

SUPPLEMENT IV — (Acts, Art. 50)

REPORT OF THE DEPUTIES APPOINTED BY SYNOD EDMONTON 1965
FOR CONTACT WITH REPRESENTATIVES OF
THE ORTHODOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

To the General Synod of the Canadian Reformed
Churches, convened at Orangeville on November 7, 1968.

Esteemed Brethren,

After due preparation deputies met with The Committee on Ecumenicity and Inter-Church relations of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (O.P.C.) on Oct. 4 and 5, 1966 in the building of the O.P.C. at Rochester, N.Y. and again on Oct. 4 and 5, '67 in the Bethel Canadian Reformed Church at Thornhill, Ont.

At the first meeting the Rev. Messrs. L. de Roy Oliver, Dr. F. Kingsley Elder, Rev. G. Knight, Rev. J. Peterson and Prof. P. Woolley were present from the O.P.C. General Assembly in 1966, and the Rev. D. DeJong, H. Scholten, L. Selles and Mr. W. Wildeboer from the Canadian Reformed Churches.

On request of deputies Rev. Scholten had been appointed by the Regional Synod 1966 of the Can. Ref. Churches in Ontario as a substitute for Rev. A. B. Roukema, who was not able to attend the meetings because of ill health.

At the second series of meetings the same persons were present with the exception of Prof. Woolley who was replaced by Prof. N. Shepherd, and Rev. D. DeJong, whose request to be excused from the meetings because of his departure to Edmonton had been granted. Rev. Scholten acted now as substitute for Rev. DeJong. Recovered, Rev. Roukema was able to attend the meetings.

In the first meeting the reasons why the Can. Ref. Churches had sought contact with the O.P.C. were outlined and the mandate given by the Synod of Edmonton was read. The committee informed deputies that the 33rd General Assembly of the O.P.C. had authorized them to "discuss matters of mutual concern with deputies of the Can. Ref. Churches", which mandate was renewed by the 34th General Assembly. It was decided to use the instruction of the deputies as an agenda for the first series of meetings. For the second series it was decided to take as agenda the points which deputies liked to see discussed from their side. They concerned: "the function of the confessional standards in the O.P.C. and the extent of the binding to the text of these standards;" "the membership of the O.P.C. in the Reformed Ecumenical Synod"; "correspondence with other churches and rules for correspondence;" "the changes in the revision of the Form of Government of the O.P.C. which is in preparation."

A. The first point of the instruction which deputies received from the Synod of Edmonton reads: "to advise the O.P.C. via her deputies concerning our Confession and Churchgovernment and to inquire whether the O.P.C. can accept the Can. Ref. Churches on the basis of this Confession and Churchgovernment as true churches of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ."

The information meant in this point was provided to the committee by means of an historical survey of the establishment of our churches in Canada and the U.S.A., the introduction of the standards of faith of the Can. Ref. Churches and the Churchorder accepted by them.

A number of questions were raised by the committee.

1. Did the teaching of Rev. B. Telder in the Netherlands concerning

the intermediate state cause a controversy in the Can. Ref. Churches?

Our reply was that, though everyone does not think alike on the matter no controversy arose. At the second series of meetings a survey of the present troubles and divisions in the Dutch sister-churches was given by deputies on request of the committee.

2. Do the Can. Ref. Churches have any troubles in their midst with respect to the infallibility of the Scriptures and the historicity of the facts related in them?

Our reply could be that no difficulties of this nature exist in our churches.

3. Do the Can. Ref. Churches demand a verbal binding to the Confessions in their Form or Subscription?

In answer to this question the subscription form was read and the stipulations on it discussed.

4. Are the major assemblies in the Can. Ref. Churches exclusively broader or also higher assemblies.

Our reply was: exclusively broader assemblies.

5. Are the Can. Ref. Churches with the O.P.C. of the opinion that in the major assemblies the church is gathered together?

Our reply is that while the church is the congregation of true Christian believers according to our Confession, the church-assemblies are meetings of the duly represented delegates of the churches.

6. The O.P.C. acknowledges only as binding such decisions as are in complete agreement with the word of the Scriptures or with the constitution of the church based on the Word of God. Does this also hold for the Can. Ref. Churches or are "the lower and higher courts" (classis, synods) entitled according to Can. Ref. Church polity to lay down binding rules for the churches?

Our reply is that the churches in their federative structure committed themselves to abide by decisions taken in good order (Art. 30 C.O.) and in harmony with the Scriptures and the Churchorder (Art. 31 C.O.).

The committee informs us that in matters which do not directly concern the contents of Scripture and Confession the General Assembly appoints study committees and submits a report to the churches which is generally deemed acceptable, while the churches are free to implement the recommendations of such a report. Think e.g. of the report on membership of the Lodges. The result can be that different practises on a certain point are found in the local churches.

The question whether the O.P.C. can accept our churches as true churches on the basis of her standards and church-government was not discussed as it was no question for the committee but its point of departure.

B. The points 3 and 4 of the instruction which deputies received from the Synod of Edmonton read: "to indicate to the O.P.C. via her deputies our concept of church correspondence and to familiarize ourselves with the viewpoint of the O.P.C. in this matter." "To discuss the correspondence with other denominations at present maintained by the O.P.C. and by our Churches."

1. The rules of correspondence with foreign churches as adopted by the Synod of Hamilton 1962 are read by deputies. The committee takes exception to the first rule: "to see to it that there are no deviations from the Reformed confessions in doctrine, liturgy, churchgovernment and discipline." This rule implies according to the committee that the corresponding churches accept and exercise

a kind of supervision over one another.

As to the rule that "the corresponding churches admit each other's ministers to conduct the church services, preach the Word and administer the sacraments," O.P.C. ministers will preach the Word wherever and whenever a pulpit is opened for them. The custom dates back to the time that the Word of God was scarce in the country and ministers faithful to the Word of God were invited to lead the services in denominations which hungered for the bread of life.

The rule: "to render account to each other in case of correspondence with a third party" is not too favourably received either since it tends to restrict the freedom of the church.

The O.P.C. did never adopt certain rules for correspondence. This does not mean that the O.P.C. is opposed to all rules for this purpose.

The suggestion was however made in the first series of meetings from the side of the committee that, if sufficient agreement existed between the Can. Ref. Churches and the O.P.C., the two churches should enter into complete church-union. The location of the churches, with exception of the Am. Ref. Church of Grand Rapids on different sides of the border between the U.S.A. and Canada is not considered a hindrance for such a union by the committee. In the second series of meetings the committee agreed with deputies that it would be better, if sufficient agreement between the churches existed, to establish church-correspondence.

2. The committee informed deputies that a distinction is made in the O.P.C. between "fraternal relations" and "full correspondence". The O.P.C. maintains fraternal relations with several Reformed and Presbyterian Churches a.o. the Ref. Presb. Church of North America (Covenanter), several Free Scottish Churches in Canada, the Ref. Presb. Church of Ireland, the Free Church of Scotland.

The O.P.C. entered into a relation of full correspondence as sister-churches with the (synodical) Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, the Reformed Churches of Australia and the Reformed Churches of New Zealand. The rules of the Synodical churches were submitted to and accepted by the O.P.C. as the rules for this particular correspondence.

3. The committee can understand the objections which deputies have against the correspondence which the O.P.C. maintains with the Synodical churches in Holland. The committee pointed out however that asked for advice by these churches the O.P.C. protested strongly against the intended joining of the World Council of Christian Churches and against the decision to admit women to all the offices in the church.

If the (synodical) Reformed Churches act against this advice the O.P.C. could very well decide to discontinue the correspondence.

4. Objections are also brought forward by deputies against the membership of the O.P.C. in the Reformed Ecumenical Synod.

The R.E.S. backed up the doctrinal decisions which led to a split in the Netherlands. It took not always a firm stand against the W.C.C.C. and accepted two churches as members which belonged to the W.C.C.C. The (Synodical) Reformed Churches play a leading role in the R.E.S.

Though the committee can understand our objections it is pointed out that the O.P.C. had nothing to do with the decisions of the R.E.S. concerning the doctrinal issues of '44 as the O.P.C. was not a member of the R.E.S. when it took its stand in '46. It is furthermore stated that the R.E.S., though taking not too firm a stand over against the W.C.C.C. in its first meetings, has seriously warned

against membership of the W.C.C.C. in later years. The development in the R.E.S. will be closely watched by the O.P.C.

C. Point 2 of the mandate of the Synod of Edmonton instructed deputies "to discuss with the deputies of the O.P.C. the differences in Confession and Church-government between the O.P.C. and our churches and to examine these divergences in the light of the Word of God."

The following points were brought up by deputies:

1. The confession of an invisible church, consisting of the whole number of the elect, beside the confession of the visible church consisting of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion and of their children, found in Chapter 25:1, 2 of the Westminster Confession (W.C.). Compare questions 62 and 64 of the Larger Catechism (L.C.).
According to the committee not two separate churches are meant but two aspects of the one holy catholic church. The O.P.C. stress the necessity to join the visible church in its teaching and preaching.
2. The attention of the committee is drawn to it that our Confession of Faith does not speak of "more or less pure churches" as Ch. 25:4 of the W.C. does, but uses the distinction: "true and false church". Is, thus ask deputies, the latter distinction not more scriptural and does the distinction between more and less pure not easily lead to the unscriptural teaching of the pluriformity of the church?
The committee wonders if a basic difference exists between the two distinctions. The Can. Ref. Churches accept that there is a graduation in the degree wherein a church is true or false. And that indeed no basic difference exists appears from paragraph 5 of Ch. 25 of the W.C. which reads: "The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error and some have so degenerated, as to become no Churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan."
3. Chapter 18 of the W.C. speaking of the assurance of grace and salvation reads in paragraph 3: "This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties before he be partaker of it." Comp. L.C. Q 81.
The W.C. according to the committee, does not deny in these words that faith is "a sure knowledge" and "a firm confidence" as confessed in Lord's Day 7 of the Heid. Cat., but speaks of the subjective assurance of faith which is to be distinguished from the commitment to Christ. Reference is made to Ch. 1:16 of the Canons of Dort which may be compared with the confession of the W.C. on this point.
4. Answer 31 of the L.C. reads: "The covenant of grace was made with Christ as the second Adam and in him with all the elect as his seed". Deputies point out that the Can. Ref. Churches cannot accept this confession as scriptural truth. They do agree however with the confession of Answ. 166 of the L.C. which reads: "but infants descending from parents, either both or but one of them professing faith in Christ, and obedience to Him are, in that respect, within the covenant and are to be baptized."
The committee assures that the teaching in the O.P.C. is in agreement with Answ. 166. The Kuyperian thesis of a presumptive regeneration as ground for the baptism of infants has never been accepted in the O.P.C.
5. In connection with a number of rules in Answ. 99 of the L.C. for

the understanding of the 10 commandments, the extensive treatment of these commandments in the L.C., whereby in particular several expressions used in the presentation of the 4th commandment in Answ. 116-121 are questionable and in connection with other objections against answers of the L.C. the question is raised by deputies in how far in particular the L.C. is binding in the O.P.C. The committee answers that though all the standards of the O.P.C. are binding, the L.C. does not have the place in the O.P.C. which the Heid. Cat. has in our churches. The L.C. is not used anymore for preaching purposes. It is also hardly used for catechism instruction. The result is that the L.C. is not too well known among the church members. This is in particular the case in those churches which consist for the greater part of members which came to the church through home-mission work done in their communities. The committee replies in the second place that in the O.P.C. a distinction is made between officebearers who should know and be able to teach and defend the confessions and common believers who want to join the church. Though the latter must be prepared to submit themselves to the instruction of the church, they are admitted to the church on their profession of faith in the Lord Jesus as their Saviour and no complete knowledge of the entire confession nor agreement with each section of it is demanded.

6. The differences in church-government between the O.P.C. and the Canadian Reformed Churches were extensively discussed. The O.P.C. in its Form of Government takes its point of departure in the church universal. The local churches are branches of this universal church. The implication of this view is that the General Assembly is the chief governing body in the church and the authority of the presbytery (classis) is superior to the authority of the session (consistory). As however the O.P.C. accept only those decisions as binding which are directly based on the Word of God or on the Constitution of the church it is not possible that the churches are brought under the power of the major assemblies. The same rule checks also the danger of dominocracy which is present since according to Ch. 4 of the Form of Government (F.O.G.) "the office of the minister is the first in the church both for dignity and usefulness," and since all the ministers are delegated to the major assemblies.

As elders are considered to be "the particular representatives of the people" according to Ch. 5 of the F.O.G. the danger exists that they become the executors of the will of the people. Traces of it are found in Ch. 13: 1, Ch. 15: 1 and Ch. 17 of the F.O.G. A distinction between "judicial" and "administrative" discipline, which is made in Ch. 1 of the Book of Discipline may lead to it that church discipline is not only used to "punish sin" but also as a measure of order.

These and other points showed that considerable differences exist between the two churches in the implementation of the kingship of the Lord Jesus over His church. But as to the great principle of scriptural church-polity: the complete sovereignty of the Lord Jesus, as the Head over His body: the Church, and consequently of the Word of Christ as sole rule for doctrine and life, no difference existed. The committee was well aware that the matter of church-government should remain open for further discussions and the readiness to go farther into it is present.

7. A revision of the Form of Government is in process in the O.P.C.

D. The discussions were held in a brotherly spirit and a basic unity of faith was experienced at the meetings.

This unity which in spite of differences in doctrinal issues, in matters of church-polity and in the historical background and development of the respective churches prevailed, made it a great joy to meet together.

E. The mandate which the Synod of Edmonton gave deputies does not contain the instruction to make recommendations to the churches or to the coming Synod.

This report which in agreement with standard procedure is addressed to the Synod of Orangeville, is respectfully submitted to the churches in the expectation and hope that the churches will overture the major assemblies on this particular matter.

February, 1968.

With brotherly greetings,

A. B. Roukema, Clerk.

H. Scholten

L. Selles, Convener.

W. Wildeboer.

APPENDIX

(To Report of Deputies 1965 — for Contact with the O.P.C.)

SUMMARY OF MEMBERSHIP of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 12-31-1966

| | | | |
|-------------------------------------|--------|------------------------|-------|
| Number of Churches: | 106 | | |
| Number of Chapels (Home Mission) | 10 | | |
| Number of Ministers | 154 | | |
| Number of Members | 13,579 | — Communicant Members: | 8,789 |
| | | Baptized Children | 4,790 |

Presbyteries (Classes) in:

| | |
|--------------------------------|-------------|
| Dakotas | 17 churches |
| New Jersey | 16 churches |
| New York and New England | 14 churches |
| Ohio | 5 churches |
| Philadelphia | 16 churches |
| South | 6 churches |
| Southern California | 12 churches |
| West Coast | 13 churches |
| Wisconsin | 7 churches |

Average Contribution per communicant member: \$199.00