

March 3, 1998

## INTRODUCTION:

- A. The subject ought not to be a difficult one for those Reformed.
  - 1. The need of federation seems so obvious.
  - 2. Reformed churches have practiced proper federation since the Reformation.
  - 3. And independency has usually been rejected.
- B. For those who wish to read an interesting evaluation, check the P.R. Theological Journal of this past April-- article by John Hooper in Plymouth England.
  - 1. He has observed the evils of independentism first-hand in England.
  - 2. And gives sound reasons for a Scriptural federation of churches.

## DANGERS OF INDEPENDENTISM

### I. WHAT INDEPENDENTISM IS:

- A. As such:
  - 1. It is a church with no denominational affiliation.
    - a. Organized as an independent church.
      - 1) Often happens with some "charismatic" pastor.
      - 2) Some gain large followings--often become "mega-churches."
    - b. Or it may be a congregation which separates itself from a denomination to which it was formerly affiliated.
      - 1) These become dissatisfied with the direction of the denomination.
      - 2) And these do not wish to run into similar problems with another affiliation which might end the same way.
  - 2. Not to be confused with an "autonomous" church.
    - a. An "autonomous" church is ruled by the elders--but agrees to federate with other churches.
      - 1) These can again leave the denomination.
      - 2) But while these are in it, they abide by the decisions made.
    - b. An independent church may be involved in loose organizations, but are not bound to abide by any of its decisions.
- B. Reasons for independentism:
  - 1. An attempt to escape the "hierarchy" of the denomination.
    - a. That is an understandable reaction.
      - 1) Rome developed into a great hierarchy: the pope ruled.
      - 2) Many denominations also develop into an evil hierarchy.
        - a) The CRC showed this in 1924 when the classes suspended and deposed officebearers.
        - b) In recent years the trend has accelerated in the CRC.
          - 1/ It suspends an article of the C.O. contrary to any of its own rules and regulations.
          - 2/ It imposes the wish of the Synod concerning women in office.
    - b. To separate and remain independent is considered the solution.
      - 1) One is no longer compelled to support activities financially that are distasteful to the local church.
      - 2) One is no longer bound by decisions which are contrary to Scripture.
      - 3) It is even argued that denominationalism or federation is contrary to Scriptural patterns.
  - 2. To give a free hand in the work of ministry.
    - a. The local church need not follow directives from broader bodies.

- b. It can develop freely its own ministries without giving account to a classis or synod.

## II. INDEPENDENTISM IS NOT REFORMED

- A. One hears of "Reformed" Baptists, or Independent "Reformed" churches.
  - 1. One recognizes that there might be a time for such independency.
    - a. Gives opportunity for seeking proper federation.
    - b. Or it might be needed to work at forming a new federation.
  - 2. However, to be "Reformed" yet independent is an oxymoron.
- B. But federation is an essential element of being Reformed.
  - 1. The Church Order of Dordt presents federation.
    - a. Remember: this was drawn up not that long after the Reformation.
      - 1) If ever there was a fear of hierarchy and desire for independency, it would have been then.
      - 2) Yet our fathers did not shy away from federation.
    - b. It clearly identifies and defines denominational life.
      - 1) It recognizes the dangers of hierarchy--and has articles which are designed to protect against that.
      - 2) Yet it presupposes the need to federate--and sets forth the rules for the same.
  - 2. Calvin and the reformers agree.
  - 3. In fact, Scripture gives support for this position.
    - a. It is true that formal denominations are not set forth there.
    - b. Yet the churches practiced unity in very real ways.
      - 1) There is the command to seek proper unity based on truth.
      - 2) There is evident the work of mercy between various churches.
      - 3) There is the "synod" of Jerusalem dealing with the circumcision issue.
        - a) True: this was not in fact a synod.
        - b) Nevertheless, the unity of the churches is emphasized.
          - 1/ In that Antioch sought help from Jerusalem and the apostles and elders there.
          - 2/ In that the ruling there was also passed on to all of the churches as a binding decision.

## III. THE DANGERS OF INDEPENDENTISM

- A. The danger of hierarchy within the local church.
  - 1. Independent churches claim to want to avoid hierarchy.
  - 2. Yet within the local church there is real danger of hierarchy.
    - a. It may be the preacher who becomes a small "pope."
      - 1) The congregation is bound to submit to his dictates--often without the opportunity to appeal.
      - 2) He seems able to introduce what he will--no appeal.
    - b. Or: several elders, often permanently installed, rule with a harsh hand the church.
      - 1) The preacher will likely fear to oppose them.
      - 2) And these will insist that their way is always the right way.
    - c. Or there is a certain hierarchy of the congregation.
      - 1) They can "vote out" the preacher if they are unhappy with him.
      - 2) So the majority becomes, if you will, the pope there.
- B. Danger that each within the church begins to do "what is right in his own eyes."
  - 1. The emphasis on "independentism" must have its effect in the congregation.
    - a. There is no emphasis on unity within the body of Christ.
    - b. Soon that desire for independency shows itself within the church itself.
      - 1) Each insists on his own theological position.
        - a) Each holds to what is right in his own eyes.

- b) Soon a congregation exists with no unanimity in doctrine.
  - 2) And there often then is disunity within the congregation.
    - a) One church of which I am aware, decides only by unanimous vote.
    - b) But even here, there has been division--because ultimately each is accountable to the chief elder.
- C. There is no stability or opportunity to bring appeals.
  - 1. With our sinful flesh, often disagreements arise.
  - 2. In an independent congregation, there is no place of appeal.
    - a. Discipline ultimately must be decided by the majority (or unanimous) vote of the congregation itself.
    - b. The minister's position is secure only as long as he retains the confidence of the majority of the congregation.
- D. There is little or no opportunity to labor together in missions, seminaries, or even to help one another.
  - 1. It might be possible to cooperate with others in the mercies of Christ.
    - a. Even then, it would be more difficult to cooperate with other churches.
    - b. But means have been used to accomplish this.
  - 2. Difficult or impossible to do mission work.
    - a. If the church is sizeable, perhaps they could work on their own.
    - b. Most independent churches are small--and would find such work virtually impossible.
      - 1) How can they properly work with others when there is no unity in doctrine?
      - 2) A tendency then to concentrate only on the local congregation.
  - 3. Small churches can not adequately provide for the ministry.
    - a. Some share ministers with other congregations--to which they have refused to federate.
    - b. Some ministers must be in a "tent-making" ministry to the detriment of the congregation.
    - c. Or congregations continue without a minister.
  - 4. Independent churches would have difficulty finding a minister who fits in with the doctrinal position of their congregation.
    - a. These can not provide a seminary for the training of ministers.
    - b. Must use either independent seminaries or those of other denominations.
    - c. The consequence also would be that men of differing doctrinal positions could likely occupy the pulpit.
- E. The calling of the church is to seek unity:
  - 1. Not on the lowest common denominator--the ecumenism of our day.
  - 2. But on the basis of truth; as Christ and the Father are one.
  - 3. Such union has many blessings--even and especially in this evil age.

*often - lack of fellowships w. other ministers*



## **Dangers of Independentism**

We treat a subject today which concerns that which ought not to be a question or problem in Reformed circles. Independentism is associated with many Baptists and Congregationalists. One hardly expects this to be a problem or danger in Reformed circles.

The need of federation seems so obvious—why even discuss it? Reformed churches have practiced federation since the time of the Reformation. Though, indeed, it took some time for churches after the Reformation to establish an orderly church government, it was nevertheless soon accomplished. Monsma and Van Dellen, in their Church Order Commentary, page 131, write:

The Reformed Churches of the southern Netherlands (now largely Belgium), met repeatedly since 1563, regulating their affairs largely according to the Orders in force in France and Geneva under Calvin.

The refugee Churches in England and Germany at this time also held their meetings.

The Wezelian Convention, 1568, though not a synod inasmuch as the various delegates were not authorized to act for the various Churches, was the most representative gathering of Holland Churches held up to that year. Tentative regulations for definite federation were adopted.

The first Synod of the Reformed Churches of the Low Countries was held in 1571, at Emden, Germany. Conditions in the Netherlands were as yet too hostile and irregular for a Synodical gathering. The Emden Church Order provided for Consistories, Classes, Provincial Synods, and National Synods. That this time, according to Prof. H. Bouwman, the Churches of our forefathers yielded some of their individual rights regarding government and discipline for the sake of the general welfare of the Churches. All delegates to this first Synod had been summoned and delegated with authority to act in this direction. At the same time rules were agreed upon which protected the rights of the individual members of the Churches, and which would counteract all willfulness and arbitrariness. The Churches also agreed to admit candidates to the ministry only after consultation with the other neighboring Churches, and that Ministers would henceforth not be called or disciplined without such consultation.



One might, therefore, reject independentism as unreformed, and certainly not Protestant Reformed.

For those who have not yet read the interesting evaluation of Independentism in the Protestant Reformed Theological Journal, I would recommend the article. Mr. John Hooper of Plymouth, England has had personal, first-hand experience with Independentism in England and the British Isles. He has observed the evils of this directly. He gives sound and Scriptural reasons for federation. The many small, evangelical, independent congregations in his area have convinced Hooper of the difficulties and dangers inherent in Independentism.

So: what is Independentism? It is the position of such a church which refuses federation with other churches—no matter how like-minded, and continues on their own. Such independent congregations can originate in a variety of ways. It may be an energetic, charismatic preacher who begins a new church movement in a certain city. His dynamic presentations and novel programs attract a wide variety of people. Soon he has a sizeable congregation who are enthused about their pastor and his methods. Not unusually, such a person soon builds a mega-church which becomes known widely in the whole region.

At other times, a denomination may put out a minister who refuses to conform to the confessions or standards of the denomination. Again, the force of his personality will often cause many of the congregation to follow the man out of the denomination. Once separated from a denomination, this church will seek to “do its own thing” while independent and separate from all other churches.

It also happens that unhappy and dissatisfied Christians see their denomination going rapidly down the road of apostasy. Though with extreme reluctance, these people will separate themselves from the denomination and establish a new and more Scriptural congregation. Then, rather than taking the “chance” of going down that same pathway again in another denomination, these will insist on continuing as a separate and independent church.

We must, at this point, take care not to confuse independency with autonomy. The position of Reformed churches has ever been that the local church is autonomous. The rule over the local church remains with its elders. When it becomes part of a federation, it does not lose that autonomy. It does willingly place itself within a federation where it recognizes the binding nature of the decisions of Classis or Synod. Such a Reformed church realizes the value in such an action, but also knows that the church can withdraw from that federation if there is basic disagreement on important and usually doctrinal issues. This church retains for itself those

important elements of any church: it has the preaching of the Word, it exercises discipline over its members and its ministers, and it administers the sacraments. But in areas where churches ought to co-operate, this congregation joins hands with others of like mind to carry out the work of the Lord.

Some independent churches do join themselves to loosely-knit organizations. They refuse, however, to allow such organizations to make decisions which are binding on the local congregation.

Why should any church, much less Reformed churches, opt for independentism?

One obvious, and not too difficult to understand, reason is the fear of or desire to escape from hierarchy. Only those who have personally experienced the oppressiveness of hierarchy can know how one would eagerly desire to escape from under that. Only one who has escaped that, can fully understand that independentism seems to be the only way of avoiding such a danger again.

It was Rome that developed into an awful, anti-Scriptural, hierarchy. Many understandably called the pope an Anti-christ. At the time of the Reformation, and still today, Rome rules over its churches with a heavy hand. What the Pope decrees, the churches must obey. Under such a hierarchy, there arose the denial of justification by faith; there arose the doctrine of papal infallibility, the doctrine of Mary's immaculate conception and increasingly Mariolotry. In Luther's day, the doctrine of salvation by works led to the sale of Indulgences, increasing emphasis on the saving value of the mass, and many other heretical ideas. All of this was imposed on the churches.

But also within Reformed denominations, and Presbyterian as well, there arose a form of hierarchy. Control of the denominations came from a central source. There developed what some have called "boardism." Increasingly, the responsibility of the local churches in important areas of church government was now assumed by boards or classes or synods.

Our own churches originated in part because of such hierarchy. When classes of the Christian Reformed Church suspended and deposed officebearers within certain churches, they assumed a key-power which rightly belongs only to the local church. Such classes could have severed relationships with individual churches for whatever reason, but the key-power remains with the elders within each autonomous church. That was hierarchy—and a hierarchy which has continued to plague the C.R.C. as the recent defections from their denomination also evidence.

When the broader gathering (Synod) can at its whim simply set aside an article of its own Church Order in order to allow for the ordination of women officebearers, something directly contrary both to its Church Order and our confessions, you have hierarchy. Surely one would chafe under such church government when so obviously the decisions taken are so contrary to Scripture—and when a Synod refuses further to listen to debate or alter its decisions.

The reaction, almost normal reaction, is to escape such bondage—and refuse to be part of any federation where conceivably the same situation could develop anew. Congregations do not want to be placed in a situation where they are forced to contribute to activities of the federation with which they strongly disagree. They do not want to be held responsible for Synodical decisions which are contrary to Scripture. Having been “burnt” once, they fear lest they should become burned again.

Even, it is argued by some, denominations are contrary to the teachings of Scripture. It is pointed out that no denominations appear on the pages of Scripture. Individual churches are identified, but not federations of churches. Though churches apparently did cooperate, yet not as denominations. Nor were there any Synods which met—Jerusalem-gathering to decide the matter of circumcision was hardly a Synod.

But separation from the stifling binding of a hierarchical denomination comes for some as a breath of fresh air or freedom from a prison. Now the congregation can develop in its own way without binding restrictions placed upon it by others. Its mission work can be carried out freely. Its church programs can be adapted to the needs of the local congregation. Its ministry need not be bound by Synodical decisions—and sometimes, not by Creeds anymore either.

In an interesting article titled: Order in the Church, by David Hall, pastor of the Covenant Presbyterian Church, appearing in “Christian Renewal,” Sept. 22, 1997, this author points out:

Often church of reformed heritage are pressed by the molding of the surrounding culture’s ethos toward a polarity that is much more similar to congregational/democratic polity than by preinciples of presbyterian/representative polity. In well-intended reaction away from hierarchial tyranny, some communions find themselves more aligned with democratic government than scriptural government.

We ought to understand well that independentism is not Reformed. One hears of “Reformed Baptists” who are also independent one of another; or Independent “Reformed”



Churches. For the latter, there may be reasons for this independentism for a time. Some of these churches have recently separated from their mother denomination. After separation, there is a time of re-organization and establishment as a new congregation. These desire some time in order to seek a proper federation with other congregations. Some have indeed organized into a denomination: the United Reformed Churches.

To remain independent would truly be an oxymoron.

Federation is an essential element of being Reformed, or Presbyterian for that matter.

That this is the case should be evident from the Church Order of Dordt. Remember: this Church Order was drawn up not that many years after the Reformation. One would expect that if ever there was a fear of hierarchy and a desire for independentism, it should have been then. The tyranny of Rome was fresh in every mind.

Still, our forefathers did not shy away from federation for fear of hierarchy. On the contrary, aware of the dangers of hierarchy, they wrote articles designed to guard against that while promoting federation. Van Dellen and Monsma point this out well in their *Church Order Commentary*, pp. 132-133, when they write:

Regarding the nature of ecclesiastical assemblies, note first of all that according to Reformed church polity, only such Churches as are confessionally like-minded can have part in these gatherings. For Churches to be federally united, these must have a common conception of Holy Writ, and thus a common working platform. Co-operation and promotion of each other's welfare would be impossible without confessional unity. Ecclesiastical federation without confessional unity would make for shallowness and fruitlessness, or else for trouble and constant conflict.

Secondly, Churches ecclesiastically federated are and remain complete in themselves. The various local Churches do not dissolve themselves into a large classical Church, or into a national, synodical Church. The local congregation is a complete manifestation of the body of Christ, a unit in itself, and is not to be looked upon as a subdivision of a large super-Church ruling with superior power.

Furthermore, the nature of ecclesiastical federation... is nevertheless such that the major assemblies exercise a binding authority regarding all matters which concern the Churches in general and which have not been specifically left to the individual Churches or congregations. At major assemblies the individual Churches act in unison by common

consent. Decisions must therefore be respected unless proven contrary to the Bible or the Church Order previously agreed upon.

Reformed Church polity therefore upholds the integrity of the local Church, but at the same time does full justice to all the Churches federally united and the spiritual unity underlying the federation. Also because of this spiritual unity in Christ and confessional unity doctrinally, by God's providence, federation is not left merely to the judgment of each Church. There is a very definite spiritual obligation flowering forth from a real spiritual union and agreement which makes ecclesiastical federation and its implications mandatory upon the Churches.

An examination of our Church Order clearly shows what Van Dellen and Monsma point out. In articles 29 through 51 the structure of a federation is briefly but importantly set forth. Article 29 immediately and clearly declares, "Four kinds of ecclesiastical assemblies shall be maintained: the consistory, the classis, (the particular synod), and the general synod."

And the expressed guard against hierarchy is very brief, clear, and potent in Article 84, "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."

In the article appearing in *Christian Renewal*, quoted from above, David Hall writes:

God has not left believers isolated to fend for themselves. Those who are not connected to the body of Christ and those who are not flourishing with one another are depicted as "cut off from the head" (Col. 2:19). Unrelatedness is neither a virtue in the NT nor in the OT. The Bible is squarely against individualism as an infrastructure for a form of government. The scriptures are consistently opposed to the modern rights-oriented societies of the western world. When problems arise, our Father has loved us enough to give us other counselors, godly elders, and the infallible Bible which reveals to us who God is and what He wants. For our own good, God has put together an organized form for settling controversies. God gave the greater counsel (Prov. 15:22) and the Assembly to his church. This structure is to be an aid to the local church, with the power located in the grassroots, and with the momentum originating in the local church. Yet he

has also revealed a protective layer, an organized system of appeals, to peacefully resolve issues. That is part of God's problem-solving method (Acts 15).

... In our own times, we're often chagrined at how much Christians strive for autonomy. That was not the case in the NT. It was not the expressed desire of the NT church to do its own thing. The churches felt a strong bond. We are led to ask, "Was it they who were wrong? Or we? Is it possible that we yearn for a little too much independence, and a little too much self-rule, which could actually be dangerous for us?"

(The writer continues) ... The governmental teachings of Luther, Calvin Knox, Beza, Voetius, Wollebius, the *Jus Divinum*... Thornwell, and Dabney are sufficient paradigms that can also serve as primers for church government.

For those who value organizational progress, we can urge, "Don't re-invent the wheel." The biblical aspects of government, need not be ignored by each successive generation, nor rediscovered by the alternating generations. We could profit much by studying the "Old Paths."

One could examine the works of the Reformers to show that they likewise maintained the need of federation and cooperation of like-minded churches. There's was never a false ecumenism in which doctrine or truth were ignored. But those who were one in doctrine were to be one also in unity.

Scripture, of course, is the ultimate basis for what we are to maintain on federation. It is true that there is no reference to denominations in Scripture. Neither Paul nor other of the apostles insisted on a kind of federation.

But what does Scripture teach? In the first place, the unity of the churches became evident in the acts of mercy which were presented. One instance is recorded in Romans 15:26, "For it hath pleased them of Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor saints which are at Jerusalem." This act of mercy was carried out cooperatively by various churches in order to provide aid to the poor saints in Jerusalem. This does not prove the existence of a federation, but the very close cooperation does indicate that a relationship existed which was more than simply independent churches helping other independent churches.

There is the fact that the apostle Paul addressed his letters to the *churches*. That is clear especially in the letter addressed to the churches of Galatia. Such a letter implies a oneness in



doctrine within those churches and a common need for instruction and guidance. He instructs one church to read also the letter addressed to another church.

There is also the appeal of the church of Antioch to that of Jerusalem as recorded in Acts 15 concerning circumcision. Some had come from Judea to Antioch and insisted, "Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved." In Jerusalem the apostles and elders would treat that matter.

Some have called this the first Synod. Such is hardly the case. There appears to be represented in Jerusalem only the church of Antioch and that of Jerusalem. It was also an appeal directly to the apostles of Jesus Christ. Other churches through delegates were not represented there.

Yet when the elders and apostles had made their decision, this was sent not only to Antioch. Acts 15:23 states, "And they wrote letters by them after this manner: The apostles and elders and brethren send greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia..." Clearly the decision taken at Jerusalem was binding upon the Gentiles in the various churches.

But we must treat, yet, the question of *dangers* of independentism. One might even state, we are treating the *evils* of independentism. In speaking thus, we can not conclude that all of these evils are seen in all independent churches—just as we can never say that all churches joined in federation do not face some of these same dangers or evils.

The first and perhaps most obvious danger is that of *hierarchy*. That might seem a strange claim. Does not independentism spring out of the *fear* of hierarchy? Yet it is true that hierarchy is itself a real threat in independentism.

That hierarchy can come in at least three different forms. Often it is the preacher who assumes a role of "pope" within the congregation. His word is law. He is likely a very personable individual. He is an excellent speaker. He can effectively plan the operations of the congregation. Many are attracted to the congregation as a consequence. Nevertheless, it is the preacher who exercises authority. He may have a consistory or board of directors. But what he wants, he gets. None can successfully oppose the wishes of the preacher. Those who might oppose him, are either put out or forced to leave. This preacher determines the confession of his church. He determines the walk of its members. From his rule there is no appeal.

Probably all of us are aware of churches of this nature.

A second form of hierarchy which appears is that of the elders or members of the board of directors. These often remain in office for life. Their word is law. Not unusually there are two, perhaps three, of such elders who direct and govern the whole of the church. They are always "right." No one may gainsay them. They are in a position to hire or fire the minister. The preacher, if he is to remain in that congregation, must kow-tow to these elders. He fears lest he offend them. For if he does offend them, there is no appeal to their decision to oust him from his office.

The third form of hierarchy is that of the rule of the people. It is not uncommon that the people rule in independent churches. The government is congregational. The people decide ultimately on matters of discipline. The congregation can decide not only on the hiring of an individual as pastor, but can at any time also decide to fire him. There is no appeal to their decision. The result is that a pastor must tread a fine line in order not to offend any majority of the congregation. Often he must labor under great tension in that regard. It makes for a very difficult, often impossible, ministry.

Another great danger of independentism is that each member easily begins to do "what is right in his own eyes." That is understandable too. If churches insist on remaining independent for fear of losing some of their freedom to do as they think is right, then members within the congregation will do the same. In independent churches there is the real danger of failing to emphasize proper unity, a unity based on truth, of the body of Jesus Christ. Soon each member will confess whatever he himself determines is right. He begins to live in whatever way *he* thinks will serve God. He will not have others give direction or advice.

Before long, the congregation has many differing doctrinal positions. It has many differing and conflicting life styles. None dare to speak against another. There is a fear of exercising Christian discipline. This is especially true for very small congregations—and many independent churches are small. There is the fear of losing members. So, to retain current membership, each is allowed to do what is right in his own sight.

The second great danger would be the lack of stability with no opportunity to bring appeals to another body nor seek the assistance of others.

The fact is that with one's sinful flesh, disagreements are almost inevitable. There are personality clashes. There can be disagreement on doctrinal issues. There can be differences of

opinion concerning one's walk. Often such disagreements can split the congregation—perhaps even bring its dissolution.

Discipline, if it is practiced, often is initiated by elders but then ultimately decided by majority vote of the congregation itself. Nor is there opportunity to appeal what may be a wrong done to the individual.

Ministers in these congregations must ever seek to retain the favor of a majority of the congregation—or he could simply be voted out of office. The vote need not necessarily be on doctrinal issues—it could merely be personality clash. One would think that such a situation would make the ministry of the Word very difficult indeed.

Then there are those areas of labor which virtually require the cooperation of congregations. There are such things which many can do together in which the individual congregation can not do by itself. The danger, then, is that small independent congregations neglect part of the work of the church since these can not do this on their own. In maintaining independence, the church fails to honor the Word of Christ when He prays for the oneness of His church.

That work may involve the question of the mercies of Christ. Though independent churches can indeed find opportunities to help others, still such assistance can easily be neglected. If there is isolation which often follows independency, then there is not a great desire always to help others either. If the broader unity of the body of Christ is ignored, benevolence can also fail.

The labor of missions becomes impossible especially for smaller congregations. A large but independent church can call and support missionaries on its own. Most independent churches remain small. These can contribute to the support of a missionary together with other churches. But that would in fact be a contradiction of their idea of independency. If one refuses to be part of a federation—thus manifesting the unity for which Christ prayed, how can then such unity be exercised in cooperating with others in mission work? Or would such a congregation support an independent mission society which works outside of the instituted church? Indeed, and independent congregation would find it difficult to carry out this work on its own. But if it worked together with other churches, it would in fact be practicing a kind of federation which presumably they had renounced.

Independency has as its fruit that a congregation may find it difficult to obtain a minister who is in harmony with its own doctrinal position. They must look to independent seminaries or



seminaries of other denominations for the men they need. Or they must call a man from another independent congregation or from another denomination. Or they must hire a man who “candidates,” seeking a position in this church. The concept of cooperating with other like-minded churches to establish and maintain a seminary to train men for ministry in their own congregation, is impossible. Yet this is another essential element in order that the unity and the doctrinal purity of the church be maintained.

One might add that often there can be lack of fellowship between ministers of the Word. In the denomination, there is the opportunity to speak together, work on projects together, encourage one another. But in an independent congregation, there can often be a sense of loneliness because opportunities of fellowship are few.

It is the calling of the church to seek the unity for which Christ prayed in John 17. That unity can not be based on the “lowest common denominator.” It is rather a unity which reflects the unity between Christ and His Father—unity based on the truth. Unity is not only a requirement for each local congregation within its own membership—but must also be sought of those churches like-minded one with another. It is that unity which is the strength of the Protestant Reformed Churches. Let us guard, therefore, on the one hand against unity apart from truth; but on the other hand, let us ever be mindful of the requirements of Christ set forth in John 17.