

Sinode vs Sinodokrasie

In die Maart tot April 1991 uitgawe van *The Outlook* het dr. Lester de Koster in drie artikels sy redes gegee waarom kongregasionalisme (independentisme) gereformeerd is, en waarom hy meerdere vergaderings wat bindende uitsprake maak verwerp, onder die titel "Synod-ocracy: cause and cure"

Prof. David Engelsma het daarop geantwoord in drie artikels in die *Standard Bearer*, vol.68, nr.9-11, onder die titel, "Church Unity, Reformed Synods, and Independency".

Hier heel onder het ek die verwysings gegee waar hierdie twee reekse artikels afgelaai en gelees kan word. Hier volg nou eers 'n paar aanhalings uit albei standpunte, en dan volg daar so paar opmerkings van my kant af:

A. Synodocracy, dr. Lester de Koster

"These articles are addressed to those who perceive that the health of a whole civilization depends, finally, upon the orthodoxy of its churches. And that the orthodoxy of the churches depends, as the Reformation was fought to demonstrate, upon the realization of an immediate responsibility to the Word of the Lord, without the intervention of Pope, bishop, priest, classis or synod or bureaucracy. There is unmistakable correlation between the decay of biblical authority in the churches, reflected among us in what I shall call synod-ocracy, and the collapse of public morality on the streets. Calvinist history testifies to that."

"Indeed synodocracy shows up most persistently in the denominational tax called the "quota system." If ever a Luther demanded liberation for the churches from the tax called indulgences, we need another Brother Martin now to liberate the local congregation from the tax called quotas. If ever a Calvin railed against the abuses of councils, we need now awake to what synodocracy is doing in the CRC. Ironic, isn't it, that to Luther at Worms the Bishops said, "Recant!" while to your congregation, the 'bishops' of classis and synod say, "Pay up!" Birds of a feather! And what was Luther's or Calvin's reply? "Show me from Scripture!" It must be our position again! There will be no true freedom from synodocracy among us until the churches say, "Show us from the Scripture!" over edicts which synods lay upon their backs. "Show us" where the Word authorizes synods to open church office to women! "Show us" where the Word authorizes synods to levy taxes upon the churches! "Show us" where the Word gives authority to the Church Order. The day such echoes of the Reformation are heard from your congregation in chorus with many others will be the dawn of liberation for the CRC. And you will serve the Lord better by bringing that day to pass in the denomination than by running away!"

"And by now you are reminded of another sinodical denigration of biblical authority among us, done in '88. That synod decreed that the evolutionary theory of man's descent from the animal is, mind you, quite in harmony with Genesis and at home in our Confessions! And do you recall the aftershock? From then on, parents and consistories lost effective control over every form of evolutionary fantasy enunciated in school and congregation. You want a school board to protect your children against Darwin? Who are you? Synod approves! You want Genesis preached as literal Truth? Who are you? Synod gives its imprimatur to passing the Bible by. Heresy on sinodical holiday. Sinodocracy is recipe for anarchy! And anarchy flourishes among us! Anything can be said with impunity and is. Shocking denial of Bible and Confession appears in print. You expect some disciplinary reaction? There is none! When authority is usurped by sinods, there is left an authority vacuum in the local congregation. Exactly what Geneva, for example, well understood. If the Bible is to be the authority in the local

congregation, then neither Pope, nor council nor synod can tyrannize over the local church. So it must come to be among us again, if spreading anarchy is to be curbed."

"How can churches thinking themselves wrought in the heritage of Luther and Calvin some crawling on hand and knee, pleading to be heard by the new synodocratic bishop? And when turned rudely away, go back to bathing their knees for yet another appeal? What can be done? Quite simply, a return to the heritage we have let slip from the churches' fingers."

"The challenge which the Lord is using synodocracy to lay upon your consistory table is simply this: you are the church; can you act like it? Don't look elsewhere for the source or the cure of our problems. Cartoon character Pogo was right, you know, "We have found the enemy, and he is us!" The failure of nerve is ours. The cure can be ours. Right here, and now."

"Regain control over, so you can accept responsibility for, the use of your church's money. The quota system makes this impossible. Support a body only what your congregation believes in and acquires strict accountability for. Let individuals support what they can in good conscience."

"The key to the knowledge of God is obedience," said De Koster. "In short, the pulpit says here's the Word of God, do it, and the result is the knowledge of God. Jesus says, if you continue in my word, then you are my disciples indeed, and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. That does not require a classis or a synod. It requires a pulpit, it requires elders, it's helped by deacons, and a congregation that is prepared to do the Word of God."

"I cannot see that the congregation needs more than these simple principles," said De Koster. "There are all kinds of forms of keeping together without creating a classis that starts to hand down law. A classis doesn't have the marks of the church. You can't serve communion at a classis, not legitimately. There's no consistory there. So I say, how does it happen that a body that doesn't have the marks of the church gives orders to a body that does?"

B. Reformed Synods, prof. David Engelsma

"Two conditions must be present in the church of Christ for the balance of Reformed church polity to succeed. Where these two conditions are not present a Reformed church polity cannot long last. The history of the church is often characterized by a (sometimes wild) swinging of the pendulum from one extreme to the other. The proper balance can be maintained only when, in the first place, those within the church are willing **to submit to the instruction and direction of Scripture**. This must be emphasized because submission to Scripture is submission to Christ Himself who is the Head and Sovereign in the church. Church government is nothing but an implementation of Christ's rule in the church. The proper balance can be maintained in the second place, only when within the church is found **a mutual trust among the members**. Only when there is mutual trust and a mutual desire to seek the welfare of the church will Reformed church government be observed and maintained. Such church government as Scripture requires is not something which can be imposed upon a church; nor is it something which will work itself out on its own power; nor can even the strictest observance of rules bring it about. Trust is the key element. Without it all fails."

"This is the Reformed tradition. The great Dutch authority on Reformed church government, Dr. H. Bouwman, expresses this tradition when he writes, "The theory of the **absolute** sovereignty of the individual churches has always been opposed by the Reformed" (*Gereformeerd Kerkrecht*, Vol. 2, 1934, p. 15; my translation of the Dutch). Bouwman goes on to assert that the Reformed view of the life together of the churches of Christ is that the local church subjects herself to the decisions of the broader assembly. Bouwman then observes:

Such a subordination is not the introduction of a hierarchy in the church, but a subjecting of itself (on the part of the local church-DJE) to the yoke of Christ, a practising of the unity of the body of Christ, and a seeking of the maintenance of Christ's kingship (Geref. Kerk., Vol. 2, p. 66).

It is the independent churches, mostly Baptist, that deny the binding character of the decisions of synods or councils, as Article 26 of their Savoy Declaration states: "These Synods so assembled are not intrusted with any Church Power properly so called, or with any Jurisdiction over the Churches themselves, to exercise any Censures, either over any Churches or Persons, or to impose their determinations on the Churches or Officers."

The Reformed churches held the decisions of the Synod of Dordt to be binding upon all the churches. It was the Arminians who repudiated the idea of denominational authority and of binding synodical decisions."

"Often synods have themselves to blame for the violent reaction against synodical authority and for the disregard of synodical decisions. They infringe upon the authority that Christ has given to the consistory. They ride roughshod over the church order. Worst of all, **they make decisions that conflict with Scripture and deviate from the confessions**. These decisions they then attempt to bind upon the congregations. Thus synods, intended to express and safeguard the unity of the churches, destroy the unity of the churches. But the reaction against this abuse of authority that consists of rejecting synodical authority altogether is **no better**. It also is destructive of the unity of the church of Christ."

"There is evidence in the New Testament of such covenantal, federative oneness among the many congregations. There was a bond among all the New Testament congregations that bound one doctrine upon them all and that guarded against the intrusion of false doctrine. With specific reference to the doctrine concerning marriage, divorce, and remarriage, the apostle wrote in [I Corinthians 7:17](#), "And so ordain I in all churches."

There was a bond that bound one order of public worship on all the churches. In [I Corinthians 14:33](#), the apostle declared concerning certain rules for worship that he was laying down for the Corinthian church, "God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints." The next verse makes plain that one rule making for peace that God authors in all the churches alike is that "your women keep silence in the churches" inasmuch as they are to be "under obedience" (v. 34). When, therefore, the Christian Reformed Church, having decided that women may be preachers and ruling elders, **attached the stipulation that sections of the denomination were permitted to exclude women from these offices, they added the sin of dividing the church to the sin of disobeying Christ's prohibition against female ministers and elders. A denomination must have one church order whose rules, especially its rules concerning the offices, bind all alike.**

There was a bond that bound all the churches of the apostolic era to help each other materially. There is in the New Testament *diaconal* indication of federation. In [II Corinthians 8](#) and 9 it is not so much the point that the other congregations ought to help the needy

church in Jerusalem as it is that this help is "fellowship" ([II Cor. 8:4](#)). It is in the unity of the church that the prosperous congregations share in the lack of the needy church and that the needy church shares in the abundance of the congregations that are well-off.

The churches set before us in the New Testament were not independent, but united. Although they were autonomous, they were subject in important respects to an authority that was over them all. That which united them externally and organizationally and that which governed them was the office of the apostle. That office is no more. But the power to unite the churches institutionally and the common authority over all the churches remain. These now reside in the churches themselves, and the churches exercise this power and this authority by the synod."

"It is not the case, therefore, that membership in a denomination is purely a voluntary matter for a congregation. It is true that the congregation freely joins herself to the denomination of like-minded churches. But it is also true that she does this by virtue of the Spirit's working within her to obey His command to seek the unity of the church. Membership in a denomination is a duty and a necessity for the local church, as membership in a local church is a duty and necessity for the individual believer.

Refusal by a congregation is visited by God with judgments. These are the "perils of independency." The independent congregation is tyrannized by a lordly pastor. Or, congregation and minister fall into the hands of dictatorial elders. If the church escapes these disasters, she is liable to be torn apart by internal strife, since there is no remedy for local troubles in appeal to broader assemblies. The independent church deprives herself of the safety of the multitude of counsellors (cf. [Prov. 11:14](#)). Often, when the dominant minister retires or dies, the church is at a loss where to find a good, well-trained pastor. It is common that the independent church is so dependent upon a particular, gifted preacher that the church virtually passes away with him. There is, besides, the danger that the church turns in upon herself, concentrating all her attention and energies upon herself, as though the kingdom of Christ were no broader than this one congregation.

But is there not the equally great, or even greater, danger of the hierarchy and apostasy of synod? And does this not spell the ruin of all the churches in the denomination? Our English correspondent raises this question, not so much because of his own fear of synod (for he confesses that he is "strongly persuaded that only connectionalism leading to synod is Scriptural") as because of the anti-synodical sentiment that is afoot today.

There are curious misconceptions about the Reformed synod in our day. One is that synod is inherently an evil or the threat of evil. On the contrary, the rule is that the synod is a good thing. Such was the Jerusalem synod. The effect of the Jerusalem assembly upon the churches was beneficial: "And so were the churches established in the faith, and increased in number daily" ([Acts 16:5](#)). Such were the ecumenical synods that confessed the truths of the Trinity and of the Person and natures of Christ against pernicious heresies. Such was the Synod of Dordt. I myself have seen broader assemblies rescue beleaguered pastors; fl save" sorely troubled congregations; deliver wronged and oppressed saints; uphold faithful consistories that were attacked by mistaken or wicked members of the congregation; and restore, or maintain, peace in the denomination by wise, biblical judgments on issues of controversy.

To be sure, synod is subject to the evil of hierarchy. But this is **the abuse of the synod, not its necessary quality**. The consistory of the local church is also liable to become hierarchical, as is the individual pastor or elder. But no Reformed man for this reason repudiates consistories or pastors or elders.

Another curious notion that gains currency is that synods become apostate overnight apart from the apostasy of the churches in the denomination. Thus, suddenly, the "good" congregations are confronted by the "evil" synod that has materialized out of nowhere. This is pure myth. Synods that set aside the authority of Scripture and the Reformed confessions, adopt false doctrines, and approve unrighteous behavior only show that the churches of these denominations have been falling away from Christ for a long time. After all, where do the ministers and elders that make up the erring synods come from? From the local congregations. **And all the congregations share responsibility for the falling away of the denomination from the truth. At the very least, they tolerated the departure.**

The truth of this is illustrated in the issue that now threatens to split the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), the ordination of women as ministers and elders. Conservatives excoriate the synod of 1990 as an evil synod for approving the ordination of women to the offices of minister and elder. But already 35 years ago the CRC approved women voting at the congregational meeting. This **is rule in the church by women and a concession to the spirit of feminism in the world.** In 1978 the CRC approved the ordination of women to the **office of deacon.** This too is rule in the church by women. The decision to ordain women as ministers and elders is the inevitable end of a long process. All the congregations have been well aware of this process and were involved in it. **All are responsible for it.**

This leads to the interesting question with which our correspondent in England closes: "Just suppose that the synod of the Protestant Reformed Churches became corrupt and handed down a decision contrary to the Word of God. I assume that you are going to tell me that local presbyteries and local churches need not, indeed must not, accept such decisions. That turns your local churches into independents, does it not?"

No synod of the PRC is going to become apostate, so that it decrees unrighteous decrees, apart from a long history of gradually increasing unfaithfulness on the part of the congregations themselves. Against this, every congregation, every pastor, every consistory member, and every church member is called by Christ to fight daily, in every lawful way. God grant that we are doing this!

If a synod of the PRC should make a decision that corrupts the gospel or transgresses the law, there are certain actions that the faithful congregation may not take. She may not form a "little church within the church" with other faithful congregations. Then she stays in the now apostate denomination, but tries to live her own separate life within the organization of the denomination. **This makes a mockery of the denominational bond, that is, of the unity of Christ's church.** Nor may she publicly agitate against the decision, stirring up opposition against it wherever she can. This is forbidden by Article 31 of the church order of the PRC, the venerable church order of Dordt. It is revolution in the sphere of the church.

Certainly the faithful people of God will never accept decisions that contradict the Holy Scriptures and that approve wickedness, even though these decisions are adopted by synod. Their sole recourse is to protest the evil decision to synod. And if synod on behalf of the denomination **upholds the evil decision**, the faithful congregations must **sever** their connection with the PRC.

This does not turn them into independents. For as soon as possible, they will either establish a new denomination on the basis of the Word of God and the Reformed confessions or they will unite with an existing denomination of faithful Reformed churches.

They must. They cannot do otherwise. **For it is Reformed to seek the unity of the church."**

Opmerkings:

1. Ek dink dr. de Koster spreek wesentlike probleme aan van die HUIDIGE funksionering van 'kerkverband en sinode' waarmee ons die afgelope dekades duidelik kan identifiseer, lees die artikels deeglik asb. My kritiek: hy gaan ongelukkig nie in op die belangrikste skrifgedeelte wat die kwessie van meerdere vergaderings se bindende besluite aanspreek nie, nl. Hand.15, en dit is 'n groot leemte wat hy moet beantwoord.
2. In die lig van die eerste aanhaling onder die 'Reformed Synods' afdeling (B), die volgende opmerking: die probleem is nie om bande te soek met ander gemeentes en saam besluite te neem op grond van Skrif en belydenis in meerdere vergadering nie, maar eerder met 'wie' jy bande soek en saam besluite neem, d.w.s.
 - a. wat is kerke/ampsdraers/gemeentes se Skrifbeskouing (2 Tim.2:15; 3:15-17) ?,
 - b. buig hul almal afsonderlik en saam met al die gemeentes onvoorwaardelik voor Christus en sy Woord (Ef.1:22; 17:11), en
 - c. is daar wedersydse vertrouwe en liefde vir mekaar in Christus ?
3. Dit blyk *tans* die beste weg, ja, die beste 'kerklike weg' tot bybelse reformasie van ons kerke, en juis om die eenheid van sy kerke orals te dien in Christus, om te *begin* met die gereformeerde independentistiese kerkregeringsvorm, met die doel om deur die Here se genade by die gereformeerde presbiteriale kerkregeringsvorm *uit te kom*, soos plaaslike gemeentes mekaar op grondvlak vind om Skrif en belydenis, in leer, diens en kerkregering.
4. Let wel: ek staan nie independentisme op sig self voor nie (want dit is 'n doel op sig self, om daarin te bly en tevrede te wees), maar independenties as 'n weg van wesentlike kerklike reformasie, soeke na **ware** kerklike geloofseenheid, en nie 'n valse lippediens (valse verklarings) wat van 'bo-af' geforseer word deur allerlei kerklike grense op papier en betekenislose besluite nie.
5. En vir hulle wat meen 'gereformeerde independentiste 'skeur' die kerk, a) die *hoeveeldheid* kerklike vergaderings en veral 'sinodes' word nêrens gevind in die Belydenis nie, en is daarom nie 'n belydenissaak nie, en, b) in NGB art.29 bely ons: "Verder is hierdie heilige kerk nie geleë in, gebonde aan of bepaal tot 'n sekere plek of sekere persone (en wil ek byvoeg – sekere meerdere vergaderings nie -slc), maar dit is oor die hele wêreld versprei en verstrooi. Tog is dit met hart en wil en deur die krag van die geloof in een en dieselfde Gees saamgevoeg en verenig."
6. Laasgenoemde is die ware ekumene, die ware eenheid van Christus se kerke, wat ware plaaslike kerke moet najaag, wêreldwyd.
7. Ons moet altyd die woorde van Calvyn onthou, as ons verwyte van kerkskeuring en partyskappe wil rondslinger: "Die broederlike liefde is egter so nou aan die eenstemmigheid in die geloof verbind dat laasgenoemde die begin en end van eersgenoemde is." Alles, al ons vergaderings en kerkwees, word bepaal of dit 'in Christus' is, en weer in Calvyn se woorde, met verwysing na Paulus in Fil.2:2-5, skryf hy: "Daarmee gee hy te kenne dat iets wat sonder die Woord van die Here gebeur, nie die eensgesindheid van gelowiges is nie maar 'n kliek van goddeloses." [IV.2.5]

Hier is die 2 reekse artikels:

A. Synodocracy, dr. Lester de Koster

Synod-ocracy: causes and cure (1)

<http://proregno.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/synodocracy-1.pdf>

Synod-ocracy: causes and cure (2)

<http://proregno.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/synodocracy-2.pdf>

Synod-ocracy: causes and cure (3)

<http://proregno.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/synodocracy-3.pdf>

Sien ook: <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/reformed/archive95/nr95-010.txt>

B. Reformed Synods, prof. David Engelsma

- Church Unity, Reformed Synods, and Independency (1)

http://sb.rfpa.org/index2.cfm?mode=narrow&volume=68&issue=329&article=2975&book=0&search=The%20Binding%20Decisions%20of%20a%20Reformed%20Synod%20&page=1&chapter=0&text_search=0

- Church Unity, Reformed Synods, and Independency (2)

http://sb.rfpa.org/index2.cfm?mode=narrow&volume=68&issue=328&book=0&search=The%20Binding%20Decisions%20of%20a%20Reformed%20Synod%20&page=1&chapter=0&text_search=0

- Church Unity, Reformed Synods, and Independency (3)

http://sb.rfpa.org/index2.cfm?mode=narrow&volume=68&issue=327&article=2951&book=0&search=The%20Binding%20Decisions%20of%20a%20Reformed%20Synod%20&page=1&chapter=0&text_search=0

- The Binding Decisions of a Reformed Synod (vol.67, nr.17)

http://sb.rfpa.org/index2.cfm?mode=narrow&volume=67&issue=344&article=3143&book=0&search=The%20Binding%20Decisions%20of%20a%20Reformed%20Synod%20&page=1&chapter=0&text_search=0