

Mission Accomplished? Some Dangers in Past-Participle Thinking

by Theodore Plantinga

In our age of pluralism it might make sense to rejoice in the multiplicity of denominations making up the Christian ecclesiastical landscape. But most Christians in the Dutch Reformed tradition instead feel guilty about this fact. They have a feeling that Christians are supposed to be one and united, and that under ideal circumstances their unity would express itself in church organization and governance.

Of course they are also aware that doctrinal disagreements have long stood in the way of Christian unity. But where there is agreement -- especially formal agreement rooted in adherence to the same creedal standards -- there ought to be unity. Yet in the world of the Dutch Reformed churches we find quite a number of competing denominations, all of them somehow claiming allegiance to the so-called Three Forms of Unity, namely, the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Belgic Confession (1561) and the Canons of Dort (1618-19). To complicate the picture somewhat, I should mention that there are also Reformed churches that trace their origin to Germany (such as the RCUS). In the British tradition we find Presbyterian denominations which are Reformed in their theology but rely on the Westminster standards instead of the Three Forms of Unity.

Is the addition of one more denomination to an already lengthy list a matter for congratulations and rejoicing? Many Reformed people think not. And the situation is complicated by what we might call a past-participle problem. Not only is the new denomination (already) Reformed, it is also (already) united, for it calls itself officially the United Reformed Churches in North America (URC). In 1995, before adopting its current name, this group of churches formed a "provisional federation" with the name "Fellowship of Uniting Reformed Churches in North America" (FURC).

First of all, it should be recognized that "reformed" is a past participle and, as such, has long given rise to uneasiness. We often say that a *Reformed* church is a *reforming*, thereby creating the impression that we are constantly on the lookout for ways to change and improve. Yet in fact many Reformed churches are mired in their traditions, with the result that talk of being a *reforming* church breeds cynicism among the younger set. One is reminded of a Biblical warning to the effect that the one eligible to boast is the fellow who is taking his armor off (because the battle has been fought and won), and not the fellow who is putting his armor on (see I Kings 20:11).

The new denomination, made up mainly of people who have broken with the Christian Reformed denomination, officially proclaims itself *united*. What might this mean? One possible meaning is that there is no disharmony or conflict or controversy within. In the case of recent seceders, such a claim would be hard to believe. A second possible meaning is that the denomination bearing the name is the result of a process of church union. The United Church of Canada came into existence in 1926 as a union of churches that had earlier called themselves Presbyterian or Congregational or Methodist. But such is not the case with regard to the URC. In the first stage of their existence as a body, these churches could well have called themselves the "Fellowship of Seceding Reformed Churches in North America." By using the term "uniting" instead, they gave rise to a certain expectation. And so it is fair to ask whether we do not have a past participle problem here, and whether the term "United" is not premature.

Some might argue that a term like "seceding" has negative connotations, whereas "uniting" and "united" seem more positive. I grant that there is something to this argument. But there is precedent in church history for using a term with negative connotations. In 1886 there was a church struggle in the Netherlands, in the denomination to which the churches in question trace their ancestry. The churches involved in the 1886 struggle characterized themselves as "doleerend," that is, sorrowing or lamenting. They had undertaken a course of action that they found regrettable. More specifically, it was their position that it was regrettable that things had come to such a point in the churches that their type of action was deemed necessary. "Doleerend" is a present participle (like "uniting"); it became a noun when the term "doleantie," as a name for this church struggle, came into general use.

Some critics of the United Reformed Churches would probably like to see more of a "doleerend" spirit among them. Two groups, in particular, come to mind. Leaders in Canadian Reformed circles have suggested that the URC folks should form a provisional federation, thereby signaling that they are *on the*

road to church union, as opposed to *having arrived* by having constituted themselves as a denomination. Since the Canadian Reformed regard themselves as the legitimate historical alternative to the Christian Reformed denomination (CRC) and as a continuation of what this denomination used to stand for, it makes sense that Christian Reformed seceders should seek union with them,. But then, to complicate the picture, there is also a denomination known as the Federation of Orthodox Christian Reformed Churches, which is made up of seceders who took their leave of the CRC a decade or two before the current crop. In those circles, too, the question is raised: why do the more recent seceders not seek union with us? And if another round of secessions comes about (public meetings in recent months give us reason to suppose that this may well be the case), will it lead to the establishment of still another small denomination offering itself as a more conservative alternative to the CRC?

Book titles today have to be short and snappy. There was a time when the title page of a book gave quite some indication of the content and thesis. The names used by churches and denominations are also short. If they could be longer, the use of "united" in a church name could be placed properly in context. Then we might call the new denomination "The Reformed Churches of North America which are *united* in their adherence to revealed truth and to the Reformed confessional standards while lamenting the visible disunity in the ranks of the Reformed believers and doing everything in their power to bring this sad state of affairs to an end." Perhaps a denomination's name needs a footnote.

What disturbs me the most is not the irony in the name of the new denomination but the implicit one-upmanship in the names of so many small denominations. For example, when a congregation or denomination officially calls itself "orthodox," it is implying that some other church is no longer all that orthodox, or has become liberal. The implied charge may well be true, but it hardly seems a gracious act to include the accusation in one's name. Christian college A may consider itself to be more orthodox and more faithful to revealed truth than Christian college B, but it does not send out hints in that direction in the name it adopts for itself.

I would suggest that Reformed churches adopt a practice that is common in some other sectors of Christendom, namely, to relegate denominational adherence to a subtitle, so to speak. A Lutheran congregation usually advertises itself simply as such and then makes its denominational affiliation a secondary matter on its signboard and its letterhead. Couldn't we do the same in the Reformed world? Thus we could have Calvary Reformed Church, affiliated with the CRC, Rehoboth Reformed Church, affiliated with the Canadian Reformed Churches, Immanuel Reformed Church, affiliated with the United

Reformed Churches, Bethel Reformed Church, affiliated with the Reformed Church of America, and so forth.

Such a practice would tend to dispel the notion that there is such a thing as Christian Reformed thinking, or Canadian Reformed theology, and so forth, and would thereby discourage the quest for denominational distinctives -- the quest that leads these separate groups to take measures that will have the effect of setting themselves off from kindred groups. And it would make the process of secession less traumatic: the Trinity Reformed church might one day drop its affiliation with the CRC as a denomination, operate for a while as an independent church, and then affiliate with some other body, while retaining continuity and office-bearers throughout the process. Our current practice leaves some people supposing that denominational membership somehow helps to constitute the very essence and identity of a congregation.

The topic of secession needs some careful analysis if our church life is to remain healthy. This short article is intended as a small contribution to the discussion that must now take place. In the meantime, I wish the United Reformed Churches well: may they seek to serve their Lord in the spirit of the longer title I devised for them. *[END]*