

ADDRESS TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF  
THE ORTHODOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
JUNE 1997

Mr. Moderator, brothers in the Lord Jesus Christ,

First of all I would like to express my appreciation that we may be here to attend part of your General Assembly this year.

We - that are my fellowdelegate Mr. Gerry Nordeman from Burlington, Ont. and myself Rev. John DeGelder, Pastor of the Can. Ref. Church in Smithville, Ont. - we represent in your midst the federation of Canadian Reformed Churches.

We thank you for the invitation sent, and it is my privilege to address you on behalf of our Churches. Our last General Synod, held in Abbotsford BC (1995) decided, among other things, *to acknowledge with gratitude the commitment of the OPC to be faithful to the Scriptures and to defend the Reformed heritage.*

We wish you, as Gen.Assembly in 1997, that under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, you may show the faith and the courage to hold on to the same commitment to be faithful to the Word of God, and to defend the heritage of the Reformation.

As Can.Ref.Churches we have been present in North America for almost 50 years, with the first General Synod held in 1954 in Carman, Manitoba. Most of our members arrived in Canada (some in the States) after the 2nd World War, coming from the Netherlands. In 1944 they had gone through the liberation; a separation from the GKN, as the result of a struggle against unlawful bindings to views beyond Scripture, imposed on them by Synods and other assemblies. At this time we have a little less than 15,000 members over 45 congregations. That's an average of more than 300 per congregation, which shows a pattern remarkably different from the OPC. You have about 21,000 members over 225 congregations, which makes for less than 95 p. congregation.

We maintain ecclesiastical fellowship with various Reformed and Presbyterian Churches in the world, and have been actively involved in the ICRC, right from the beginning.

It is not for the first time that delegates from the Can. Reformed Churches visit and address your Gen.Assembly, just like many of our General Synods have seen and heard delegations of the Orth. Presb. Church. We remember with appreciation the presence of br. Jack. J. Peterson in Abbotsford in 1995. And we have heard in his words the desire to strengthen the bond between our respective Churches, when he said: *Brothers, we want to walk with you and live with you in full ecclesiastical fellowship. After 25 plus years you know us and we know you. Let's make a decision.*

And brothers, I dare say that this visit is of a somewhat different nature than those made in the past. I would say that this time we approach a new and historical moment in the long history of the

contacts between the Orth.Presb.Ch and the Can.Ref.Churches. This year, 1997, it has been 20 years that our Gen.Syn. of Coaldale, Alb., came out with the following declaration:

*Synode decide with thankfulness to recognize the OPC as a true Church of our Lord Jesus Christ as confessed in Art.29 of the Belgic Confession.*

This resulted in what was called "a temporary relationship called ecclesiastical contact" between the OPC and the Can.Ref.Chs. This was, of course, not the beginning of the contacts. As a matter of fact it was in 1962 at the Synod of Hamilton that these contacts were dealt with for the first time on the level of Synod.

Well, since then we have gone together as Churches through a long, and - let's face it - sometimes tedious history of what was called by our Synod Abbotsford: protracted discussions. 35 years of many meetings, discussions, reports, studies, and evaluations. Useless? I don't think so. Actually: if you would take the time and make it an effort to go through all the documents written and dealt with over the years, you would find much interesting and helpful material. So: not useless.

Too long? Yes - definitely. Especially if you look at the effects, the practical results of those efforts over the 35 years since 1962. This is not a proper time and place to go into the details of this history, or to evaluate the results. One of our ministers has gone through all the Acts of our Synods, and put together a little booklet about the various developments in the contacts between our respective churches. In the title he summarizes the outcome of his survey as follows **ONE STEP FORWARD - ONE STEP BACKWARD.**

Well, in this way you can be very active and very busy, but you won't make a lot of progress. That's clear.

And yet, in spite of these long and sometimes difficult discussions between you and us, as well as among each other as Can.Ref.Churches and Churchmembers - none of our Synods ever wanted to give up the declaration of 1977, that the OPC is a true and faithful Church of the Lord Jesus Christ. We have always thankfully recognized the firm stand you have taken in defence of the truth, the reliability, and the authority of God's Holy Word.

We have noted with great respect that it was this love for the Word of God that has motivated you in your decisions concerning your relationship with the C.R.C. We realize how hard this must have been, seeing your old and strong ties with the C.R.C., because of their help and encouragement in the past.

We believe, brothers, that now we have come to an important point, a turning-point in the history of the contacts between you and us. In 1995 our Synod of Abbotsford gave some clear directives to the Committee for Contact with the OPC, expressing the hope that *in this way the protracted discussions between the Can.Ref.Chs and the OPC can be concluded by the establishment of a relationship of Ecclesiastical Fellowship within the next three years so that, the Lord willing, it can be finalized by Synod 1998.*

Well, we believe that in our latest discussions as Committees we have come to an agreement on the matters of the fencing of the Lord's table and confessional membership, that can open the way to the establishment of a relationship as sisterchurches. It is our hope and prayer that now both the Gen. Ass. of the OPC, and the next Gen. Syn. of the Can.Ref.Chs. can accept this agreement and will be willing to establish this Ecclesiastical Fellowship.

And then? Once everything has been nicely settled and arranged we stop? Is the comfortable status of Ecclesiastical Fellowship - is that the "goal"? No - it's not.

Just before I close, let me focus for a minute on the future. Imagine that indeed the Churches decide to establish this formal Ecclesiastical Fellowship. That does not mean that suddenly all our differences disappear. There are differences between the Three Forms of Unity and the Westminster Standards; there are differences between our Church Order and your Form of Church Government. And neither one is ready to give up these important documents. And we don't need to either.

But how important to continue to discuss these differences, so that within the relationship as sister-churches we may build one another up in faith, hope and love. Let the communication continue or even increase. There is so much we can learn from each other. What a challenge to make sure that this Ecclesiastical Fellowship does not become an empty formality.

What often happens is that such a relationship between Churches is just a matter of interest for the narrow circle of "theological leaders", so to speak, and Committee members, but alien and unknown for most of the people in the local congregations. So there we have another challenge: how do we make this Ecclesiastical Fellowship a living reality for the members in our local congregations?

Brothers, what do you think? Is it all worth the effort and the time? I am convinced it is. All over the world the Church of Jesus Christ is under attack in many ways. The battle continues. The numbers are small and the powers of Satan are strong. At the same time: Jesus Christ is gathering His Church from every tribe and nation. And He continues to do so, calling us to be faithful. How do we need each other in the ongoing fight to defend, maintain, and proclaim the truth of the Gospel in our modern world.

Brothers, the Canadian Reformed Churches greet you in the Lord Jesus Christ. We wish you the blessing of our Father in heaven, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit in your work as General Assembly. May the peace of Christ govern your Assembly and your Church.

Thank you.