

**Church and Covenant:
Theological Resources for Divided Denominations**

In the face of growing divisions between their conservative and liberal wings, how should mainline churches think about the unity of the church? In recent years, proposed solutions to mainline crises have invoked the idea of “covenant.” For example, the PCUSA Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church started its work by covenanting that, amid all their differences, they would hold together in prayer, worship, the reading of Scripture, and intense listening.¹ More prominently, in 2006 the Archbishop of Canterbury proposed a covenant for the members of the Anglican communion in an attempt to restore unity and trust after the ordination of Gene Robinson as bishop of New Hampshire.²

In this book, I too suggest the notion of “covenant” as the basis for the church’s unity. However, in contrast to the covenants I have mentioned above, I will forward this covenant not as a human concept – a covenant made between church members, congregations, or, as in the case of the Anglican covenant, national churches – but as of divine making. I will explore covenant from the perspective of the ecclesiology of the church in which I grew up, the Netherlands Reformed Church (NRC), the national church of the Netherlands. Like American mainline churches, the NRC counts among its members both liberals and conservatives, groups

¹ *A Season of Discernment: The Final Report of the Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church, as approved by the 217th General Assembly (2006)* (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Church (USA), 51.

² “The Challenge and Hope of Being an Anglican Today: A Reflection for the Bishops, Clergy and Faithful of the Anglican Communion,” a statement by Roman Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, released by the Archbishop’s office on June 27, 2006.

with serious theological differences.³ Even the topics they have discussed over the past few decades have been similar to those in American churches – for example, homosexuality and the interpretation of Scripture. However, given the concept of a divine covenant as the basis for the church’s unity, liberals and conservatives in the NRC continued to accept each other as members of the same church. The church membership of the other theological camp was not at stake, because the membership of all rests not on a human choice but on a divine one, expressed in baptism: “You did not choose me but I chose you” (John 15:16). If God chooses the other as a fellow member of the covenant, what right would a group of members have to separate from the “we” to form a “they”?⁴

In this chapter I will first examine the ecclesiological history of the Netherlands Reformed Church. Thereafter, I will expound this ecclesiology’s principles in five theses. With these five theses I invite my readers to engage in a “thought experiment.” I ask you to step into this different ecclesial world, to see how it fits together, and then, enriched with the new theological concepts and moves you encounter there, to return to the American situation and see whether and how any of these ideas might help us forge unity in the American church.

The Origins of the Ecclesiology of the Netherlands Reformed Church

What makes the NRC’s understanding of the church as based on “divine covenant” all the more interesting is that this national church was itself the result of ecclesial strife. In the nineteenth

³ In this essay I use the terms “liberal” and “conservative” in a technical sense, not as terms of praise or critique. They are descriptive, not evaluative.

⁴ I am applying this statement to the Netherlands Reformed Church, since the church united in 2004 with the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands and the Evangelical–Lutheran Church in the Kingdom of the Netherlands to form the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (see also footnote 5).

century, the NRC seemed to be in the process of losing its theological identity. While some ministers denied the resurrection or the divinity of Christ and another famously came out as a follower of Buddha, the leadership of the church, to whom disciplinary means were available, refused to uphold the church's confessional standards. In this situation the conservative minority found itself divided in two camps concerning how to respond. One camp believed that the church's traditional character ought to be restored by its members' appealing to the church's courts and synod. If this action proved unhelpful, the members would leave the church. This strategy became known as the *juridical way*. For several decades, the juridical camp made its appeals; when they failed, members indeed dissented and formed the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (RCN).

Meanwhile, the other half of the conservative minority followed what was called the *medical way*. Its members believed that as long as the church did not prevent a person from preaching the gospel, that person should never leave the church. They believed that the medicine of the gospel itself could heal a sick church. Although they were weakened by the loss of their conservative allies, members of this group continued to focus on preaching the gospel.

The result seemed predictable. The dissenting RCN could be expected to become a conservative bulwark, with its identity firmly protected by its juridical structure. The larger NRC would grow more and more liberal, with a slim and powerless conservative minority. However, things turned out differently. One hundred years later the dissenting RCN found itself on the far left of the theological spectrum, with its international daughter churches, including the Christian Reformed Church in the U.S.A., declaring themselves in impaired communion with their mother church. Meanwhile, in the 1930s and 1940s a spirit of renewal began to stir the larger NRC. Liberals, middle-of-the-roaders, and conservatives grew discontent with the perceived theological "wishy-washiness" of the church. None of these groups gave up their particular

approach to the gospel, but all came to realize that a church, to be true to its calling, needs to confess boldly its obedience to the gospel of Christ. They found one another in a notion of “covenant” as developed by the people of the *medical way*. In 1951, an overwhelming majority of the national synod accepted a new, Christ-centered church order and restored the church’s ties to its confessional documents. The preaching of the gospel – and that alone – had healed the church.⁵

⁵ Virtually all literature on the modern history of the Netherlands Reformed Church is in Dutch. Good sources for the period under discussion are: A. J. Rasker, *De Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk vanaf 1795*, (7th ed.; Kampen: Kok, 2004); Th. L. Haitjema, *De richtingen in de Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk*, (2d ed.; Wageningen: H. Veenman en Zonen, 1953); Th. L. Haitjema, *De nieuwere geschiedenis van Neerlands Kerk der Hervorming* (Wageningen: H. Veenman en Zonen, 1964); and H. Bartels, *Tien jaren strijd om een belijdende kerk* (Den Haag: Stockum en Zoon, 1946).

The theologians most influential in shaping *medical way* ecclesiology are: Daniël Chantepie de la Saussaye (1818–74), J. H. Gunning (1829–1905), Ph. J. Hoedemaker (1839–1910), Hermann Friedrich Kohlbrugge (1803–1975), O. Noordmans (1871–1956), G. Oorthuys (1876–1959), P. J. Kromsigt (1866–1941), and Th. L. Haitjema (1888–1972). All these theologians wrote in Dutch; most of their works are brochures and articles written in the context of church debates. None of them wrote a systematic ecclesiology; what follows is, therefore, a rational reconstruction of their ecclesiology as implied in these occasional writings.

Interestingly, the twenty-first century saw a repeat of the debate between the juridical way and the *medical way*. When in 2004 the Netherlands Reformed Church united with the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands and the Evangelical–Lutheran Church in the Kingdom of the Netherlands, a small group of conservative congregations and pastors refused to participate; they argued that reuniting with the more liberal RCN would undermine the confessional nature of the NRC. Other conservative congregations and pastors, explicitly referring to the arguments of the nineteenth century *medical way* theologians, did join

The Ecclesiology of the Netherlands Reformed Church

What then is the notion of “covenant” as developed by the *medical way* theologians? I will expound this notion in five theses.

Thesis one: The church and its unity are constituted by God’s covenantal actions, not by human confessions, covenants, agreements, or practices.

The decisive theological premise of the ecclesiology of the *medical way* theologians is that the church and its unity are constituted by God’s covenantal actions, not by human confessions, covenants, agreements, or, as many contemporary American ecclesiologies have it, practices.⁶ It is certainly true that God’s covenant invites a response – a response of faithful confessing, faithful practicing, and so forth. But confessions are no more than that: they are acts of response, of acknowledgement, of acceptance, of gratitude and obedience to God’s prior act. Yet that act is not dependent on human response. The covenant is not annulled even when

the newly formed Protestant Church in the Netherlands. See: W. J. op ’t Hof, ed., *Belijdenis en verbond: Ecclesiologie in de gereformeerde traditie* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2003); W. Verboom, *Om het verbond. Een persoonlijk getuigenis in het zicht van de Protestantse Kerk in Nederland* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2003); Wim Verboom and Chiel van den Berg, “De Protestantse Kerk in Nederland: een dispuut,” in Gerrit de Kruijf, ed., *Theologie in Dispuut* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2004), 111–40.

⁶ Cf. Reinhard Hütter in his essay “The Church,” in James J. Buckley and David S. Yeago, eds., *Knowing the Triune God: The Work of the Spirit in the Practices of the Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001), 23–48: “the church is to be understood as a web of core practices which at the same time mark and constitute the church” (35).

faithful confessing or practicing is absent. By contrast, when the covenant is absent, no confessing or practicing is possible.

In interpreting the divine covenant the advocates of the *medical way* were strongly influenced by their reading of the Old Testament, which is full of stories of Israel's disobedience to the covenant and of God's response of anger, threats, and judgment. Yet nowhere does God's judgment on human disobedience bring an end to the covenant; on the contrary, God's judgments always come *within* the context of the covenant. God judges to entice and implore God's people to return, and God's declaration *Lo-ammi*, "you are not my people" (Hos 1:9), is always immediately followed by the covenantal promises:

Yet the number of the people of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which can be neither measured nor numbered; and in the same place where it was said to them, "You are not my people," it shall be said to them: "Children of the living God." [Hos 1:10]

The people of the *medical way* believed that what holds for God's actions under the old covenant holds no less for God's actions under the new covenant. If God does not respond to human disobedience as annulling the covenant, neither can we human beings.

Thesis Two: The confessing nature of the church is not well safeguarded by a church of the confessions, but only by a confessing church.

If the church is constituted by divine covenant, and not by human confession, what are the implications for the status of the church's confessional documents? The people of the *medical way* were no less intent on assigning to these documents centrality of place in the life of the church than were the people of the juridical way. After all, both groups were theologically conservative. However, the *medical way* theologians believed that juridical strategies could

never lead to the desired outcome. To make their point, they introduced a distinction between “a confessing church” and “a church of the confessions.”⁷ The strategies of the juridical way could lead only to the latter – a church of the confessions, that is, a church which, by majority vote, is bound to its confessional documents. But that majority vote does not mean that the church as a body, the church as a whole, confesses the gospel. It only means that a group of church members attached to the traditional confessional documents has mustered enough votes to establish a majority. A *confessing church*, on the other hand, is more than a church that has some confessional capital in the bank. A confessing church is a church which as a whole, as a body, binds itself gratefully to the gospel and commits itself to confessing this gospel in the face of all powers and principalities of our age. Such confessing is not the outcome of a majority of votes. It is the outcome of a spiritual process in which the church as a whole – left and right, old and young – wrestles for the truth.⁸

Where wrestling for the truth will lead is not certain, of course. After all, the truth of God’s revelation is larger than the formulations of our historical confessional documents; and only God knows what new, undiscovered insights we may receive in our common discernment. This wrestling might lead to something different, something richer, something of greater truth than any of the positions yet proposed. Trying to amass a majority of votes, however well-meaning, is therefore taking a shortcut – one which avoids risking that God may lead us where

⁷ See Th. L. Haitjema, *Gebondenheid en vrijheid in een belijdende kerk* (Wageningen: H. Veenman en zonen, 1929).

⁸ For a similar position defended by a contemporary theologian, see John Webster, “Confession and Confessions,” in *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (London/New York: Continuum, 2005), 69–70, 73 (69–83).

we do not want to go. As Hoedemaker, one of the leaders of the *medical way*, exclaimed: “May God protect us against an orthodox synod.”⁹

For a contemporary example of what this wrestling for the truth looks like, I refer to two articles published in 2004 by *Christian Century* magazine. In these articles, Richard Mouw of Fuller Theological Seminary and Barbara Wheeler of Auburn Theological Seminary explore the current divide in the American mainline church. Mouw, an evangelical, answers the question, “Why do conservatives need liberals?” and Wheeler, theologically liberal, tackles the reverse: “Why do liberals need conservatives?”¹⁰ Both authors, rather than simply holding their party line, speak movingly of how they have been challenged by the “other side.” Wheeler reflects on how her encounters with evangelical culture have strengthened her faith:

Early on in my relationships with evangelicals there was a moment when I knew, and knew that the other knew, that we were hearing the same gospel. I am not proud of the fact that my evangelical friends spoke first, affirming my faith before I affirmed theirs. I’m not proud that I failed to take the initiative, but I’m grateful that they did.¹¹

Mouw recalls a visit by his friend Virginia Mollenkott to Calvin College after her coming out – a visit during which she reminded the audience,

⁹ Quoted in W. Balke, “De kerk bij Hoedemaker, Gunning, Kraemer en Van Ruler,” in: W. Van ’t Spijker, W. Balke, K. Exalto, L. Van Driel, eds., *De Kerk: Wezen, weg en werk van de kerk naar reformatorische opvatting* (Kampen: De Groot Goudriaan, 1990), 208 (202–30).

¹⁰ Barbara G. Wheeler, “Strange Company: Why liberals need conservatives,” and Richard J. Mouw, “Hanging In There: Why conservatives need liberals,” *The Christian Century* 121.1 (January 13, 2004) 18–25.

¹¹ Barbara G. Wheeler, “Strange Company,” 18–19.

You may disagree with everything I have said thus far, but I hope we can at least agree on this: Whatever your sexual orientation, there is nothing – absolutely nothing – that you have to do or agree to before coming to the foot of the cross of Jesus. The only thing any of us has to say as we come to Calvary is this: “Just as I am without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me, /and that thou bidst me come to thee, O Lamb of God, I come.”

Mouw reflects:

I believe that in that plea she was expressing good Reformed doctrine. We do not have to have either our theology or our ethics well worked out before we can come together to Calvary. All we need to know is that we are lost apart from the sovereign grace that was made available through us through the atoning work of Jesus Christ.¹²

Both authors acknowledge that these experiences in themselves do not bridge the theological divide. But they do allow these colleagues, in Mouw’s words, to “journey on as friends – no longer strangers to each other – who are eager to talk to each other, and even to argue passionately with each other about crucial issues.”¹³ They cannot let go of one another, because they have met one another at the foot of the cross of Christ. Leaving the other, turning one’s back to the other, would mean turning one’s back to the crucified Jesus. So they hold on to one

¹² Richard J. Mouw, “Hanging In There,” 25.

¹³ *Ibid.*

another, however uneasy it is in the moment, and however unclear just where their path is going is to lead. That is wrestling for God's truth.¹⁴

Thesis Three: Church discipline is eschatological.

The topic of "confessions" always goes hand-in-hand with another issue – that of church discipline. The theologians of the *medical way* believed in the need for church discipline. At the same time, however, they believed that as much as confessing is not the result of juridical procedures, but instead is an act wrought by the Spirit, the same should be said about church discipline. This premise leads to the third thesis: *church discipline is eschatological*.¹⁵

By this slogan the *medical way* theologians meant at least three things. First, the *criterion* for church discipline is eschatological. After all, there was never a time when church's teaching was infallible; there was never a time when the church's life was morally impeccable. In determining whether someone's life or teaching is in conflict with the church's position, the past holds no gold standard against which we can measure the life or teaching that is under consideration. The golden age is rather in the future: the Kingdom of God. We can only speak provisionally about the eschaton, however; so if the eschaton is the criterion for our disciplinary actions, these actions also need to be provisional. The *medical way* people liked to refer here to Jesus' parable about the kingdom of heaven as a cornfield in which an enemy sowed weeds, and the master of the field did not allow his servants to gather the weeds for fear that the servants

¹⁴ Another example of such contemporary wrestling is the position that the evangelical ethicist Oliver O'Donovan stakes out in his *Church in Crises: The Gay Controversy and the Anglican Community* (Eugene, Or.: Cascade Books, 2008), especially in chapters two and seven.

¹⁵ See O. Noordmans, "Het eschatologisch karakter van kerkelijke tucht," in: *Verzamelde Werken 5* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1984), 82–87.

might also uproot the corn: “Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, ‘Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn’” (Matthew 13:30).

Second, because the Kingdom is not the outcome of our actions but a gift to us from God, so also the real actor in church discipline is God. The church is only the instrument. In our disciplinary actions, therefore, we need to make use of the church’s God-given means in which God expresses judgments, namely, the preaching of the gospel. Church discipline is to take place not in the church court but in the pulpit. As another famous slogan of the *medical way* people goes: “Throw in the Word, and you will see miracles.”

A third comment finally qualifies the preceding two: the church’s disciplinary actions can be more firm and decisive the more immediately they relate to the church’s confession concerning the embodied Word, Jesus Christ. Even while the eschaton has not yet been realized, it has been inaugurated; and even while church discipline happens primarily by way of the preaching of the Word, that Word has become flesh and has lived among us. Here we speak of a reality that is not eschatologically beyond us but that, in the words of the first letter of John, “we have looked at and touched with our own hands” (1 John 1:2). That most Christians can share in the creeds of the early church is precisely because these creeds concern this reality. Here the truth has come to us the most closely, the most concretely present, with a human face and a human voice. Here, therefore, the church can also speak and confess and judge the most clearly.¹⁶ In other words, if disciplinary action is necessary, or even if a church dividing conflict becomes necessary, let it be disciplinary action or a church dividing conflict concerning the confession of Jesus Christ!

¹⁶ See Th. L. Haitjema, *Reorganisatie en Leertucht* (Wageningen: H. Veenman en zonen, 1929), 23.

Thesis Four: God's covenant constitutes the church in its invisible as well as its visible nature, and in its organic as well as in its institutional nature.

The *medical way* people rejected a strong distinction between the visible and the invisible church, or between the church as an institution and the church as the body of Christ. When they spoke of the divine covenant as the basis for the church, they did not mean by the latter an invisible church, a gathering of true believers, as distinct from the crowd seen in a church building on a Sunday morning. Instead, they meant the visible community. That community, including its institutional aspects of officers, church order, congregational meetings, assemblies, and so on, is in its essence not a human association based on human decision or assent, but is constituted by the divine act of covenant.¹⁷

Here again, the *medical way* people were deeply influenced by their reading of the Old Testament. God's covenant with Israel did not apply only to an inner circle of believers, but to all the children of Israel. And within that covenant, God laid claim on the institutional life of Israel no less than on their hearts and minds. So too with the church, the *medical way* theologians believed.

The belief that the church in all its visible and institutional aspects is not of human but divine origin has powerful implications for our understanding of church membership. For the *medical way* people, one is not a member of a church because of *deciding* to join, but because of either being born in the church or being found by it.¹⁸ In this view the *medical way* theologians reflected a strong Augustinian understanding of faith: faith is not a human act, it is a

¹⁷ See P. J. Kromsigt, "Het wezen der kerk," in G. Oorthuys and P. J. Kromsigt, *Grondslag en wezen der kerk* (Wageningen: H. Veenman en zonen, 1933), 81–135.

¹⁸ See especially Ph. J. Hoedemaker, *De kerk en het moderne staatsrecht I: De kerk naar goddelijk recht* (Amsterdam: Hollandsch-Afrikaanse Uitgevers Maatschappij, 1904).

divine gift. They believed that the same holds true for church membership. This belief implies, however, that one cannot leave the church for no longer agreeing with some of its members. If the church were of human origin – if it were a human club or association – its members could leave at will. Human associations are based on the agreement of their members. Not so the church. If you and I are members of the same church, our common membership is not rooted in some agreement that you and I have made, rather, in the fact that God placed both of us there together. If, therefore, you and I at some point come to disagree, neither you nor I can take leave, for the church of which we are both members is not mine or yours or ours, but God's.

American and European sensibilities most strongly clash on this point. American church life is based on a distinction between the invisible and the visible church, between the Church with a capital "C," which can be said to have a lofty, divine origin, and churches with a lower-case "c," the actual institutional expressions of the Church – what Americans call "denominations." As the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer remarked on his visit to the United States about seventy years ago, American churches "do not dare to claim for [themselves] the name of the church of Jesus Christ because this name is too great, too dangerous. The church is something beyond the denominations."¹⁹

The issue is that "denomination" is not a theological concept but a sociological one. And for the church, defining itself sociologically and not theologically has very important consequences for the praxis of American church life. I want to point out two such consequences.

The first is that, because American churches define themselves sociologically, they have no theological resources that can help them in times of disagreement and ecclesial strife. The very fact that Christian communities define themselves as "denominations," that is, as

¹⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes 1929–1936* (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1970), 95.

gatherings based on human assent and agreement, means that once assent and agreement are undermined by dissent and disagreement, there is really no reason – no theological reason – to remain unified. A reference to a recent article in a mainline church magazine, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, illustrates this reality. In the article, a PCUSA minister argues that one should not be upset about congregations and ministers who leave the denomination for other places of service. After all, the argument goes, “Denominations are not the same thing as the Church. They are human constructs that have served us well, but we should not confuse any of them with the Church Proper.”²⁰ Based on this premise, the writer is of course correct. If churches are just *denominations*, why stick together? But on the other hand, why buy the premise? Why believe we are just denominations? What is the *theological* argument for saying so?

The second consequence of a sociological self-understanding of the American church comes in the form of a paradox: By making church communities theologically less important, they become in practice more important, while by making them theologically more important, they become in practice more disputable. For example, a couple of years ago I lived in a small New England town of thirty thousand residents, most of which are Roman Catholic. In this town no fewer than sixteen Protestant denominations are also represented. If people like the above-mentioned writer in the *Presbyterian Outlook* have their way, there may soon be a few more, and based on his argument we should have no theological problem with that potentiality. However, the practical result of even the current situation is that each of these sixteen Protestant denominations has struggled to maintain a physical plant, pay a pastor, support a staff, organize a Sunday school program, do effective outreach, and so on. Although we say denominations are theologically unimportant, since they aren’t the Church Proper, in practice

²⁰ Clay J. Brown, “On Unity: Changing our language... Matching our rhetoric with our real beliefs,” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, (vol. 189, no. 35; October 29, 2007), 32 (28, 32–33).

they consume a disproportionate amount of the Church's – or should I say God's? – money, time, and energy. As I have already said, by making our church communities theologically less important, they become in practice more important. On the other hand, if we were to accept God's covenantal claim on the institutional aspects of our churches – if we were no longer to see these institutional expressions merely sociologically, but instead accord them theological importance – at that very moment we would see their multiplicity not as a justified expression of our diversity but as foreign to the unity of the covenant, as a sin against the body of Christ. By making them theologically more important, we make them in practice more disputable.²¹

Thesis Five: Church shopping is verboten.

When churches define themselves sociologically, as denominations, they have very little built-in theological resistance against the prevailing norms of the surrounding culture, which in the North American context means that very quickly they start behaving economically, as corporations competing for one another's market share. After all, the church building must be maintained, the minister must be paid, and we must have members to pay these bills. Valued economically rather than theologically, church members respond in kind, as consumers – they go church shopping.

However, if church membership is based on covenant rather than on choice, the church membership of local congregations should not be decided by individual preference. This premise is why the new Netherlands Reformed church order of 1951, in which the theological principles of the *medical way* people got organizational hands and feet, adhered to the geographical principle of church membership. The entire country was divided into small geographical areas,

²¹ Cf. here the important "Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity," in Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, *In One Body through the Cross* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003).

each one connected to a local congregation; and the congregation to which one belonged was determined by the geographical area in which one lived. When a person moved, that person's membership was automatically transferred to the congregation of the new place of residence. Thus local church membership was not an expression of individual preference but the practical result (!) of learning to live together as children of the same divine covenant.²² Church shopping became, by principle, *verboden*.

How would it look if American mainline churches adopted a similar attitude toward local church membership? Obviously, the geographical principle would be very difficult to apply to our context – no American church has the nationwide presence that would make this principle practically workable. But American churches *would* be able to apply the underlying theological ideas to our attitudes toward transferring and receiving members.

The article I mentioned earlier from *The Presbyterian Outlook* starts with the following story:

During Faith Presbyterian Church's stated monthly Session meeting, the clerk notes that a letter has been received from Trinity Community Church, requesting that Tom and June Wilson's membership be transferred to Trinity. Session members anxiously eye one another without saying a word. Finally one elder speaks: "I deeply regret that Tom and June have left the faith. You all know what we must do. I move that we deny this request and that we write a letter to Trinity, informing it of this decision and inquiring as to why it is so busy proselytizing Presbyterians."²³

²² On the geographical principle, see especially B. A. M. Luttikhuis, *Een grensgeval, Oorsprong en functie van het territoriale beginsel in het gereformeerde kerkrecht* (Gorichem: Narratio, 1992).

²³ Brown, "On Unity," 28.

The author of the article expects his readers to respond in outrage about the elder's proposal – after all, “in real life, we gladly transfer members from any legitimate Christian body, regardless of our perceived doctrinal differences with them.” He then uses this expected outrage to suggest that, just as we have no problem with a member's transferring out of our denomination, we shouldn't worry about a whole congregations' leaving it.²⁴ If we are members of a church by choice, his point is valid. But if our membership is based on divine covenant, the elders of Faith Presbyterian Church are actually correct.

What if church bodies were to respond to transfer requests like the one described above by saying, “We are sorry, but we cannot do what you ask. Obviously there is something that bothers you about our church. We are committed to working with you on the problem, however difficult and painful doing so might be for all of us. But we are all called to be together as members of the body of Christ; and just as the eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’ (1 Cor 12:21), we cannot let you go”? And similarly, what if our churches were to say to members who want to transfer in on account of conflicts with their parishes of origin – or simply because they prefer our youth program, or Bible study, or the preaching of our pastor – “We are sorry, but we cannot do what you ask. Obviously there is something that bothers you about your own church. We are fully committed to helping you with that problem. If your church is lacking some of the resources we have, we would be interested in seeing whether we can share them. If you have a conflict with your pastor or church leaders, we would like to devote our time and energy to sitting down with you and seeing whether we can facilitate a process of reconciliation. But we cannot help you take the shortcut of leaving your church and avoiding the risk of going where God might lead all of you together”?

²⁴ *Ibid.*

At the least, such polity would ensure that, in order to sustain and grow the economy of our programs and ministries, we would not look to our neighbor churches for new members, but instead to those to whom our attention should be directed in the first place: the unchurched. At the very best – if we are serious about sharing resources and the ministry of reconciliation – such polity could lead us to discover exactly what the author of the *Presbyterian Outlook* article wanted to argue, namely, that we do not make up the church on our own. But, in contrast to the article’s implied theology, we will discover this truth not by denying the church’s visible, institutional nature, but by underscoring it.

The Future of the American Mainline Church

The mainline church seems to be the weakest link in American Christianity. Aging, internally divided, and with a sharply declining membership, many predict that in the next twenty to thirty years we will see its end. The internal differences are simply too serious, the divisions too wide to be bridged. Maybe these voices are correct. If they are, I certainly do not believe what some optimistically add, namely, that while we will see the current mainline churches break apart, we will also see a realignment along conservative and liberal lines rather than denominational lines. This prediction ignores the fact that, for example, conservative Presbyterians are as much *Presbyterians* as they are conservative; and the same holds for Lutherans, Episcopalians, and other denominational adherents of conservative or liberal stripes.

Nonetheless, I believe we need to be open to another possibility. What if God called these dwindling, powerless, and deeply divided churches to teach American Christianity something that it never seems to have internalized: that “being church” is not dependent on human agreements, covenants, or confessions, but only on God’s gracious covenanting actions toward us? Indeed, the theological differences within the mainline churches are serious, and the

divides are wide. They are indeed so serious and wide that no ecclesial “compromise” will smooth them over; no ecclesial “agreements” may bridge the divides. But what if, from God’s perspective, these differences and divisions are not at all about what we take them to be – homosexuality, ordination, Scripture. What if they are rather God’s instruments for bringing us to the point where all our attempts to save the church fail, and we finally turn to the one whose church we are trying to save – Christ? Maybe God’s future for the American mainline church is that it embody, in all its divisions, in all its powerlessness, in all its inability to solve its own problems, what goes to the heart of the gospel: we do not belong to God’s people based on our own willing, choosing, or acting, but on God’s actions.

If America’s mainline church is called to embody this reality, it moves the church away from American *main street* culture. The idea that churches are based on human confessions, agreements, or covenants perfectly matches the American emphasis on freedom and choice. But could this be the place where, more than anywhere else, God indeed calls the American mainline church to go against the cultural grain by embodying, in all its concreteness, the real freedom that is in Christ – the freedom of being chosen, the gift of grace? If so, the “mainline” could become an unexpected blessing for American Christianity.