptistic direction on the latter.

Also in another respect, I was involved with the last URC synod. For the first time in the history of the Theological College, we were invited both to put up a display table at the URC Synod and to speak some words of introduction about the seminary to the synod. We gladly accepted and made use of both invitations. Hence, some of our seminary professors were also at the URC synod. Since there was no one to speak with at the display table during sessions of synod, we availed ourselves instead of listening in on the sessions. It meant several busy days of catching the flavour of the URCNA through interacting personally, speaking, and listening to the debates on the floor of synod.

Again, it is important to realize, this is not a report from the principal of the seminary to the Board, nor from a professor to a synodical committee. Nor does this view necessarily reflect that of any Board or committee. It is just my personal opinion and reflections for the benefit of members of the Canadian Reformed Churches. The question that will be large on our minds will be: *where do we go from here?*

Nine Points

Besides asking the URCNA whether they were still committed to the relationship, the Canadian Reformed synod also asked the URCNA about the status of the nine points of Schererville 2007. While I doubt that the URC synod actually answered that question in a formal letter to us, it was the subject of lengthy debate since the Hills URC sought the rescinding of the nine points on procedural grounds. Hills URC argued that the nine points did not come from a specific church and therefore was not lawfully on the table of the 2007 synod. After a heated debate, the Hills URC appeal was defeated and the Nine Points stood. Some will ask, "what do I think about that?"

Two points here regarding the nine points. First, it is necessary to understand that while I think the nine points should have been more carefully considered and presented by Schererville, I have no significant objection to them. There was considerable concern raised about them initially when they were first published because many Canadian Reformed persons understood them as a critique of the theological positions they had learned from K. Schilder and others. When one reads them against the backdrop of what is being said among Federal Vision proponents, however, they become much clearer and even quite acceptable to us. For more on this, see the article "CanRC Answers to URC Questions" on www.pupilssofchrist.com.

Second, concerning the procedural question, there was a very interesting debate on the floor of synod. It was a rare moment when the chairman and the vice-chairman asked for the floor shortly after each other. The chairman, Rev. Ralph Pontier, rose first to warn about the danger of matters being discussed at synod that did not adequately come from the churches. No minor assembly discussed the Nine Points before Synod did; they did not come from there. Later the vice chairman, Rev. Ronald Scheuers rose to argue that the matter of Federal Vision was legitimately on the agenda of synod having been placed there by the churches, and that the Nine Points were nothing more than an answer to the FV questions. What do I think? I think both of these fine brothers were correct. Synods may not make up their own agendas, but the Federal Vision matter was placed on the agenda in a proper manner, and the Nine Points were an answer to the FV question. Just as our synods often write lengthy observations and considerations in response to matters and those observations and considerations are not derived directly from the churches, so here. Frankly, the existence and confirmation of the Nine Points does not, in my judgement, need to pose any significant problems to the Canadian Reformed Churches. Similarly, it should be noted here that without dissent, the URC Synod accepted the more lengthy report on Federal Vision and Justification. Again, I have no significant problem with that. While I am not sure that the body of the report accurately reflects the views of Federal Vision writers, that is something that such persons will need to address themselves. The conclusions of the Justification report however are largely quotations from the Three Forms of Unity and hence ones with which Canadian Reformed people would wholeheartedly agree. The only criticism I have is that, given the nature of the areas of the final 15 recommendations, it would have been good to affirm that the covenant promises are extended to all covenant children and not just to those who respond in faith; this, however, is not something FV people deny but it would have been a helpful affirmation of the teaching of Lord's Day 27.

In any case, I believe that if we have not adequately done so thus far, the Canadian Reformed Churches would do well to express solid agreement with the URCNA on the matter of

justification. There should be no doubt about the fact that we stand shoulder to shoulder with these brothers on this most significant doctrinal point. Justification is solely through faith alone on the basis of the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ alone.

Three Committees

This URNA synod also had on its agenda Overture 13 which urged Synod to conclude the work of the URCNA's Phase 3 Unity Committees.

Let me quote from Overture 13 at length. The Classis wrote:

This overture calls us to express appreciation for the work that has been accomplished by these committees while acknowledging that our federations are not yet ready to enter into Phase Three of our Guidelines for Ecumenicity and Church Unity. . . . we wish to set forth two principles with absolute clarity

First Principle: We believe that the Lord of the Church does call His people to pursue unity of heart, mind and purpose (Eph. 4:1-6; John 17:20-23). However, a combination of sinfulness and cultural distinctions sometimes prevents or indefinitely delays *complete* unity among like-minded groups of believers. *We should never be satisfied with such a situation.* But neither should our longing for fuller expressions of unity cause us to sacrifice the unity the Lord already has granted within our existing federations.

Second Principle: We love and respect our Canadian Reformed brothers, and we regard their congregations as like-minded sister churches. *Please do not read anything in this overture as a contradiction of this.* Since the inception of the URCNA, we have appreciated the encouragement, fellowship and example of our brothers in the Canadian Reformed Churches. We consider the Canadian Reformed Churches to be a federation of true churches which serve the Lord faithfully and admirably. We desire to continue serving the Lord alongside of them, just as we serve alongside our brothers in the Reformed Church in the United States and in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (with which we also enjoy Phase 2, or "sister church," relationships).

DIVISION IN THE PROCESS OF UNITING

But, after nearly a decade of struggling to find a way to merge the URC and the CanRC into a single federation, we believe that the process is having a detrimental effect on both federations, as well as on their relationship with one another. In fact, we have become convinced that continued efforts to merge *at this time* will result not in *one* federation, but *three* – because a substantial number of congregations from both existing federations seem almost certain to refuse to remain in a merged federation.

Surely, that unwillingness to manifest a greater degree of federational unity is due *in part* to our sinfulness. But whose sin is it? Time and again, we find ourselves unable to answer that question.

We believe the question is unanswerable because many of our differences are rooted not in sin, but in historical and cultural differences. These differences have left both federations with perspectives to which we hold tenaciously – not because of sinful pride, but because we truly believe that our perspective reveals the proper course for the churches to follow.

Overture 13 then went on to suggest that the work of three significant committees be concluded.

A Common Songbook? Whereas there was a time in our relationship wherein we had one joint committee to work towards a common songbook to be used by a new united federation, Synod Schererville 2007 already moved away from that direction when it shifted their committee's focus away from a common songbook and towards a new URCNA Psalter Hymnal. London 2010 went only a small step further when it decided "to conclude the mandate of the Songbook Committee to produce a common songbook" (*Press Release, July 30 2010*).

Personally, I am not surprised. From my experience on many URCNA pulpits I know that the brothers and sisters there have a deep love and appreciation for many of the psalms and hymns. The same is true of the brothers and sisters in the CanRC with our Book of Praise. To combine these two books into one book that would adequately satisfy the wishes of both groups is a monumental, if not impossible, task. Clearly, *if these two federations ever do get together, they will have to be willing to sing out of either or both books*. Maybe it's a moot point. As all these songs will undoubtedly be scriptural, our only real concern may be how to carry all these books to church; but by the time we all get together we might just be singing collectively by means of a projector screen anyway. Our electronic age will present us with unifying possibilities!

Theological Education? Overture 13 also suggested that the Theological Education Committee be dissolved. Again, one need not be surprised that London 2010 agreed. The committee had a mandate to resolve the tension between the position of the URCNA which was against a federational seminary because of bad experiences in the past with the position of the CanRC which is very convinced that a federational seminary is the more biblical and proper approach. Burlington 2010 and London 2010 both rejected the committee's final proposal that would allow entrance to the ministry through independent seminaries and place a federational seminary under the jurisdiction of a regional synod. London 2010 declared that the committee had fulfilled their mandate (*Press Release, July 28*), rejected the model proposed, and suggested that churches that came up with a better model could address a subsequent synod by overture.

Obviously, I have an opinion in this discussion. A federational seminary is not just a Canadian Reformed preference; this has been regarded as the proper route ever since the Secession days in the Netherlands. Training future ministers is not the business of private enterprise or independent boards; it is obviously the business of the church to prepare future ministers of the Word. Bad experiences with previous seminaries is no reason to reject the principle; when a seminary goes bad it is also the federation which is responsible for failing to properly govern. In Hamilton we are blessed to have both a federation that does govern, and a seminary faculty that is willing to be governed and respects the wishes of the federation.

Having a federational seminary certainly has its benefits. In the present we are enjoying a high degree of unity in the CanRC federation, and much of that is due to the fact that almost all our ministers have received the same seminary education. A federational seminary with a high degree of academic rigor also bodes well for the future of the federation. As of 2011 the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary will have seen a complete change of faculty over a process of no more than ten years, and, under God's wonderful provision, that has happened without the sense or the charge that we have changed direction.

Is it entirely impossible to unite these two approaches to seminary education? I continue to believe that an approach that I have defended before is the most viable option. If there is a willingness to have a federational seminary, a federation could establish a board which would both supervise the federational seminary as well as evaluate the seminary education of those who attend non-federational schools. Such a board could hold seminaries that want federational approval accountable to agreed upon standards and ensure that the final outcomes are as similar as possible. Such a Board could even insist on representation in Boards of seminaries seeking support. But that is undoubtedly a discussion for another day.

Joint Church Order? Overture 13 also asked London 2010 to “declare that the mandate of the Proposed Joint Church Order Committee has been fulfilled.” Overture 18 likewise asked that this Committee be disbanded. London did not quite do that however. It continued the committee but at the same time decided that any changes to the Proposed Church Order should now be directed to the synod by overture rather than to the committee. While this is an interesting development, it is also quite problematic. It means that the Proposed Church Order would no longer be a jointly agreed upon document as one federation may make changes which might not be agreeable to the other federation. Is the URCNA getting prepared to go to the bargaining table on aspects of the Joint Church Order in case the churches do warm up to the idea of federative unity at some future date?

While I am not sure what all the issues with the PJCO might be for the URC brothers, I have certainly observed one during the time I spent in London. A Canadian Reformed person sitting there listening to over 200 brothers dialogue together in a large assembly will often be struck by the great contrast with the smaller delegated bodies of the Canadian Reformed synods. It became apparent to me that this Synod could complete its agenda in a quicker fashion (1 week) than a CanRC synod (2-3 weeks) also because it has a larger number of committees. But how well will this continue to function if the number of churches and hence the number of delegates continues to grow? Clearly, there was a sense too that every church and every varying opinion wanted to be heard and heard clearly. Perhaps the fact that the larger percentage of the URCNA is American has had an influence on the representational nature of this body. One leaves then very doubtful that any committee will ever manage to convince this federation to operate its broader ecclesiastical assemblies in a delegated rather than representative manner.

Two New Problems?

Of particular interest to the Canadian Reformed federation are a couple of other points.

One was a proposal to define more carefully several terms and the authority given to them. Synod London was presented with terms such as “doctrinal affirmation,” “pastoral advice,” “study committee reports,” and “synodical judgements.” Clearly this was an attempt to define both the nature and the authority of a document such as the Nine Points of Schererville 2007. The discussion was quite extensive however, and the emotions ran high. The proposal suggested, for example, that while “doctrinal affirmations” could not be used to bring disciplinary charges against anyone, such affirmations should be respected and upheld by all officebearers. To Canadian Reformed ears, this sounded too much like extraScriptural binding which has caused many a division in the past. In the end, it was referred to the standing Synodical Rules Committee for further study and reflection. A federation such as ours would do well, however, to scrutinize very carefully the document that eventually evolves from that process.

Another discussion that took place was about the level of doctrinal commitment expected of the communicant membership of the churches. Is it full assent to all possible doctrines? Is there room for exceptions or stipulations? As the Canadian Reformed have had these kind of discussions as well, with varying answers, it will be beneficial to observe also the results of this discussion.

So what will it take?

Many a young man or woman faced with a broken relationship has asked the question of the other person, “so what will it take to get us together?” A federation might ask the same of another federation.

For one thing, it will take a strong desire for such a union. Do we really want it? Is it even necessary? While our Synod expressed the sentiment that lives within our federation, namely, that we should move forward with the unification process, I am not convinced that anyone in the Canadian Reformed Churches is ready *at this point* for union with the URC. There are still obstacles, as mentioned above. There is a perception of division within the URCNA. “Better no marriage than a bad marriage,” we would say. Perhaps it’s time to re-think our ecclesiology. Maybe it’s not everything to be one federation. When we joined organizations like NAPARC and ICRC, were we not saying that the Church of Jesus Christ is wider than one or even several federations? We do not feel pressure to become one with the OPC; so why do we exert pressure when it comes to the URCNA? But still, when all things are equal and union with another federation seems almost natural and can happen without much controversy, we ought to unite. Such union is still biblically mandated. But, as Overture 13 suggests, if we try to merge two churches into one but in the meantime actually create three we have lost much and probably gained nothing.

But in case things change and we want to court this sister again, what should we do in the meantime? Several things, it seems to me.

First, *be prepared to sing out of more than one songbook.*

Second, *be prepared for an extensive discussion about the possibility of having major assemblies that would be representative rather than delegated bodies.*

Third, *be careful as to how one writes about Federal Vision material.* This sister of ours is sensitive on this issue because of the lack of clarity on justification, and that sensitivity is not unjustified. If we care about our relationship, blanket statements of approval of FV material are foolhardy.

Fourth, *be creative and prepared for a new discussion on theological education.* The idea of a seminary under a regional synod has been rejected, as has the concept of regional synods. The idea of a synodically mandated Board for theological education is worth pursuing.

Fifth, *be content to continue to preach on each other's pulpits and exchange attestations.* Turning the clock back on these points will only be considered offensive, and will be a sure way to break off the relationship for good.

Let us remember: just because the URCNA is not ready to unite with us, that does not make her our enemy. We are still good friends, brothers in our wonderful Lord, members together of NAPARC and ICRC. The enemy is the devil, and the times are evil. There just may be another day when we need each other more than we do today. If our Lord tarries long, there just may be a day when we unite.

To quote from Overture 13 again:

we believe the churches of both federations would be better served *at this time* by removing the pressure of our attempts to develop the formal structures of a united federation, which attempts belong to a later stage of the unity process.

Meanwhile, we already acknowledge one another as faithful churches of Jesus Christ. Let us be intentional about assisting one another in the maintenance, defense and promotion of Reformed doctrine, liturgy, church polity and discipline. Let us continue accepting one another's members at the Lord's Table; opening our pulpits to each other's ministers; receiving ecclesiastical delegates to our broader assemblies; and encouraging our members to interact with one another. Let us find ways to help one another to pursue the lost, disciple the found, and encourage the saints. And let our CERCU members continue to assist the churches to find ways to dispel fears and increase our mutual recognition of the unity our federations already have, so that future efforts to enter Phase Three might be received with the enthusiastic support of the churches.

And may the Lord use these informal, face-to-face contacts to bind together our hearts, such that our eventual unity of federations will arise as a natural product of our knowledge of and love for each other.

Personally, I believe that those are fine words that we do well to heed. Let us press on together because regardless of the names of our federations, we *are* one. When we follow the path sketched above, we may just come to a day when we believe that it is possible, wise, and obedient to unite after all.

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