

# REFORMED CHURCH POLITY CONCERNING WITHDRAWAL OF CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

Rev. Dr. R. Dean Anderson (last revised: 24 August 2016)

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## 1. A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE HISTORY

### 1.1 Reformed church polity<sup>1</sup> of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century

Reformed church polity at this time with respect to the treatment of those who withdraw from church membership is best illustrated with reference to a number of decisions taken at ecclesiastical assemblies.

#### 1574 The “Provincial” Synod of Holland convened at Dordrecht<sup>2</sup>

Part. 22. In answer to the question concerning the excommunication of those who have fallen away to the Mennonites: excommunication shall be proceeded to by using the steps proposed at the Synod of Emden.<sup>3</sup>

#### 1578 The National Synod convened at Dordrecht<sup>4</sup>

The situation which led to the following decision came about when certain Reformed ministers intruded into a schism in one of the congregations of the Walloon churches (a separate French-speaking church federation in the Netherlands) and by their own authority started a new congregation. See *part. questions* 49- 51.

Art.9. Those who without having been called and outside the lawful order of the churches gain entry for themselves into the ministry, whether this occurred in congregations where order is already instituted or whether they were called by some private persons among whom no such order exists, shall be admonished by neighbouring office bearers to adhere to the order of the churches, and if they remain disobedient after two such admonitions, the classis shall meet and they shall be declared to be schismatics and itinerants. Those who sit under the preaching of such ministers shall be brotherly admonished and with suitable reasons brought to order.

(For the later revision of this sentence see the decision of Middelburg 1581 below.)

<sup>1</sup> Where, in what follows, the words “church polity” are used, their meaning is almost always restricted to church polity concerning withdrawal of membership.

<sup>2</sup> F.L. Rutgers (ed.) *Acta*, 158. This “provincial” synod acquired a national character and authority.

<sup>3</sup> These are the three well known announcements from the procedure of excommunication in our church order, see the *Acta* of the Synod at Emden 1571, 70-71.

<sup>4</sup> W. van ‘t Spijker (ed.), *Acta*, 145.

### 1579 The Particular Synod of South Holland convened at Schoonhoven<sup>5</sup>

Part. question 3. To the question from Gorcum whether someone who has separated himself off from the church of Jesus Christ by false doctrine and further says, when admonished: I want nothing more to do with you, should be publicly excommunicated; or whether it is not sufficient that the church or congregation is informed of this by announcing his name and his own withdrawal,—the brothers state and advise that this would not be sufficient, but that the announcement must be made with public excommunication.

### 1581 The National Synod convened at Middelburg<sup>6</sup>

The churches in Zeeland placed the following question before synod:

What shall be done with those who fall away from the communion of the churches to the world or to heresies, but yet do little harm by their example. Should they, after admonishment, be publicly excommunicated?

The synod replied...

Whether those who fall away from the communion of the church and turn to heresies, or otherwise go amiss, but yet do little harm by their example ought, after admonition, to be publicly excommunicated?

Answer: Depending on the circumstances of the persons, times, places and sins, do what in the judgement of the consistory and classis is considered to be upbuilding.

In the revision of the church order of Dordt of 1578 synod 1581 made the following statement (based on the decision of 1578 quoted above)...

What is to be done with those who follow after ministers, who are schismatics, to hear them preach?  
Answer. They shall be admonished to desist and with suitable means again be brought to order.

This policy in the Reformed churches becomes more clear from the scholarly research of prof. Van Deursen on the churches in the province of Holland in the first few decades of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Van Deursen summarises the policy in the Reformed churches after having introduced the case of a man from Haarlem who requested his consistory to remove him from the church roll because he had gone over to the Roman Catholic Church. He continues ...

Such a request was never acceded to. It seems that the conviction generally held was that one can only separate from the church by death or by excommunication. In other words, that no human decision can be of any influence here. Excommunication is an act of God (Heid.Cat. q/a 85) which although it is not the same as death because of the possibility of a later readmittance, nevertheless is similar in that it lies outside the power of man. Just as no one can remove himself from the living by writing a letter to the consistory, in the same way one ought not to reasonably expect that any attention will be given to a message concerning withdrawal from the church. The congregation itself decides who belongs to it. What members on their own authority decide is of no importance. Those who “withdraw” remain under the official supervision of the consistory “in order to bring them back to the sheepfold of Christ” (Acts of the classis Haarlem, 21 June 1606). If they do not respond to the admonition, then the normal procedure for church discipline is followed, even when they demonstrate themselves to be indifferent. When such disciplinary cases came up, they were to be proceeded with right up to excommunication. Even when the person who had withdrawn moved to another location, the consistory of that new town was expected to continue the discipline process through to excommunication or repentance. Concerning someone who went over to the Baptists the criterion remained whether he had allowed himself to be rebaptised—i.e. that he had received adult baptism instead of child baptism which was no longer accepted in his new church. If rebaptism had occurred then excommunication always followed directly. The criterion for going over to the Catholic church was that one had been to confession and taken communion; this was considered to be a rejection of the Reformed religion and anyone who had done this could no longer excuse himself by appealing to “wickedness and ignorance” (Acts of the classis Edam, 23 April 1618).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> J. Reitsma and S. D. van Veen (ed.), *Acta*, 2.177.

<sup>6</sup> F. L. Rutgers (ed.), *Acta* 424, 449, 405.

After the synod of Dordt 1618/19 an exception was often made in this policy for Remonstrants (Arminians) who remained with a separate Remonstrant church. In many places, between the years 1610 and 1618, secession or “dolerende” (“grieving”) churches (and even classes) of contra-remonstrants (Calvinists) had arisen. After the synod of Dordt these churches were officially recognised as the legal Reformed churches and the services of the Remonstrants were in principle forbidden. The Reformed churches attempted as far as possible to win the Remonstrants back by admonition. In most places those people who hardened themselves in Arminianism (and in some places in the province Holland this amounted to hundreds of people) were simply *considered* no longer to be members of the Reformed church. In Amsterdam, where there were very few Remonstrants, church discipline was applied which resulted in ten excommunications. The exception in terms of not pursuing church discipline in many places against Remonstrants was never applied to Remonstrant ministers, who (if they refused to repent) were deposed.<sup>8</sup>

That the general discipline policy for cases of withdrawal remained in force later in the 17<sup>th</sup> century is clear from the decision of the Provincial Synod of Utrecht to approve of the way classis Amersfoort intended to deal with the separatist followers of Jean de Labadie.<sup>9</sup>

### 1674 The Provincial Synod convened at Utrecht<sup>10</sup>

The classis of Amersfoort had raised the following question ...

How to deal ecclesiastically with those who in spite of admonitions, instructions, chastisements, and forewarnings, separate themselves from the Reformed churches uttering slander, calumny and condemnation of the churches and their ministers and members, stubbornly stay away from the communal services, and so absent themselves from hearing God’s word and use of the sacraments there and either go and attend the separatist conventicles, or the house-congregation of the aforementioned Jean de Labadie, given that the form for the Lord’s Supper bars them from the table and proclaims that they have no part in the Kingdom of Christ, being despisers of God, and of his word, and of the holy Sacraments, and are given to raise discord, sects and mutiny in Church or State?

They had proposed the following solution (to which the synod gave its approval):

The esteemed Classis understands art.14 of August 1674 to mean that they are to follow the charge given by our Saviour in Matt. 18.

As these decisions make clear, the administration of discipline in the Reformed churches in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries was somewhat different from what has become custom among many Reformed churches today. Normally speaking the only manner in which one became excluded from membership of a Reformed church (excepting death or departure to a foreign country) was to be excommunicated in accordance with the procedure of the three steps given in the church order.<sup>11</sup> In certain cases much patience was exercised and sometimes an exception was made as in the case of church members who attended the Remonstrant congregations shortly after the synod of Dordt 1618/19. Such patience was also recommended for applicable cases in the decision of the synod of Middelburg 1581. We also see, however, in the decision of Dordt 1578, that Reformed ministers who by their schismatic conduct separated themselves from the churches were not formally excommunicated. The doctrine of these men was not suspect. In such cases the classis was required to pronounce that they no longer had standing in the Reformed churches. This policy forms a strong contrast to the treatment of Remonstrant ministers who refused to repent. Such ministers were excommunicated. Worthy of note, when we reflect upon these decisions, is that the entire procedure of suspension from the

<sup>7</sup> A. Th. van Deursen, *Bavianen en Slijkgeusen*, 155-56. In the course of this paragraph Van Deursen cites many minutes of consistories and acts of classes. I have only included those references which refer to direct quotations in the text.

<sup>8</sup> See A. Th. van Deursen, *Bavianen*, 351 ff.

<sup>9</sup> H. Bouwman (*Kerkelijke Tucht*, 156) mentions the procedure followed by the consistory of Molkwerum (Friesland) in 1699. A certain H. Sioerds had left Molkwerum for Amsterdam with an attestation but joined the Roman Catholic Church there. When he finally returned to Molkwerum (without an attestation) the consistory decided “to excommunicate this Heringh Sioerds given that he is a dead member.” This consistory (with the consent of classis) thus excommunicated a member long after he had left the village with an attestation. We ought to realise that in the 17<sup>th</sup> century one was considered to be a member of the local church until his attestation had been officially accepted by a sister church elsewhere. Because Sioerds had never handed in his attestation anywhere he was still, formally speaking, a member of the church at Molkwerum. See below for the same reasoning among the churches of the secession in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>10</sup> A. C. Duker, *Gisbertius Voetius*, volume 3, appendix 28.

<sup>11</sup> For Rutgers’ view on the church polity of that time see below.

Lord's Supper and admonition had to be continued, even when a church member no longer wanted to be a member of the Reformed church and no longer attended there. The only recognised procedure by which membership could be terminated was the procedure of excommunication in the church order. The notion that someone of his own volition could withdraw from membership was systematically rejected.

By way of summary two points from original Reformed church polity are of importance:

- 1) No one can of his own volition terminate his membership in the church of Christ. Only the overseers appointed by Christ can come to that decision.
- 2) Even when a church member no longer values being a member of the Reformed church and joins another (sectarian or false) church, the entire procedure of admonition, suspension from the Lord's Supper and the three steps of excommunication is still followed.

## 1.2 The church polity of the Secession

The second synod ("meeting") of the seceded congregations took place in Utrecht in 1837. During this synod the churches began to draw up a new church order. For this church order a number of articles had been drafted about membership in the church of Christ; how someone becomes a member, and, of course, how this membership can be terminated. It is remarkable that no mention is made of withdrawal and the only manner by which membership could be discontinued was by means of excommunication. Two articles clearly show this:

Art.4. The aforementioned confessing members and their children must continue to be acknowledged as members until, because of their doctrine or conduct, they are excommunicated from the congregation.

Art. 6. As long as someone is not excommunicated from the congregation of Christ, he is entitled to receive the signs and seals of the covenant of grace for himself and his seed, unless the Consistory of the Church has placed him under discipline for a period of time. ....<sup>12</sup>

The synod of 1841 returned to the church order of Dordt which, as far as our subject is concerned, brought no change. This old church order also identifies excommunication as the only way to terminate membership and makes no mention at all of withdrawal (which did not have legitimacy in the 17<sup>th</sup> century).

Synod Groningen in 1846 had to give advice in a difficult matter. There appeared to be a minister who instituted churches partly from members of other existing churches (Rev. Ledeboer). Such conduct was, of course, condemned, but there seemed to be a lack of clarity on the question as to whether these new congregations wished to belong to the church federation. Synod advised the consistories, having to deal with members who left an existing congregation to become members of a congregation belonging to this minister, to proceed "with all caution." Excommunication was advised against. It was recommended that such members be given a declaration "that they, because of their manner of conduct, could no longer be recognised as belonging to the congregation." This special ruling (for people who were clearly still upright believers and now belonged to congregations which might yet come to belong to the church federation) confirms the rule that normally membership can be terminated only by use of the form for excommunication.<sup>13</sup> At the synod of Leiden 1857 this culminated in a proposal, after years of deliberation, to come to the conclusion that this minister together with another colleague had withdrawn. It was proposed that Synod declare "that from this moment on, these two brothers are to be regarded as standing outside the communion of the church."<sup>14</sup> Whether this proposal, after much discussion, was ever actually adopted is not clear to me from the Acts. These ministers (with their congregations) would no longer be considered as affiliated with the churches. Such a declaration cannot, by its very nature, be compared with a withdrawal of membership from a local church. When, at that same synod, the question was asked how to deal with members who withdraw themselves "without separation in form," reference is made to the decision of 1846.<sup>15</sup> The wording "without separation in form" probably has reference to the fact that it may be said of

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<sup>12</sup> *Handelingen*, 112. See also pp. 104, 109-110.

<sup>13</sup> *Handelingen*, 409. The brief quotation in F. L. Bos, *Orde*, 278, does no justice to the context of this decision.

<sup>14</sup> *Handelingen*, 678-79.

<sup>15</sup> *Handelingen*, 712.

these church members that “in other respects nothing can be said against their doctrine and conduct” (decision 1846).<sup>16</sup>

We meet another kind of exception at the synod of Amsterdam in 1849. It seemed that members would sometimes move elsewhere without requesting an attestation. Aside from that, there was no mention of misconduct in doctrine or life. The following decision was taken:

That the members, who leave a Congregation, should request their attestations within the period of a year and six weeks. In case of omission, their membership shall have lapsed.<sup>17</sup>

At the synod of Franeker of 1863 a major reversal in the handling of those who have withdrawn takes place.<sup>18</sup> In connection with a request for advice concerning a certain case of discipline, it was mentioned that the member in question was of the opinion that she had resigned her membership. This led to a discussion “whether such ought not to be dealt with in an ecclesiastical manner, according to the church order of Dordrecht 1618 and 1619.” It is unclear how her consistory had actually dealt with her. In any event the following decision was eventually taken:



*The first professors at Kampen: T.F. de Haan, S. van Velzen, A. Brummelkamp and H. de Cock*

When someone, while subject to ecclesiastical admonition, relinquishes his membership in the congregation, despite the efforts expended on him toward his amendment being unfruitful, this shall be made known to the congregation, for by doing so he has withdrawn himself from the jurisdiction of the church.

Two faculty members of the Theological School at Kampen requested that it be recorded that this decision was taken against their advice. A protest against the decision followed which was signed by four ministers and six elders. It reads as follows:

The undersigned feel called upon to protest against this decision most strenuously, because in their view this decision restricts or removes the second key in God’s Congregation, and conflicts with art. 90 of the Synod of 1846.

The article referred to was the unusual regulation concerning members who had joined one of the congregations of Rev. Ledeboer. The synod declared that its decision did not render the regulation of 1846 invalid. That is perhaps true, but the regulation of 1846 was now no longer an exception. With this decision an entirely new way for the exercise of church discipline against those who thought they could effect their own withdrawal was opened. An age-old Reformed practice was set aside. Behind all of this is an entirely

<sup>16</sup> In 1857 these words (“without separation in form”) cannot be interpreted as “without specific notification of their withdrawal.” The difference between a withdrawal by public notification, and forsaking the church without notification of intent, was at that time not a relevant issue as far as the requisite disciplinary procedure was concerned. Not until six years later would this distinction become a subject of serious discussion. For the interpretation of the decision of 1857 as made by the synod of Leeuwarden 1891, see below.

<sup>17</sup> *Handelingen*, 466.

<sup>18</sup> *Handelingen*, 862-63.

different view on membership in the church. Who determines when someone is no longer a member? That individual himself or the consistory? Until then the Reformed churches had acknowledged that ultimately the responsibility for determination of membership belonged to the consistory. From this moment on the individual was granted that prerogative. In fact, the ecclesiastical way of the church order of Dordt was dismissed in cases of withdrawal.

At the next synod of Amsterdam in 1866 the provincial synod of North Holland submitted a gravamen in which it demanded that this controversial decision of 1863 be repealed as being in conflict with the church order of Dordt 1619.<sup>19</sup> After much discussion synod decided not to respond. This time all the faculty of the Theological School in attendance requested that the Acts record that this decision not to respond was “taken against their advice.” Immediately thereafter a similar gravamen came up for discussion, submitted by the provincial synod of South Holland.<sup>20</sup> The delegates from that province explained that the synodical decision paralyzes church discipline. After extensive discussion the opinions remained divided. In the end the decision of 1863 was partly amended. It now read:

When someone, while subject to ecclesiastical admonition, terminates his membership in the congregation, the consistory shall deal with him accordingly as required by the circumstances.

This decision allowed latitude for both views on church membership and the administration of church discipline against those who withdraw. At the synod of Middelburg of 1869 a new gravamen was tabled from the provincial synod of North-Holland.<sup>21</sup> The provincial synod demanded that the decisions of the synods of 1863 and 1866 be “expunged.” After discussion this request was shelved. Thus a situation remained in which it was left to the freedom of the local churches to choose between accepting a withdrawal and formal excommunication of those who withdraw.

It is interesting to learn that at the synod of Utrecht 1877 the provincial synod of North Holland had put a proposal on the table concerning attestations:

That synod determine that in normal circumstances attestations remain valid for no more than six months following departure, and that someone who does not comply with this should not immediately lose his membership, but be dealt with in an ecclesiastical manner.<sup>22</sup>

This reminds us of that case of discipline in the church at Molkwerum in 1699, namely the idea that someone remains a member of a local church until he actually hands in his attestation elsewhere. If the attestation is not handed in elsewhere then that is of course the equivalent of withdrawal. This provincial synod, by way of this proposal, attempted to make the disciplinary procedure obligatory in such cases of withdrawal. When voting became deadlocked, synod was unable to take a decision. The situation remained unchanged, that is, freedom of action was tolerated.

The provincial synod of Drente requested the general synod of Leeuwarden 1891 to further clarify the decision of the synod of Leiden 1857 about how to deal with those who “without separation in form withdraw from the communion of our church.”<sup>23</sup> It had appeared that some churches misused this decision by reading it to say that the churches had the right to draw conclusions about withdrawal from the evidence. The synod declared that this decision of 1857 was made with a view to the members of the churches of Rev. Ledebouer (who functioned outside the bond of the churches). Additionally the synod made the following declaration:

The Synod, taking everything into account, and considering that the decision referred to is only of application to persons who neglect the public worship services in the Christian Reformed Congregation, without otherwise deviating in doctrine or conduct, exhorts the consistories to: safeguard against wrongful use of this article, either by using it to rid themselves of members who

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<sup>19</sup> *Handelingen*, 920. The gravamen refers to the 162nd sitting of the *Post-Acta* of the Synod of Dordt. There we find the following decision: “All Churches, both the ordinary members and especially the office bearers, are earnestly exhorted to diligently and strictly maintain the Articles of the Church Order concerning discipline; the Church Visitors shall pay particular attention that the Churches are not negligent in this matter.”

<sup>20</sup> *Handelingen*, 920-21.

<sup>21</sup> *Handelingen*, 1017-18.

<sup>22</sup> *Acta*, 54-55.

<sup>23</sup> *Acta*, 24-25.

are to be patiently endured and admonished, or to apply it to those members who go astray in doctrine or conduct and must be dealt with in the way of ordinary discipline.

From this decision (which was unanimously adopted) it is clear that it was the intention of synod to prohibit resorting to the practice of concluding that a withdrawal had taken place without an explicit statement to that effect from the person concerned.

In cases where people—without deviating in doctrine or conduct—crossed over into another (not false) church of Christ or instituted their own house congregation, the rule of 1846 applied, whereby instead of the procedure for excommunication the consistory made an official pronouncement declaring that the person involved, because of the way he acted, was no longer recognised as a member of the congregation.<sup>24</sup> The original objective of this decision of 1846 was to create an exception just for those cases, because otherwise the withdrawn members had to remain under discipline up to and including excommunication (using the form). After 1863 it became possible for consistories to accept a withdrawal, but it remained in the freedom of the churches to continue using the disciplinary procedure.

### 1.3 The church polity of the *Doleantie*

The church polity of the *Doleantie* was in large part influenced and determined by the effort of two men, namely A. Kuyper and F. L. Rutgers. In a pamphlet published in 1890 (*Separation and Doleantie*, J. A. Wormser: Amsterdam) Kuyper laid the foundations for his ideas about church membership and the consequences this has for the administration of church discipline.<sup>25</sup> Kuyper clearly distinguishes between the organic body of Christ (the invisible church) and the instituted, visible church. Church polity has to do with the church as institute. The church as institute comes into being as a “volitional act of the confessors.” A member can therefore never be forced into remaining a member. His own will is determinative. (Hence the idea that not a single disciplinary pronouncement can be made against someone who of his own volition relinquishes his membership). For its part, the church is also free to act. It can look for contact and association with other local churches in total freedom and in that freedom can never be forced to prolong someone’s membership (the right of excommunication of someone who wants to remain a member).



*Abraham Kuyper*

The Bible doesn’t make that distinction of course. The metaphor of the body of Christ is used for the local church in its tangible existence (see 1 Cor. 10 and 12) and this point was strongly defended by F. M. ten Hoor (of the secession churches) in his refutation of Kuyper’s ecclesiology. He also contested the idea that the church as institute comes into being through the volitional act of the believers.<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, these Kuyperian ideas about church membership, consolidated and interpreted by Prof. F. L. Rutgers in his church political brochures and advice to churches, became predominant in the Reformed churches. It is remarkable that Rutgers himself appears to have assumed that this was also the church polity of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>27</sup> In his lectures on church polity, which were posthumously published, Rutgers concedes that there is tension between the practice of the Reformed churches in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries and those of his time (which in his opinion were correct).<sup>28</sup> He tries to ease that tension by maintaining that the excommunications of previous centuries (he only mentions the case of Bertius of Leiden, see the appendix) were examples of case histories which lacked a formal declaration of intent to withdraw. And why did people not do this? Rutgers answers: “People then did not yet have an understanding and view of the church as an association.” It appears that in this way he tried to align his church political view on this issue with that of the Reformed forefathers. He maintained that the church political procedure of excommunication in the church order was intended only in cases where a member of the congregation wanted to stay in the

<sup>24</sup> From the following decision by synod it is clear that the regulation was not considered applicable to church members who joined the Salvation Army.

<sup>25</sup> This brochure is discussed by D. Deddens in “Het Doleantiekerrecht,” 91-94.

<sup>26</sup> Discussion by Deddens, *op.cit.*, 97-98.

<sup>27</sup> See *Kerkelijke Adviezen*, 2.305 (an advice from 1910). Unfortunately Rutgers fails entirely to support his premise.

<sup>28</sup> *College Voordrachten*, 86-87.

church and yet ought to be put out of it.<sup>29</sup> That his assessment of history at this point was incorrect has been shown by historical research after his time and is summarised above in section 1.1. It was not the untutored church members who did not know of “the concept of (the church as an) association,” but it was the Reformed Churches who refused to give legitimacy to such a concept.<sup>30</sup> The church polity of Kuyper and Rutgers at this point is diametrically opposed to that of the Reformed churches of old. And yet this new and in principle unreformed idea of the church as an “association” would go on to define the church polity of the Reformed Churches in terms of discipline procedure.

#### 1.4 The church polity of the Reformed Churches 1892—1944

In 1892 the Christian Reformed Church (the churches of the secession) and the Low-German (Nederduits) Reformed Churches (the churches of the Doleantie) came together to form one church federation (the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands).<sup>31</sup> It was not long before the matter of church discipline for withdrawals came to the table. In the decisions that were taken we see the strong influence of A. Kuyper as well as F. L. Rutgers.

In the Acts of the synod of Middelburg of 1896 we find the following:

Art. 95. Report is made concerning the question from Drenthe: “The provincial Synod of Drenthe requests the General Synod to resolve, how to deal with persons who, according to Art. 76 and 77 of the Church Order have been placed under church discipline, but meanwhile, by relinquishing their membership, withdraw from the Reformed Church. Is, in view of the relation of our churches with the State, continuation of discipline against such persons possible, and in an ecclesiastical context desirable and necessary?”

Considering indeed that withdrawal from discipline, to which one had voluntarily subjected oneself, and breaking with the communion of the church, to which one ought to belong, for reasons which cannot withstand the scrutiny of God’s Word, is not a sin to be regarded lightly; and that indeed those who do this need to be earnestly and persistently implored to turn back from their wayward path and may not be too quickly cast loose; but considering also that in the end joining the church as institute, and remaining there in terms of church polity must always be left in the freedom of each person, Synod unanimously concludes that no one can continue to be an object of church discipline, when he persists in the resignation of his membership.

Kuyper’s view of church membership comes clearly to the fore in this decision. The same synod (art. 93) and also that of 1905 (art. 14) emphasise that withdrawal may not be inferred from the evidence. In cases where people actually attend church elsewhere (without giving formal notice of withdrawal), the procedure for church discipline is to be applied including eventual excommunication with use of the form. We see here that stubborn disobedience to the consistory and joining another church is considered to warrant church discipline. Given this procedure the person withdrawing can avoid a public excommunication, announcing that he has been placed outside the kingdom of God, by providing explicit notification of his withdrawal. But this does not alter the condition in which he now finds himself—he has removed himself from the congregation of Christ.<sup>32</sup>

A new request to allow confirmation of withdrawals based on the purported evidence came before synod The Hague 1914 and once again the synod prohibited this approach. In the advisory report given beforehand (the so-called ‘pre-advice’) by H. H. Kuyper, the idea is advanced that withdrawal can be inferred only when, in addition to having joined another church where services are attended, children are sent to catechism classes, the sacraments are used there, and there is a further refusal to receive the elders of the church of which one is

<sup>29</sup> See, for instance, *Kerkelijke Adviezen*, 2.250.

<sup>30</sup> It is to be noted that Rutgers in an advice from 1909 argues against the idea of “erasure” (*i.e.*, to conclude from the evidence that a withdrawal has occurred) by pointing to the fact that the church is not an “association” (in contrast to the Reformed ‘State’ Church). See *Kerkelijke Adviezen*, 2.306.

<sup>31</sup> Some seceded churches did not take part in this. These we know as the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken* (in Canada, *Free Reformed Churches*).

<sup>32</sup> The synod of 1905 shed some further light on this (see below) with the intent that someone who went to church elsewhere (where the preaching was Reformed) only due to a lack of understanding of the concept of church should not be excommunicated. What comes to mind here is the exceptional regulation among the seceders for the members of the churches of Rev. Ledebor.



still a member and a refusal to listen to the admonition of that consistory.<sup>33</sup> This exception agrees with one already given by Prof. Rutgers in an ecclesiastical advice in 1909.<sup>34</sup>



Prof. F. L. Rutgers

However, here and there local churches appear to have had difficulty with excommunicating members who attended another church without explicitly withdrawing themselves. They appealed to a clause from the conclusions of 1905 which read: “that for this reason excommunication may never be applied against members who, according to the consistory, do not fit the description of the Form of excommunication.” It was argued as if this clause meant that excommunicating members who attended another church was not permitted.

The synod of Middelburg 1933 received a further request for clarification. Quite honestly, it wasn’t so much that earlier resolutions lacked sufficient clarity, but that some churches had difficulty with the use of church discipline in such cases. They would much rather conclude from the circumstantial evidence that a withdrawal had taken place. The answer of the Synod of Middelburg was straightforward:

Art. 230. The committee recommends that the questions of classes Schiedam be answered as follows:

1. That the decisions of Middelburg 1896 (art. 93) and Utrecht 1905 (art. 14) (first and last paragraph), further clarified in the decision and advice of The Hague 1914 (art. 140, appendix 99), must be understood in this manner:

that members who attend church elsewhere, who do not explicitly declare themselves as separated, nor desire this, are to be repeatedly and leniently admonished and if they remain in their disobedience, are in the end to be subjected to church discipline;

which is to be understood in this way that, at length, excommunication be applied with the form for the ban;

but that in cases where it is only due to a lack of understanding of the concept of the church that they join churches of reformed preachers outside our federation, they be admonished with great leniency and patience and if they will not heed this admonition be suspended from the Lord’s Supper; but not to proceed to the final step of excommunication as long as the form for this is not considered applicable;

2. That churches who reject this rule, are to be admonished, with great leniency and patience, to abide by what has been established with common consent.

This completes our review of the synodical decisions that are of relevance.<sup>35</sup> We must be conscious of the fact that in the time after the union of 1892 there was considerable difference in the administration of cases of church discipline. Many (especially from the tradition of the Doleantie) were still used to the procedure of “erasure” (*i.e.*, inferring a withdrawal from circumstantial evidence) which was common practice in the Reformed (Hervormd) church from which they had come.<sup>36</sup> The synods during the years at the end of the previous and the beginning of this century fiercely opposed this practice of “erasure.” Rutgers himself observed more than once that an erasure was nothing more than excommunication, but one administered without a conscientious and careful procedure.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>33</sup> See appendix XCIX. The “quote” from this report in F. L. Bos, *Orde*, 276-77 is not complete (intervening sentences are omitted!) and very misleading.

<sup>34</sup> *Kerkelijke Adviezen*, 2.308.

<sup>35</sup> During the succeeding synods a couple of actual cases are presented, but the decisions taken in no way diverge from the principles already given above.

<sup>36</sup> “In the Netherlands Reformed church federation [the state church] that practice (*i.e.*, “erasure”) was often followed, especially at the time of the “Doleantie,” as a practical weapon, or a means of getting rid of troublesome members. But it is definitely unscriptural, and would also be in conflict with the entire, Scripture-based church order of the Reformed Churches.” F. L. Rutgers, *Kerkelijke Adviezen*, 2.310 (advice from 1916). Elsewhere Rutgers concedes that in the first years after the Doleantie some churches made use of this practice of “erasure,” *op.cit.* 2.309.

<sup>37</sup> “What is meant by ‘erasure’ or ‘removal from membership,’ is in every respect *the same* as ‘excommunication’” (italics by Rutgers), *Kerkelijke Adviezen*, 2.250. That premise is not entirely correct. To conclude from the evidence that a withdrawal has

## 1.5 “Church Polity” after the Liberation

Nothing can be said about the “church polity” after the liberation, because not a single general synod has dealt with the subject of church discipline in cases of withdrawal. It would appear that in practice the customs which existed before the war were in most cases followed, with the exception of inferring withdrawals from circumstantial evidence. The influential book by Prof. Kamphuis (sr.), *Om de Heiligheid van de Gemeente*, also follows this tradition with regard to the character of church membership (*i.e.*, the church member’s self determination to end his membership).<sup>38</sup>

The advice from Prof. Te Velde of 14 June, 1997 to the Reformed Churches of New Zealand is very interesting. In it he gives an account of current practice in the liberated churches and adds his own perspective. Te Velde defends the premise...

...that to belong to the church is not a matter of man’s absolute free will and free choice. He who withdraws himself from the church ought to receive a response from that church. And (unlike with various other societal relationships) not a response that is neatly neutral and bureaucratic or perhaps with regret and in impotence concludes and records what the departing individual is doing, but appends to it an authoritative judgement and explicitly declares that, for that person, entitlement to the privileges and promises, bound up with church membership, has ended. Br. ‘N’ cuts the bond with the congregation. The church affirms this (after admonition and appeal) by declaring from its perspective that Br. ‘N’ no longer belongs to the congregation.

We are not used to referring to this declaration by the church as ‘censure’ or ‘discipline.’ But it is related. After all, it pronounces judgement, it has a judicial character.<sup>39</sup>

Here the perspective on church membership is no longer that of A. Kuyper and F. L. Rutgers, but that of the Reformed Churches from the time of the Reformation. Only the practical implementation is different. Te Velde does hold to Rutgers’ premise that the disciplinary procedure of the church order is intended for those who must be evicted from the church despite the fact that they themselves are determined to remain in the church. But he adds...

The declaration concerning someone’s withdrawal sometimes approaches that of excommunication. It would be in the interest of the churches if they would develop a somewhat more extensive and inclusive explication than the simple ‘has withdrawn...’ But equating this with excommunication is unjustified.<sup>40</sup>

That this equivalency is unjustified is proven by the fact that the form for excommunication in the liturgical forms is derived in its entirety from the procedure prescribed in the church order. Where that procedure is not followed, the form can no longer be used. Te Velde does make the suggestion that the congregation can be encouraged to get involved. The congregation can, by means of an announcement made several weeks prior to the final declaration, be informed of the brother’s or sister’s desire to withdraw and call on the congregation to admonish and to pray for him or her. In the final declaration the consistory must not, according to Te Velde, make a pronouncement about the sinner’s standing with respect to the kingdom of God. He supports this contention as follows:

It is not correct for the consistory at the time of a withdrawal to suddenly make a public declaration (‘he is excluded from the kingdom of God’) if the required steps (of admonition by the office bearers and the scrutiny and agreement of the congregation) did not precede that. Because of the withdrawal, following such a thorough procedure is no longer possible. Therefore the church should abstain from

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occurred, fails to say anything about that member’s standing with respect to the kingdom of heaven. Compare this with the possibility, in the churches of the secession, for making an announcement in case of withdrawal to another (not false) church (as given above).

<sup>38</sup> *Om de Heiligheid*, 95-96. Kamphuis supports his premise with a reference to 1 Cor. 5:12, but this text only indicates that those who are outside the congregation do not qualify for church discipline. The text does not define the character of church membership and gives no answer to the question whether it is possible for someone to take the initiative in severing that membership.

<sup>39</sup> *Advies*, Par. 8.

<sup>40</sup> *Loc.cit.*

making a public declaration about someone's standing. She has to limit herself to a qualifying declaration about tangible conduct.<sup>41</sup>

It should be noted that the new church order of 2014 radically changes the church polity of the Reformed Churches (Liberated), but the return to a synodical form of church government is beyond the scope of this discussion.

## 1.6 Summary

Our overview of the history of Reformed church polity in cases of withdrawal shows that two points are of importance, namely the character of church membership and the functioning of the procedure for excommunication in the church order.

The Reformed churches of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries applied the procedure for excommunication in the church order generally whenever members, who warranted church discipline, left the church—even to members who specifically declared that they withdraw themselves to join another church. A church member did not have the right to terminate his membership. That procedure was followed by the churches of the secession, except for members who left for another Reformed church. For those members the consistory had to make a declaration that their membership in that local church was terminated.

Not until the 1860s did synods receive proposals to acquiesce in a withdrawal. After heated debate, spread out over three synods, the consistories were allowed to excommunicate members with the ecclesiastical form as they withdrew, or to declare that they had withdrawn. The entire faculty of the Theological School at Kampen sharply objected to this optional acceptance of withdrawal. The churches of the Doleantie gave in to withdrawals from the beginning. This had to do with Kuyper's view of church membership, which, as he taught, begins and ends by an act of the free will of the individual.

Church discipline after withdrawal was considered incorrect and was therefore not allowed. This issue was raised again at several synods rather soon after the union of 1892 and the decisions favoured Kuyper's ideas—especially because of the strong influence of his colleague Prof. Rutgers. This issue has never been raised at a synod after the liberation of 1944. The liberated churches commonly practice concession to withdrawals, but the actual synod decisions of the Reformed churches from before the war are no longer meticulously followed (especially in cases of inferring from the evidence that a withdrawal has taken place). Although the church polity of the Doleantie concerning this issue is followed by many (among others Prof. Kamphuis), it is worthy of note that, in principle, Prof. Te Velde defends the church polity of the Reformation, albeit with a different practical implementation.

## 2. REFLECTION

### 2.1 The character of church membership

As will be clear by now, the question concerns where the ultimate responsibility for entering into and being removed from membership in the church of Christ belongs. Can a church member of his own free will terminate his membership? In what follows I mention a number of considerations which show, in my opinion, that the responsibility for church membership rests with the consistory. In so doing I adopt the opinion of Prof. Te Velde. As Te Velde correctly points out there is, of course, a correlative. A consistory cannot use force to compel someone to remain a member of the church of Christ.

It is probably good to begin with the much quoted text of 1 Corinthians 5:12. In chapter five of this letter Paul admonishes the congregation of Corinth because they had failed to exercise church discipline against someone who had engaged in sexual intercourse with his mother-in-law. Paul demands that that person be excommunicated immediately. He then tries to clear up a misunderstanding. The verses 9-13 read as follows:

*I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner— not even to eat with such a person. For what have I to do*

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<sup>41</sup> *Op.cit.* Par. 12.

*with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore "put away from yourselves the evil person."* (NKJV)

It was never the intention, says Paul, that church members would not be allowed to associate with notorious sinners among the general public—for then they would have to go and live on another planet. No, he says, only *brothers and sisters* who remain in their sins (and for that reason are placed outside the fellowship of the church) must be avoided. The distinction Paul makes between “the people of this world” and a so-called “brother” is not between actual members of the Christian congregation and non-members, but between those who once were part of the fellowship in Christ and those who never had any connection with that fellowship. In our form for excommunication (see *Book of Praise*, p. 611-12) we also continue to call someone who has been expelled a brother. And this is entirely appropriate, for the evicted person remains a brother—although a brother who is excluded from the benefits in Christ because of hardening in a certain sin. In this regard we can see that it is impossible to break the bonds of fellowship once joined—even though membership in the church is terminated. However, this text gives no answer to the question as to whether a church member can terminate his own membership. Lord’s Day 31 of the catechism can provide some clarification. Someone who has left the church remains a brother, but he is a brother of whom it is publicly stated that he is no longer admitted to the sacraments and that he has so hardened himself in sin that the consistory can no longer bear official responsibility for him. This is the second key of church discipline.

In the highest sense, the final responsibility for the taking up and laying down of membership in the church of Christ rests, of course, with Christ himself. That perspective leads directly to the premise that here on earth the shepherds of the church, appointed by Christ, would bear that responsibility in his name. The authority which the Scripture assigns to the elders is weighty. Hebrews 13:17 has this to say:

*Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.* (NKJV)

The elders shall have to give account of the conduct of the church members—even when a church member intends to leave the church of Christ. The keys of the kingdom of heaven are given to the office bearers to bind and loosen from sins (cf. Matt.16,19 with John 20,23). For that reason this binding and loosening is restated after the procedure for church discipline in Matthew 18,15-18.

The responsibility for making a pronouncement regarding this does not belong to the common church member, but to the office bearers who have charge over his soul.

There is a direct parallel between defection from the church and admission to church membership. As we confess in Lord’s Day 21 of the Heidelberg Catechism, Christ gathers his church throughout the ages. He is the one who establishes faith in people’s hearts by means of his Holy Spirit. Because of that faith there is a desire to follow Christ and join his church. People who have come to faith are admitted to the church of Christ by means of baptism (together with the requirement that they do profession of that faith, cf. for instance Acts 2:41). This baptism is administered by office bearers of the church who rule the church in the name of Christ. Someone who joins the church of Christ does this entirely voluntarily and may never be coerced. On its part the church has that liberty as well and can never be forced into baptising people indiscriminately. The consistory bears the responsibility to ensure that Christian baptism is administered in a Christian manner. Someone unworthy of baptism may not be admitted to membership in the church of Christ. The final responsibility rests with the consistory.

A person who by faith and the administration of baptism is admitted to the church of Christ also shares in the promises of Christ. That includes, among others, the admission of his children to God’s covenant and thus to membership of the church of Christ. Hence infant baptism. If having reached adulthood, these children do not want to accept this baptism and rebel against the church of God, they are to be admonished and (if unrepentant) must in the end be excommunicated. As the form puts it (*Book of Praise*, p.608), adult children, who obstinately deny the communion with Christ and his Church, are excluded from the fellowship of Christ. They are declared to have no share in the benefits of Christ as long as they do not repent.

In the New Testament there is only one clear example of people who separate themselves from the church. In 1 John 2:19 we read....

*They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us.* (NKJV)

Here we must be careful in drawing conclusions because we do not know exactly what form of action the church took against these persons. John notes in the preceding verse that they were “antichrists,” meaning that they were people with a mistaken view of the person and work of Christ. What John does provide here is a clarification of their standing: “They do not belong to us,” he says.

In summary, we can see that Scripture continues to view those, who have been put out of the church in some sense, as “brothers” who are not to be equated with those who have never been a member. A different ethic applies to excommunicants than applies to those outside the church. Furthermore, Scripture makes quite clear that determination of membership is a matter for those whom Christ has placed as shepherds over his flock. If a sheep strays off, this does not automatically release the shepherds from their duty to go after that sheep!

## 2.2. The use of the procedure for discipline in the church order

Although the Reformed churches intended that the procedure of church discipline (based on Matt.18) be used in all cases of church defection (*i.e.*, for those who wished to remain a member as well as those who wanted to leave the church) there are, in my opinion, sufficient reasons for holding to Rutgers’ premise, that the procedure given in the church order is more suited to people who must against their will be placed outside the church. In such cases the safety valves provided by the scrutiny of a classis make sense. Indiscriminate expulsion of people from the church, against their own intentions, must be guarded against.

There is also the question whether it is appropriate to undertake a lengthy disciplinary procedure against a church member who no longer wishes to remain a member. Although we do not concede to him the right, nor the authority, to discontinue his own membership, his case is in its nature different from that of someone who hardens in sin, but throughout desires to remain a member. Take, for instance, Paul’s advice in Titus 3:10-11:

*Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a person is warped and sinning, being self-condemned.* (NKJV)

For that reason alone it would be a mistake to apply the procedure of Matthew 18 to all cases of church discipline. The church order rightly draws attention to the fact that public sins are not intended here. When the Lord Jesus gave his disciples guidelines on how to deal with sin within their circle, He did not set out to give them a detailed church order. The object of Matthew 18 is someone within the circle of the disciples, who has fallen into secret sins. Essentially this case has little in common with that of someone who suddenly and openly declares that he no longer wants to belong to that circle (*c.q.*, the church). Therefore to propose an approach other than the one prescribed here does not have to be unbiblical.

There seems to be much in favour of a consistory acquiescing to the wish of someone who no longer wants to be a member of the church. Because of the gravity of the matter it must be clear that that desire is no sudden urge but a well considered position to which someone is clearly committed. In that case the consistory can proceed with making an appropriate announcement about the membership of that brother or sister. The nature of the announcement will depend upon the circumstances of the withdrawal.

## 2.3 Differentiation in withdrawals

It is obvious that withdrawals must be distinguished from each other. In principle there are at least three different circumstances to be considered:

**a) Withdrawal for reasons that do not warrant discipline.** For instance, someone may withdraw because of moving to a country where we have no sister churches. The person concerned, however, fully intends to join the church of Christ there. Under those circumstances we would wish that person God’s blessing. We never say that our sister churches are the only true churches of Christ in foreign countries! In another case, someone could be joining a different church federation in the place he is going to live, possibly as result of a marriage. It may be that such a church could also be considered a true church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In such cases the consistory in its announcement will say only that brother or sister ‘X’ is no longer a member of the church. Depending on circumstances something could be added regarding his/her destination.

**b) Withdrawal for reasons that are unclear.** There will always be cases which are difficult to assess. For instance, someone moves suddenly without notification and sends a letter that he withdraws. If further contact with him is impossible, the consistory should not resort to making guesses about his motivation. An extreme example would be if the brother involved was kidnapped and had written the letter under coercion. That is perhaps not very likely, but my point is that a consistory must proceed with due caution. No one may have motivations imputed to him. Before a withdrawal is deemed deserving of discipline there must be certainty. The withdrawing member must be given the benefit of the doubt.

In a statement about such cases the consistory must be careful. In fact, the statement can not go beyond an announcement that the brother or sister involved is no longer a member of the church. Any expressions of “regret” should not support the suspicion that that person was necessarily deserving of discipline. There may be reason for a presumption of sin, but not of sin that warrants church discipline.

**c) Withdrawal for reasons which warrant discipline.** By far most cases in this category are of people who withdraw themselves during a disciplinary procedure. The brother is already being dealt with by the consistory and has been suspended from the Lord’s Supper table. By doing so, the consistory has already brought to the brother’s attention that, without repentance, he will end up outside the kingdom of heaven. That message is clearly reflected in the form for the Lord’s Supper. Because the consistory is unable to detect all sin in a congregation, the form warns the brothers and sisters to withhold themselves if they become hardened in certain sins. Of those who are suspended it is said: “we declare to them that they have no part in the Kingdom of Christ.” That pronouncement remains in effect “while they persist in their sins” (*Book of Praise*, p.604). That pronouncement is provisional. If the disciplinary procedure does not end in withdrawal then the declaration in the form is simply a public confirmation of this provisional judgement. That judgement fell and was conveyed to the person involved long ago when he was first suspended. The public declaration that this person stands outside the kingdom of Christ is of significance to him as well as to the congregation. For himself there is an emphatic underlining of the need to come to repentance. The congregation is exhorted to act in such a manner that this message reaches him,<sup>42</sup> and it is at the same time itself warned of the consequences of hardening in sin.

What must be done then when someone, while under discipline, withdraws? As a matter of fact that person says that he does not intend to repent, but desires to proceed in his hardening in sin.<sup>43</sup> His act of withdrawal is in this instance a public sin. The advice of Prof. Te Velde in such cases has much in its favour. In an announcement to the congregation his name and his desire to withdraw can be made public, while the congregation itself is exhorted to admonish the brother for his sinful way. Because of his publicly declared desire to leave the church, the approval of the classis is no longer required before his name can be made public. If after some weeks the conclusion must be drawn that he has hardened himself in this desire, then the consistory will have to announce that the efforts of the congregation did not turn this brother from his sinful way and a declaration is made that he is no longer a member of the congregation.

Prof. Te Velde moreover argues that because the careful procedure of the church order in that case cannot be followed, no pronouncement must be made about his relationship with respect to the kingdom of heaven. There are some things here that are arguable. The sinner’s standing was already conveyed to him when he was suspended. In cases of disciplinary suspension he has already been informed that, unless he repents, he stands outside the kingdom of Christ. His withdrawal can not change anything about that. The meticulous procedure prescribed in the church order is intended to bring him to repentance and again take part in the kingdom of heaven. If, over time, that does not happen then the congregation is publicly informed of the fact that he is already excluded from the kingdom.

Actually the congregation already knows the standing of this brother from the announcement of his name in the second step. The congregation is then exhorted to exert itself on his behalf so that he may come to repentance. In the implementation of the excommunication mention is made of the fact that the elders and the congregation have tried everything to bring him to repentance and that their responsibilities—in the ecclesiastical sense—have come to an end. The judgement, however, remains conditional. A person who has

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<sup>42</sup> See my article, *The Sinews Of The Church, Biblical Principles Concerning Church Discipline* to be found at: <http://anderson.modelcrafts.eu/articles>

<sup>43</sup> There may always be unusual circumstances, as for instance when someone, while under discipline, withdraws because of moving to a country where there are no sister churches. The consistory will only be able to exhort him to join the church of Christ there and to repent of his sins. He fits into category two.

been excommunicated can always return if he shows remorse. But until he does, he remains excluded from the office bearers' care for the church.

For these reasons there can be no objection to making an announcement in the final declaration of the consistory by which his membership in the church is terminated and the sinner's standing with regard to the kingdom of heaven is stated. On the contrary, there is every reason to make clear to the sinner, as well as the congregation, the seriousness of the matter.

### 3. PROPOSED RESOLUTIONS

In conjunction with the preceding I propose that the following decisions be taken:

- 1) The consistory decides that in all cases of withdrawal a judicial declaration be made by which the membership of the person concerned is terminated and in which the consistory shall give a clear explanation of its responsibility for this.
- 2) The consistory decides in cases of withdrawal for reasons which warrant church discipline, ...
  - a) to make an announcement to the congregation several weeks before the judicial declaration. In this announcement the desire of the person involved to withdraw shall be made known and the congregation shall be exhorted to pray for him and to admonish him in a brotherly manner.
  - b) to announce in the judicial declaration that, if the person involved does not come to repentance, he will remain outside the kingdom of Christ, according to the form for the Lord's Supper celebration.

#### APPENDIX: EXAMPLES OF DISCIPLINE CASES FROM THE FIRST DECADES OF THE 17TH CENTURY

##### 1615 The Consistory of Krommenie<sup>44</sup>

From the minutes of 27 Sept. 1615 we learn that Jan Arisz. and his wife were finally excommunicated. They had joined the Baptist church (Mennonites) already at the end of 1612. During the ensuing three years they were officially under discipline and subject to the admonition of the elders of the Reformed church.

##### 1618 The Consistory of Assendelft<sup>45</sup>

From the minutes of 11 Dec. 1618 we read the following:

The congregation was informed that Pieter Dircksz. and Geurt Willems, members of our congregation, who left the church of God and returned to the papal blindness and superstition, and who have been frequently reprimanded for this and seriously admonished to distance themselves, nevertheless remain in their evil ways. Let everyone be admonished by this announcement in his duty to pray for them and to use every good opportunity to admonish them if God will give them some time in order that they repent and acknowledge the truth, and that they may escape from the will of the devil as they leave his path through whom they have been imprisoned.

From the minutes of 1 Aug. 1620 we read:

The congregation was informed that Pieter Dircksz., who in the past had fallen into error and foolishness, through God's grace has been brought back. Implore therefore the good congregation that they, taking account of the common weaknesses of our human nature, accept him in good will and bury everything in the fire of Christian love.

##### 1620 The Provincial Synod of South Holland convened at Gouda<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> A. Th. van Deursen, *Bavianen*, 125-26.

<sup>45</sup> A. Th. van Deursen, *Bavianen*, 406, 413.

<sup>46</sup> J. Reitsma and S. D. van Veen (ed.), *Acta*, 3.420-21. See also F. L. Rutgers, *College Voordrachten*, 86.

This synod had to deal with an appeal from the “friends of Bertius” in connection with the (according to them) too hasty disciplinary procedure against Petrus Bertius of Leiden by his consistory. Bertius (a well-known Arminian) had gone to Paris on a business trip and had there become Roman Catholic. The synod gave him three additional months to reconsider and return to the Reformed church after which he (while he was still in Paris) was excommunicated by his consistory in Leiden. The Acts read as follows:

Art. 26. It is earnestly requested by the deputies of classis Leiden on behalf of the friends of Petrus Bertius, though they do understand that he by his grievous fall and apostasy deserves the utmost and sharpest censure of the church, that nevertheless not only church discipline be postponed yet for a certain time but also (as much as possible and as ecclesiastical justice would bear) that he be very mildly dealt with, because his friends are of the opinion that, not being of sound mind, he has acted more from mental derangement than from informed and considered judgement. The meeting having weighed everything of relevance in this matter, in the fear of the Lord, finding his fall very grievous and abhorrent, nevertheless, having considered the aforementioned request, deems it appropriate that Bertius not be overtaken by a hasty procedure, and to grant him the time of three months for reconsideration and that in the meantime this synod shall write to the [Reformed] church at Paris, to please admonish him for his falling away, requesting a report of their undertaking in order that (having obtained this) in due course, at the expiry of the three months, to proceed with the excommunication, unless the case be that he satisfactorily complies to their order and subscribes to the forms of unity as well as the canons of the national synod.

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