

## WITHDRAWAL/RESIGNATION FROM THE CHURCH

A study report approved  
by the Synod of the Free Reformed Churches of North America held in June 2009  
(Acts of Synod 2009, Article 25)

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**I. 2008 Overture from Vineland FRC**

To Synod of the Free Reformed Churches 2008

Dear Brothers,

The Consistory of the Vineland Free Reformed Church has recently been faced with two situations regarding confessing members who, while under the process of discipline, withdrew their memberships from our church. Their action and our subsequent and reluctant agreement to their requests have given rise to some discussion as to whether our response was proper, both Biblical and church orderly. Accordingly, the Vineland Consistory has found it desirable to seek further guidance and advice.

Considering that:

- 1) there is no clearly defined response process outlined in our church order regarding matters such as this;
- 2) there is a spiritual dimension to church membership and that the church is a theocracy in submission to Christ her head;
- 3) we recognize generally accepted institutional practices such as the right to apply, transfer and withdraw memberships in any organization or institution;
- 4) we respect the courts of the land, who have in the past protected requests (disputed and otherwise) to withdraw one's membership from an institution or organization and have penalized those who have for various reasons refused to grant such requests;
- 5) it is quite possible that our denomination will see an increase in issues like this in years to come;
- 6) this is a complex issue and that when it was brought to the 2007 Combined Consistory meeting it generated much discussion;
- 7) the Vineland Consistory was advised by the 2007 Combined Consistory meeting to bring this to the floor of Synod 2008 by means of an overture.

The Consistory of the Vineland Free Reformed Church overtures Synod 2008

to appoint an ad hoc study committee or to increase the mandate of the existing ad hoc Legal Affairs Committee to research this matter; provide advice; and to possibly expand our church order to better cover questions such as this, giving special attention to points two and four above

On behalf of the Vineland Free Reformed Church with Christian Greetings

President

Secretary

Garry Postma

Martin Grin

## II. Biblical principles concerning withdrawal<sup>1</sup>

### A. Nature of the church

The *Belgic Confession* affirms that we believe and profess, one catholic or universal Church (Art. 27). It continues by affirming that outside it there is no salvation, that no person of whatsoever state or condition, he may be, ought to withdraw himself, to live in a separate state from it; but that all men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with it. (Art. 28) This one universal church manifests itself in local congregations. This confirms how foolish it is for anyone to resign his membership from the local manifestation of the body of Christ. The *Belgic Confession* rightly affirms in article 28 that “all those, who separate themselves from the same [the church of Christ as manifested in a local church]...act contrary to the ordinance of God.”

These truths have implications for how we deal with members in their request for withdrawal. We need to understand that when a member separates from the body of Christ as she is manifested locally, that they are outside the kingdom of God. This highlights the seriousness of one’s request to withdraw from the congregation.

These truths also have implications for how we receive members from other churches. It is foolish for an individual to think that he or she can resign membership from one congregation and simply join another. Christ has only one body, or one church, and therefore it is not possible that one can withdraw from one manifestation of the church of Christ and join another. The practice of some churches accepting individuals who have resigned, or even those who have been excommunicated, without through investigation is a denial of the one body of Christ. Relating to this practice, John Murray states: *...we must also take into account the whole church and we must be as jealous for the discipline exercised by other bodies as well as our own denomination.* (Collected Works, 2.384)

### B. Vows in the church

When a person makes public profession of faith the professing individual answers several questions by making a vow to the Lord. One of the questions to which a person is asked to answer affirmatively is: *Will you submit to church government, and in case you should become delinquent (which may God graciously forbid) to church discipline?* Another formulation of this question is: *Do you promise that you will submit and subject yourself to the instruction and admonition of the church and to church discipline, in case you should become delinquent (which GOD graciously forbid) either in doctrine or in life?*

When a person answers this question in the affirmative such a one is making a vow in the public assembly of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ and makes this solemn vow in the presence of the Head of the church, Jesus Christ Himself. This vow is made without any coercion and only after having received instruction about the meaning of these words. In this vow, the confessor is promising that if the need should arise because of a doctrinal or moral misdemeanour, to submit to the procedures of Christian discipline.

When someone resigns while under ecclesiastical discipline, such a person is brazenly breaking that vow! In the act of resignation he or she is rejecting the rule of Christ that is vested in the representative rule of the lawfully ordained elders (cf. Matt. 16:19; 18:18; HC. Q. #85).

### C. Authority in the church

Consequently, when resignation of membership occurs while under church discipline, the vow made by confession of faith is broken and such a person commits sin against the fifth commandment by refusing to submit to the God-ordained authority vested in the church. According to the *Heidelberg Catechism*, God requires from the Christian in the fifth commandment that he or she will “*submit myself to their good instruction and correction, with due obedience*” (Q. #104). Indeed, Hebrews 13:17 instructs the Christian to “*obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls...*” In contrast, the act of resignation while under Christian discipline is a

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<sup>1</sup> The words *resignation* and *withdrawal* will be used interchangeably in this paper.

Most of the material in sections A-C of *Biblical Principles concerning withdrawal* comes from an excellent article published in the October 2006 of *The Outlook* titled *The Ungodly Departure* by Rev. Greg Lubbers who is pastor of the Covenant United Reformed Church of Byron Center, MI. Some of it is copied verbatim while other parts are summarized or changed for our context. Used in this way with his permission.

blatant refusal and obstinate rejection of the authority of the elders of the church and therefore an obstinate rejection of the authority of Christ Himself (cf. Matt. 18:18).

In this context, it must be understood that the authority of the elders is not a self-derived dictatorial authority. Rather, it is an authority derived from Christ, the Mediator, who has delegated this authority to specific individuals in particular spheres of church life. One body of individuals and one sphere of authority is the consistory (or church council), which has authority in the ecclesiastical life of the church members. This delegation of authority to the church is illustrated in Matthew 16:19, where Christ says to Peter, a representative of the church, *“And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”* Therefore, elders of the church of Jesus Christ do not act on their own authority in matters of Christian discipline, but exercise the biblical authority that is delegated to them, i.e. is the authority of Christ. John Calvin states this truth powerfully when he writes, *“Therefore, that no one may stubbornly despise the judgment of the church, or think it immaterial that he has been condemned by the vote of the believers, the Lord testifies that such judgment by believers is nothing but the proclamation of his own sentence, and that whatever they have done on earth is ratified in heaven”* (Institutes, 4.9.2).

However, the objection is often raised by resigning church members that the elders did not perform church discipline correctly. This fact ought to be humbly admitted by all consistories and elders. Is there a person in authority, except for Christ, who ever exercised their authority perfectly? Would any parent ever discipline a child before first proving perfection in parenting? The *Heidelberg Catechism* realizes the existence of infirmities in those who hold positions of authority and therefore exhorts those under authority to *“patiently bear with their weaknesses and infirmities, since it pleases God to govern us by their hand”* (Q. #104). Therefore, the question is not if the discipline was enacted in a perfect manner, but rather whether the discipline was enacted in a biblically faithful manner.

In addition, if the actions of the elders fall short of the standards and are unbiblical in exercising their authority, Reformed church polity provides avenues of appeal to the broader assemblies. For instance, the *Church Order of the Free Reformed Churches of North America* states that, *“If any one complain that he has been wronged by the decision of a minor assembly, he shall have the right to appeal to a major ecclesiastical assembly... (Article 31)*. Therefore, a resigning member who has not exhausted all avenues of appeal and demonstrated the unbiblical nature of their discipline to the broadest ecclesiastical assembly should not be granted the opportunity to vent their frustration with the actions of the elders of the church. Sad to say, often the resigning member finds eager ears that are more than willing to listen and negatively critique the elders’ actions. Such actions are clearly contrary to the fifth commandment.

#### ***D. Membership in the church***

Today, there are many who are questioning the need to be a member of a local manifestation of the church of Jesus Christ. They question whether becoming and **remaining** a member of a local congregation is necessary? Can I not be a Christian without being a member of a local congregation? Isn’t membership in the ‘church universal’ or ‘church invisible’ sufficient? Increasingly, these are the types of questions consistories in our culture are facing. This kind of thinking also lies behind many of those who resign their church membership.

While there may not be a Bible text stating explicitly that membership in a local body is a requirement, there is ample evidence that membership is a requirement in a local manifestation of the body of Christ, i.e. His church. Several reasons can be given from Scripture and our Confessions.

#### **1. The testimony of Scripture**

- 1) It is impossible to conceive of **preaching** without context of a local congregation. God has ordained preaching as the primary means of grace for the salvation and edification of His people. (Rom. 10:14-17) No one has any authority to preach unless lawfully called of God, which He does through the instituted church. Not even the apostle Paul, who was personally commissioned by Jesus Christ, dared to preach without being sent by an instituted church (Acts 13:1-3). A man may not preach unless he is sent (Rom. 10:14-15). Christ gives preachers to the church and the church sends them to preach (Eph. 4:11).

- 2) It is impossible to conceive of the proper administration of the **sacraments** without the context of a local congregation. The sacraments also, may only be administered by men lawfully ordained by the church. Without church membership one cannot be baptized and one cannot receive the Lord's Supper, which God has given to strengthen our faith. One who wilfully refuses to become a member of a true church spurns the gifts God has given to the church for its edification and salvation. Such a "disobedient sheep" is "outside the sheepfold and... is obliged to join it."<sup>2</sup>
- 3) It is impossible to conceive of the proper administration of **church discipline** without the context of a local congregation. Paul instructs the Corinthian congregation to *judge those who are inside*, implying that these people are members of the congregation. They are told to *put away* the wicked man, implying that this person was to be put outside their fellowship (1 Cor. 5:12-13). Furthermore, the entire procedure given in Matthew 18:15-20 is not possible to implement except there is particular and recognizable membership in a local congregation.
- 4) The Bible clearly speaks of members submitting to the body of elders implying that they are under their oversight by being members of a local body of Christ. (Heb. 13:7, 17) Furthermore, elders are called to the office by Christ through the ministry of the church since no one can take this office to himself. It is impossible to conceive of offices in the church apart from the local congregation.
- 5) Several times in the Book of Acts the phrase, "*The Lord added to their number daily*," is recorded. The church recorded who was becoming a part of the body of Christ. Other places in Acts reaffirm the practice of "*adding to their number*" (Acts 2:47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:1,7; 9:31; 11:21; 16:5).
- 6) The New Testament explicitly warns that we are not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together as is the habit of some. We are to *encourage one another as we see the day approaching*, which can only be done as a result of being a member of a local church (Heb. 10:25-26).
- 7) The New Testament continually refers to the use of one's gifts within the body of Christ, which is impossible to do unless there are particular bodies where one uses his or her gifts (Rom. 12; 1 Cor. 12). The church is the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27) and the members of that body exist in co-dependence with one another. One member may not say to another, "*I have no need of thee*" (1 Cor. 12:21). Neither may members be disinterested and act as if they have no need of any of the other members of the body, which is the church.

## 2. The testimony of the Confessions

Our Reformed church fathers recognized the necessity of local church membership and this conviction has been recorded in our Confessions. The *Heidelberg Catechism* addresses the subject of the church in Lord's Day 21. In Q. & A. 55, we read concerning the communion of the saints that "*everyone must know it to be his duty, readily and cheerfully to employ his gifts, for the advantage and salvation of other members.*" The Catechism clearly and explicitly states that we are to be members of the local body of Christ. Our membership is not only for our personal benefit but for that of others as well! P.Y. De Jong expresses it this way:

To be a Christian means to have fellowship with the living Christ and in the same moment with his people. To break this fellowship lightly, on the basis of personal prejudices and insights, is to imperil our salvation.<sup>3</sup>

The *Belgic Confession* insists emphatically on this point. In **Article 28** it lays down an absolute rule. It states: "*...it is the duty of believers according to the word of God, to separate themselves from all those who do not belong to the church, and to join themselves to **this congregation**, wherever God hath established it.*" This article adds, "*even though the magistrates and edicts of princes were against it, yea, though they should suffer death or any other corporal punishment.*" The *Belgic Confession* emphasizes the members' duty of "*submitting themselves to the doctrine and discipline [of the church]*" and "*bowing their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ*" (Article 28). Mere attendees and casually interested people cannot do this.

The threat of the magistrates and the princes' edicts and corporal punishment are not empty words. In the Netherlands when the *Belgic Confession* was written (1561), believers were risking their life when they left the false church (in that context, Rome) and joined the Reformed churches. Guido de Brès, the author of the *Belgic*

<sup>2</sup> J. van Bruggen, *The Church Says Amen: An Exposition of the Belgic Confession* (Neerlandia, Alberta, Canada: Inheritance Publications, 2003),

<sup>3</sup> Peter Y. De Jong, *The Church's Witness to the World*, vol. 2 (Pella, IA: Pella Publishing Inc., 1962), pg. 242.

*Confession*, was martyred. If believers in the sixteenth century were willing to risk their lives to join a Reformed church, what ought to be said of the many professing believers today who are not willing to undergo any inconvenience to join a true church?

The *Westminster Confession* expresses the necessity of church membership when it says that outside of the church is "no ordinary possibility of salvation" (25:2).

The *French Confession* (1559) is very similar to the *Belgic Confession* on this point:

We believe that no one ought to seclude himself and be contented to be alone; but that all jointly should keep and maintain the union of the Church, and submit to the public teaching, and to the yoke of Jesus Christ (Article 26).<sup>4</sup>

When the Confessions say that outside the church there is no salvation, they do not intend to consign everyone but church members to hell. Rather, they wanted to emphasize the importance of church membership and the seriousness of separating from the local Christian church. C. Bouwman, in his explanation on the *Belgic Confession* states:

God has ordained that salvation is made available for mankind not in the bush or on the beach, nor in the flock of the hireling (John 10:12); salvation is available where Christ is, where His voice is heard... If I no longer hear and heed God's Word and Law today, I also deprive my children and grandchildren of hearing God's Word. Withdrawal from the church is not a decision for the self only, but it has implications for future generations.<sup>5</sup>

We see, therefore, that the prevalent notion, that Christians do not need church membership is not shared by our Reformed church fathers, many of them sealing their commitment to a particular congregation with their very blood.

### III. Reformed Synods<sup>6</sup>

#### A. Reformed church polity<sup>7</sup> of the 16th and 17th century

Reformed church polity 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>8</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>9</sup>

#### 1578 - The National Synod convened at Dordrecht<sup>10</sup>

The situation that 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 used their own authority to start 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.)

#### 1579 - The Particular Synod of South Holland convened at Schoonhoven<sup>11</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, repr. 1983), vol. 3, pp. 374-375.

<sup>5</sup> C. Bouwman, Notes on the Belgic Confession (Western Australia: The League of Free Reformed Women's Bible Study Societies in Australia and Pro Ecclesia Publishers: Kelmscott, 1997), pp. 114-115.

<sup>6</sup> The content of Sections A-E, H of this section of *Reformed Synods* are from a paper of R.D. Anderson titled *Reformed Church Polity Concerning Withdrawal of Church Membership* found at <<http://katwijk.gkv.nl/anderson/pdfenglish/withdrawal.pdf>> January 27, 2009. It is used with permission. No footnote references nor his bibliography are included so if more detail is required consult the original paper at the website above. Some editorial changes have been made and others to suit the FRCNA setting.

<sup>7</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>8</sup> F.L. Rutgers (ed.) *Acta*, 158. This "provincial" synod acquired a national character and authority.

<sup>9</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>10</sup> W. van 't Spijker (ed.), *Acta*, 145.

<sup>11</sup> J. Reitsma and S. D. van Veen (ed.), *Acta*, 2.177.

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>12</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 judgment of the consistory and classis is considered to be upbuilding.

In the revision of the church order of Dort of 1578 that synod 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 clearer from the scholarly research of Professor Van Deursen regarding the churches in the province of Holland in the first few decades of the 17th century. Van Deursen summarizes 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 register because he had joined the Roman Catholic Church. He continues:

Such a request was never acceded to. It seems that the conviction generally held 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 more accepted in his own circle. If rebaptism had occurred the 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>13</sup>

After the synod of Dort 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 Dort these churches were officially recognized 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

<sup>12</sup> F. L. Rutgers (ed.), *Acta* 424, 449, 405.

<sup>13</sup> A. Th. van Deursen, *Bavianen*, 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.

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>14</sup>

That the general discipline policy for cases of withdrawal remained in force later in the 17th century is clear from the following decision of the Provincial Synod of Utrecht.<sup>15</sup>

#### **1674 - The Provincial Synod convened at Utrecht<sup>16</sup>**

The following question of the classis of Amersfoort was:

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?

The answer given was:

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

As these decisions make clear, the administration of discipline in the Reformed churches in the 16th and 17th centuries was somewhat different from what has become a custom among us. Normally, the only way 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>17</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 Dort 1618/19. Such patience was also recommended for applicable cases in the decision of the synod of Middelburg 1581. We do see however in the decision of Dort 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 ecclesiastical 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. It is worthy of note that when we trace all these decisions the entire procedure of suspension from the 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. The only recognized procedure by which membership could be terminated was the procedure of excommunication as stated in the church order. The notion that a person, of his own volition, could withdraw church membership was systematically rejected.

By way of summary it is clear that two points from the original Reformed church polity are of importance:

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

<sup>14</sup> See A. Th. van Deursen, *Bavianen*, 351 ff.

<sup>15</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 realize that in the 17th 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 19th century.

<sup>16</sup> A. C. Duker, *Gisbertius Voetius*, volume 3, appendix 28.

<sup>17</sup> For Rutgers' view on the church polity of that time see below.

## **B. The church polity of the Secession**

The second synod (“meeting”) of the seceded congregations took place in Utrecht in 1837. During this synod a beginning was made to draw up a new church order. A number of articles had been drafted about membership in the church of Christ, such as how one becomes a member, and, of course, how membership can be terminated. It is remarkable that no mention is made of withdrawal and the only way membership could be discontinued is by means of excommunication. Two articles clearly show this:

Art.4. The aforementioned confessors 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 for some period of time placed him under discipline. ....<sup>18</sup>

The synod of 1841 returned to the church order of Dort, which, as far as it applies to our subject, brought no change. This historic church order also identifies excommunication as the only way to terminate membership and made no mention at all of withdrawal (which did not have legitimacy in the 17th century).

In 1846 the synod of Groningen had to give advice in a difficult matter. There was a minister (Rev. Ledeboer) who instituted new churches, partly including members from already existing churches. Of course, this conduct was 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 who had to deal with members who left an existing congregation in order to become members of a congregation belonging to that minister, to proceed “with all caution.” Synod advised against excommunication in these cases, and instead, recommended that they be informed “that they, because of their manner of conduct, could no longer be recognized as belonging to the congregation.” This special ruling (for people who were clearly still upright believers and now belonged to congregations which might still belong to the church federation) confirms the rule that normally membership can be terminated only by the use of the Form for excommunication.<sup>19</sup> At the synod of Leiden in 1857 this culminated in a proposal, brought 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 were to be regarded as standing outside the communion of the church.”<sup>20</sup> Whether this proposal, taken after much discussion, was actually adopted is not clear from the Acts of Synod. These ministers (with their congregations) apparently would no longer be considered to be 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 the 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>21</sup> The wording “without separation in form” probably refers to the fact that as far as it concerned these church members, “otherwise nothing can be held against their doctrine and conduct” (decision of 1846).<sup>22</sup>

We meet another form of exception at the synod of Amsterdam of 1849. It seemed that members would sometimes move elsewhere without requesting an attestation of membership. Aside from the fact 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>23</sup>

At the synod of Franeker of 1863 a major reversal in the handling of those who have withdrawn from the church took place.<sup>24</sup> In connection with a request for advice concerning a particular 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

<sup>18</sup> *Handelingen*, 112,. See also pp. 104, 109-110.

<sup>19</sup> *Handelingen*, 409. The brief quote in F. L. Bos, *Orde*, 278, does no justice to the context of this decision.

<sup>20</sup> *Handelingen*, 678-79.

<sup>21</sup> *Handelingen*, 712.

<sup>22</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 a forsaking of the church without notification of intent, was then 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>23</sup> *Handelingen*, 466.

<sup>24</sup> *Handelingen*, 862-63.

such ought not to be dealt with in an ecclesiastical manner, according to the church order of Dordrecht of 1618/19.” It is unclear how her consistory had actually dealt with this. In any case, the following decision was eventually taken:

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 should 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 other 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 regarding those who thought they could act upon their own withdrawal was opened. A traditional Reformed practice was set aside. It reflects an entirely different view of membership in the church. Who determines when someone is no longer a member? The individual or the consistory? Until this time the Reformed churches acknowledged that ultimately the responsibility for determining membership belonged to the consistory. From this moment on the individual was granted that prerogative. In fact, the ecclesiastical way of applying the church order of Dort was dismissed in cases of withdrawal of membership.

At the next synod of Amsterdam 1866, the provincial synod of North Holland submitted a gravamen (protest) against this decision, which demanded that the controversial decision be repealed because it was in conflict with the church order of Dort 1619.<sup>25</sup> After much discussion, synod decided not to respond to this gravamen. This time, all the faculty members of the Theological School in attendance at the synod requested that the Acts record that this synodical decision was “taken against their advice.” Immediately thereafter, a similar gravamen submitted by the provincial synod of South Holland, came up for discussion.<sup>26</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 subjected to ecclesiastical admonition, terminates his membership in the congregation, the consistory shall deal with him accordingly as required by the circumstances. This decision now allowed latitude for both views in respect to church membership and the exercise of church discipline against those who withdraw from the church.

At the synod of Middelburg of 1869, a new gravamen was tabled from the provincial synod of North-Holland.<sup>27</sup> The provincial synod demanded that the decisions of the synods of 1863 and 1866 be “expunged.” After discussion this request was shelved.

Thus there remained a situation 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 membership attestations.

That synod determined that in normal circumstances attestations remain valid no more than six months following departure, and that a person who does not comply should not immediately lose his membership, but be dealt with in an ecclesiastical manner.<sup>28</sup>

This reminds us of the case of discipline in the church at Molkwerum in 1699, which illustrates the idea that a person remains a member of a local church until he or she actually hands in the attestation of membership elsewhere. If the attestation is not handed in elsewhere that is, of course, equivalent to withdrawal. This provincial synod, by way of this proposal, attempted to make the disciplinary procedure obligatory in such cases of withdrawal.

<sup>25</sup> *Handelingen*, 920. The gravamen refers to the 162nd sitting of the *Post-Acta* of the Synod of Dort. 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 neglectful in this matter.”

<sup>26</sup> *Handelingen*, 920-21.

<sup>27</sup> *Handelingen*, 1017-18.

<sup>28</sup> *Acta*, 54-55.

When the vote deadlocked, synod was unable to make a decision. The situation remained unchanged, i.e., freedom to act arbitrarily.

The provincial synod of Drenthe requested the General Synod of Leeuwarden 1891 to further clarify the decision of the Synod of Leiden 1857 in how to deal with those who “without separation in form withdraw from the communion of our church.”<sup>29</sup> It appeared that some churches misused this decision by interpreting 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 only with a view to the members of the churches of Rev. Ledebouer (who functioned outside the fellowship of the churches). In addition, 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 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 the practice of concluding that a withdrawal had taken place without an explicit statement to that effect from the person concerned.

In cases where members who did not deviate in doctrine or conduct crossed over to another (not false) church of Christ or instituted their own house congregation, the rule of 1846 applied, whereby the consistory, instead of applying the procedure for excommunication, made an official pronouncement declaring that the person involved was no longer recognized as a member of the congregation because of the way he or she acted.<sup>30</sup> The original objective of the decision of 1846 was to create an exception for those cases, because otherwise the members who had withdrawn had to remain under discipline, up to and including excommunication (using the Form). After 1863, it became possible for consistories to accept withdrawal of membership, but it continued to give the churches the freedom to continue with the disciplinary procedure.

### **C. 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 by Kuyper published in 1890 (*Separation and Doleantie*, J. A. Wormser: Amsterdam) the foundations are laid for their ideas about church membership and the consequences for the administration of church discipline.<sup>31</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 also never be forced to remain a member. His own choice is determinative. (Thus the idea that no disciplinary pronouncement can be made against someone who of his or her own volition relinquishes church membership). For her part, the church is also free to act. She is free to take up contact and associate with local churches and can never be forced to prolong someone’s membership (the right to excommunicate someone who wants to remain a member).

The Bible, however, doesn’t make that distinction. To illustrate: the body of Christ is a description for the unity of the local church (see 1 Cor. 10 and 12). This point was strongly defended by Professor 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>32</sup>

Nevertheless, these Kuyperian ideas about church membership consolidated and interpreted by Prof. F. L. Rutgers in his church political brochures became predominant in the Reformed churches. It is remarkable that Rutgers appears to have assumed that this was also the church polity of the 16th and 17th century.<sup>33</sup> In his lectures on church polity, which were posthumously published, Rutgers concedes that there is tension between the practice of

<sup>29</sup> *Acta*, 24-25.

<sup>30</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>31</sup> This brochure is discussed by D. Deddens in “Het Doleantiekkerrecht,” 91-94.

<sup>32</sup> Discussion by Deddens, *op.cit.*, 97-98.

<sup>33</sup> See *Kerkelijke Adviezen*, 2.305 (an advice from 1910). Unfortunately Rutgers fails entirely to support his premise.

the Reformed churches in the 16th and 17th century and those of his time (which in his opinion were correct).<sup>34</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 that 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 church, and yet ought to be put out of it.<sup>35</sup> That his assessment of history at this point was incorrect has been shown by historical research after his time and is summarized 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>36</sup> The church polity of Kuyper and Rutgers at this point is diametrically opposed to that of the Reformed churches in history. 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.

#### **D. The church polity of the GKN (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>37</sup> It was not long before the matter of church discipline for withdrawals of church membership 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 that indeed 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) emphasize 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. Here we see 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 with the announcement 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>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup> *College Voordrachten*, 86-87.

<sup>35</sup> See for instance, *Kerkelijke Adviezen*, 2.250.

<sup>36</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>37</sup> Some seceded churches did not take part in this union. These were the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken* (in Canada, *Free Reformed Churches*).

<sup>38</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. Ledeboer.

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 still a member and a refusal to listen to the admonition of that consistory.<sup>39</sup> This exception agrees with one already given by Prof. Rutgers in an ecclesiastical advice in 1909.<sup>40</sup>

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), have to 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>41</sup>

We must be aware that in the time after the union of 1892 there was quite some 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>42</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 done without a conscientious and careful procedure.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</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>40</sup> *Kerkelijke Adviezen*, 2.308.

<sup>41</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>42</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>43</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 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).

## ***The church polity of the GKN – Liberated***

Nothing can be said about the “church polity” after the liberation<sup>44</sup>, 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 that 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 (Regarding the Holiness of the Congregation)*, 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>45</sup>

The advice from Prof. Te Velde of June 14, 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 to it. 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 judgment 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 judgment, it has a judicial character.<sup>46</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>47</sup>

That this equivalency is unjustified is proven by the fact that the Form for Excommunication included with 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 making a public declaration about someone’s standing. She has to limit herself to a qualifying declaration about tangible conduct.<sup>48</sup>

## ***F. Synods of the Free Reformed Churches of North America (FRCNA)***

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<sup>44</sup> This is a reference to the *Vrijmaking* (“Liberation”, that is: from synodal authority), which occurred in 1944, when the [Reformed Churches in the Netherlands \(Liberated\)](#) (*Gereformeerde Kerken vrijgemaakt*) split off from the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. (added by jk)

<sup>45</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>46</sup> *Advies*, Par. 8.

<sup>47</sup> *Loc.cit.*

<sup>48</sup> *Op.cit.* Par. 12.

While there has been a great deal of discussion at synodical and consistorial level regarding the withdrawal of membership, there is very little recorded officially. The only reference to resignations is a report to Synod 1981 and as a result the reference to it in article 77 of the church order.

#### **Article 77 - Acts of Synod 1981<sup>49</sup>**

The two recommendations which were approved at Synod 1981 are as follows:

- 1) That preference be given to the current stipulation in Article 77<sup>50</sup>, sub 1, namely to deal with delinquent members according to the procedure of ecclesiastical discipline;
- 2) Further, that a passive resignation as outlined in the above respect does not conflict with the nature and the character of the church.

These recommendations were adopted and incorporated into our present CO in article 77. Synod 1981 adopted the idea that *'a passive recommendation...does not conflict with the nature and character of the church'* but did so in a particular context. The basis for this decision was a decision made by the CGK in 1962. However, it is clear from article 95<sup>51</sup> that they (CGKN) were speaking of members who *regularly withdraw themselves from the worship services in their own denomination by usual church attendance elsewhere.*<sup>52</sup> Now if they are still regularly worshipping in another church it is true that does not necessarily *conflict with the nature and character of the church.* However, this does not legitimize dealing with the *passive resignation* of those who are **not** attending church in other denominations or are living in censurable sin. Clearly, in those instances, someone is acting contrary to the nature and character of the church by resigning either actively or passively. The Belgic Confession is abundantly clear how separation from the church is to be understood when it states *"that no person of whatsoever state or condition he may be, ought to withdraw himself, to live in a separate state from it; but that all men are in duty bound to join and unit themselves to it..."* (Belgic Confession, Article 28).

### **G. 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 16th and 17th 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 attacked this optional acceptance of withdrawal. The churches of the Doleantie have from the beginning given in to withdrawals. 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. 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.

The FRCNA has never really addressed the issue of withdrawals from the church. We have only considered withdrawal of membership in the context of members who are in regular attendance in another church. However, we have never formally addressed the withdrawal of membership in other contexts such as discipline or apostasy.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>49</sup> See Appendix #2 for full CO report

<sup>50</sup> See Appendix #1 for full text of article 77

<sup>51</sup> C.G.K. Acta 1962, Article 95

<sup>52</sup> See C.G. K. Acta 1962, article 95 as translated and quoted in FRC Acts 1981 given in Appendix #2

<sup>53</sup> This paragraph is not part of R.D. Anderson's paper

#### IV. 19<sup>th</sup> Century Presbyterian Discussion between Dabney and Thornwell<sup>54</sup>

This question (*Should a resignation be accepted?* jk) arose in the Presbyterian Church in the nineteenth century in connection with the revision of the book of discipline. In 1857 a committee consisting of Charles Hodge in the north and James Henley Thornwell in the south, among other luminaries, was commissioned to prepare a new manual of discipline. This committee concluded that church membership was voluntary: accordingly, it held that one who resigned his membership on the grounds of unbelief should simply be "erased" from the rolls of the church, but without further ado other than perhaps announcement of the erasure.<sup>55</sup> Thornwell wrote in defence of this position:

Every man has a right to withdraw from the Church whenever he pleases, in the sense explained in our former article -- a right in the sense that no human authority has the right to detain him. As before God, he has no more right to apostatize than to commit any other sin. He is bound to believe and keep the commandments. But men have no commission to force him to do either. If he wants to go, they must let him go. "They went out from us," says the Apostle -- not that they were expelled, but they went out of their own accord, freely, voluntarily -- "because they were not of us." They found themselves in the wrong place, and they left it.<sup>56</sup>

Thornwell was careful to define the "right" of defection, not as if the defector had such a right before God, but rather in the sense of the absence of any right to obstruct him in his defection.<sup>57</sup> Note carefully, however, that Thornwell also excludes the case where offences worthy of discipline have occurred.<sup>58</sup> He focused on the case of a man who quietly and "inoffensively" renounces the faith and wishes peacefully to withdraw. Nevertheless, even in this tightly restricted case, Dabney, in responding to the proposed change took up the gauntlet in no uncertain terms: *"The attempt has been made several times in General Assemblies -- as in 1848 and 1851 -- to establish this most sweeping, mischievous and un-Presbyterian usage."*<sup>59</sup> Dabney's objections to Thornwell's view centre chiefly on the following considerations.<sup>60</sup>

- (1) The rule (allowing simple resignation) would in practice provide a ready escape-hatch for those in danger of being cited for sin, and effectively put an end to church discipline of any kind.
- (2) The rule is premised on a falsehood, namely, that unbelief is not a disciplinable sin.
- (3) Consequently, church sessions would be remiss before God in relinquishing their duty before God to exercise discipline on such grounds.
- (4) Moreover, there are only two kingdoms, that of Christ and that of Satan; dismissal from the church can only be to the kingdom of Satan, and (ironically) it would be overly harsh to so relegate a church member to the kingdom of Satan, or to absent the wholesome presence of the fatherly censures of the church, before outward behavior of a scandalous sort made it obligatory and necessary to do so.

Reading Dabney's arguments today makes it clear how far, in just a little over a century, even the conservative Reformed churches have departed from the standards of their forefathers. We are barely in a position to even follow the debates. Just one citation from the extended passage is presented to show how not just our practice but our very way of thinking about issues has radically shifted.

Are not avowed impenitence and unbelief incompatible with Christian character, and does not their tolerance in communicants "bring disgrace or scandal" on the Romish and other communions, which formally allow it, in the eyes of all enlightened men? They are, then, a disciplinable offence. But hear Paul (1 Cor 16:22), "If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema Maranatha." Here we have the very formulary of excommunication

<sup>54</sup> Verbatim quote from Timothy J. Harris, *The Challenge and Beauty of Church Discipline*, ed. Center for Reformed Theology & Apologetics, January 27, 2009 <[http://www.reformed.org/webfiles/antithesis/index.html?mainframe=/webfiles/antithesis/v1n3/ant\\_v1n3\\_discip.html](http://www.reformed.org/webfiles/antithesis/index.html?mainframe=/webfiles/antithesis/v1n3/ant_v1n3_discip.html)>

<sup>55</sup> The exact text goes as follows: "In cases in which a communicating member of the church shall state in open court that he is persuaded in conscience that he is not converted, and has no right to come to the table of the Lord, and desired to withdraw from the communion of the church; if he has committed no offence which requires process, his name shall be stricken from the roll of communicants, and the fact, if deemed expedient, published in the congregation of which he is a member." Cited by R.L.Dabney, *Discussions*, Vol.II, p. 332.

<sup>56</sup> *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, Vol.4: Ecclesiastical, p. 370.

<sup>57</sup> "The right of a man to do a thing, and the right of others to hinder him, are entirely distinct, and yet, from the poverty of language, we are often compelled to represent the non-right of others to hinder as his right to do" Ibid. p. 324.

<sup>58</sup> "The injury they have done to [the church's] name and character they are as much bound to answer for as any other offenders, and they are not to be at liberty to plead the right of withdrawal as a cover for their crimes." Ibid. p. 371.

<sup>59</sup> R.L.Dabney, *Discussions*

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 332-339

pronounced, and it is against the man who "loves not the Lord Jesus Christ;" that is, just the man who, in modern phrase, avows himself as "lacking in the suitable qualifications for the Lord's supper."

The church, we hold, is solemnly bound to teach the same doctrine in her discipline which she preaches from her pulpits, otherwise she is an unscriptural church. She is bound to testify by her acts as well as her words, against the destructive and wicked delusion so prevalent in consequence of the wresting of the doctrines of grace, that because grace is sovereign, therefore, the failure to exercise gracious principles is rather man's misfortune than his fault. It is this dire delusion which hides from men the sinfulness of their hearts; it hath slain its ten thousands. With what consistency can the pulpit proclaim that unbelief is sin, and then send forth the same pastor into the session room to declare to the misguided transgressor, in the tenfold more impressive language of official acts, that it involves no censure, and that its bold avowal is rather creditable than blameworthy? Shall not the blood of souls be found on such a session?<sup>61</sup>

In dealing with this member who confesses to unbelief and wishes on those grounds to be released from the jurisdiction of church discipline, Dabney counsels extended, tender, and forbearing treatment on the part of the session, but with this difference from that proposed by the commission: "the session should do judicially, on the ground of his own avowal, what he had requested, except that they should *debar* him from the Lord's table until repentance, *instead of giving him license to neglect it.*"<sup>62</sup>

Though it is far from my desire to adjudicate between such giants of the modern church as Dabney and Thornwell, it does appear that Dabney met Thornwell's basic objection and presented a solid Scriptural case, one which rings true to a sound understanding both of human nature and of the Reformed understanding of the church.<sup>63</sup> Yes, the church is a voluntary organization with respect to outward compulsion; but there are only two kingdoms, and only to its own peril will the church pretend that there is a principle of freedom which supersedes the lifelong obligation of all who profess entry into the kingdom of light.

## V. Discussion

### A. *Membership is an inescapable biblical duty*

It is very clear by now, that church membership is inescapably a Christian duty which is clear from the testimony of Scripture and our confessions. The challenge we face today is that many members of our congregations are not aware of the biblically obligatory nature of their membership in the Christian church. Therefore, as churches we must emphasize church membership in our teaching ministries, particularly in light of the unbiblical thinking that is so prevalent today. The sharp distinction between the world and the church is being lost today and when we quickly accept resignations, the lines are blurred even more. In that light, Monsma and VanDellen wisely state:

We regard the resigning of one's membership as a very serious step. As a rule it is a very serious sin, for often it is resorted to in order to escape the full force of discipline. In such cases the consistory should not yield lightly and should refuse to acquiesce or accept a resignation unless the party concerned insists on resigning. The promises made and the obligations assumed at the time of confession of faith give a consistory the right to apply censure even to excommunication, and unless the sinner in question persists in severing his relationship with the church, the consistory ought to perform its full duty. No easy-going, weak sentimentality should cause a consistory to be remiss in its duty on this score. The sinner concerned and the church involved are both entitled to full exercise of discipline.<sup>64</sup>

### B. *Membership is legally voluntary*

However, what is also clear is that while church membership is obligatory with respect to the command of God, it is considered to be voluntary in a legal sense. Generally accepted institutional practices are that one has the right to

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid. p. 336

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. p. 338

<sup>63</sup> Thornwell's view however can hardly be cited by moderns in their defence: "The man is treated as an offender...the guilty party is solemnly, and by the sentence of a court of Jesus Christ, excluded from the fellowship of the saints, because the love of God is not in him. The sentence, too, is an awful one, the most awful that can be pronounced on earth save that of excommunication." *Collected Writings*, p.325.

<sup>64</sup> Idzerd VanDellen and Martin Monsma, *The Church Order Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1941), p. 294. (see appendix 3 for the broader context of this quote)

apply, transfer and withdraw memberships in any organization or institution. Our survey of Reformed history (from different historical backgrounds) shows that churches have struggled with a relationship that is legally voluntary while biblical obligatory. Acknowledging this tension Monsma and VanDellen state:

It is true that membership in the organized Church can never be forced and should remain to be the result of voluntary acts on the part of all its members. But it is also true that the members at the time of their confession of faith solemnly promised to be true to the church and to submit themselves to church discipline if discipline should become necessary. Resigning one's membership is a very grievous sin, and a consistory should proceed with censuring such a one unless he determinately persists in breaking his relationship with the church. Very often we fear consistories have accepted resignations rather quickly in order to be free from the sad duty of excommunicating the party in question. This should never be done. Discipline must ever run its full course unless the object of discipline makes it impossible. Then the full responsibility will also rest on his shoulders. And, Consistories should so labour with resigning members that they can truthfully announce to the churches that the utmost has been done to restrain the member in question from taking this step and that the responsibility is his.<sup>65</sup>

### ***C. General approach to withdrawals***

While the church orderly procedure of church discipline given in articles 71-78 is preferred, its use is more suited for those who must against their will be placed outside the church. In such cases, the procedure which requires the scrutiny of classis or synod is appropriate. However, it is questionable whether it is appropriate to undertake a lengthy disciplinary procedure if one no longer desires to be a member. Is he not, by his own request to resign, stating that he understands that he is outside the kingdom of God? If that is not his understanding of withdrawal of the church, it must be explained to him with the encouragement to retract his resignation. However, while we do not concede to him the right, nor the authority to discontinue his membership, his case is quite different than one who persists in his right to remain a member while living in sin. If one, who by his life or confession is living unrepentant and ungodly, his or her continued membership in the church compromises the gospel of Christ! That reason alone requires church discipline, in that case even if there were no other! However, one who by his or her own acknowledgement is an unbeliever and wishes to resign is doing what is proper to do in his or her unbelieving state. Such a person must be encouraged to repent and use the means of grace, but it is questionable whether church discipline in its formal structure is appropriate in this case. John seems to imply such a situation in 1 John 2:19 where 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.

R. Dean Anderson also advises such an approach regarding those who have resigned, believing that it is not unbiblical to let those go who insist on their withdrawal.

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.<sup>66</sup>

### ***D. Circumstances of withdrawal***

#### **1. Withdrawal while under formal discipline**

The elders receive a note of resignation from a member who has been placed under formal church discipline. How should a consistory deal with such a request? By far, most cases of withdrawal occur in this type of context. Someone with whom the formal process of discipline has already begun resigns from the church in order to escape the 'embarrassment' of formal excommunication. In this context, the brother has already been admonished of his sin

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. pg. 315 (see appendix 3 for the broader context of this quote)

<sup>66</sup> R.D. Anderson titled *Reformed Church Polity Concerning Withdrawal of Church Membership*, January 27, 2009  
<<http://katwijk.gkv.nl/anderson/pdfenglish/withdrawal.pdf>>

and encouraged to repent. He has also been informed that if he does not repent he will be outside of the kingdom of heaven. (Galatians 5:19-21) If someone persists in his sin, and when the procedure for discipline is complete, then it will be officially declared that they are outside the kingdom of heaven.

But now, what must be done if someone, while under discipline, resigns? He is by that very fact hardening himself in the sin for which he was being disciplined and is making his intentions known, very actively, that he does not intend to repent! His very request for withdrawal is a hardening in his sin! But what is a consistory to do in such a case? What the resigning brother has done in this situation is forcing the issue. A consistory cannot force someone to continue his membership against his wishes. The following procedure is recommended:

1. Explain to him the implications of his resignation and encourage him to retract. Ideally this should be done in person, but if that is not possible written correspondence may be required.<sup>67</sup>
2. In your pastoral contacts try to determine his motives and intentions. Perhaps further instruction is needed. If so, continue to instruct as long as there is opportunity.
3. If, after some weeks, he persists in his request to resign, announce to the congregation his desire to withdraw while the congregation is exhorted to admonish him for his sinful way.<sup>68</sup>
4. If after some weeks, it is clear he has hardened himself in his desire then the consistory will have to announce that the efforts of the congregation did not turn the brother from his sinful ways and he is declared not to be a member of the congregation anymore.<sup>69</sup> Besides an announcement to the congregation the consistory may choose to use the form for excommunication particularly if the one who has resigned had been under latter stages of church discipline.

## 2. Withdrawal after receiving pastoral admonishment

The elders are to administer pastoral admonishing to someone for sin in their life (for example: unfaithful church attendance) and the member sensing that the formal church discipline process may begin, and not willing to repent, sends a note of resignation. How should a consistory deal with such a request? This situation, in essence, is not much different than the *withdrawal while under discipline* but the procedure might vary slightly depending on the circumstances. Since they were not placed under formal discipline, it is possible that they intend to join a church that is tolerant of their sin. While this is not advisable – and churches should take care in admitting members from other faithful congregations – yet as consistory we should be as charitable as possible in our announcements in this case. The following procedure is recommended:

1. Explain to him the implications of his resignation and encourage him to retract. Ideally, this should be done in person, but if that is not possible, written correspondence may be required.<sup>70</sup>
2. In pastoral contacts try to determine his motives and intentions. Perhaps further instruction is needed. If so, continue to instruct as long as there is opportunity.
3. If, after some weeks he persists in his request to resign in spite of further instruction, announce to the congregation his desire to withdraw while the congregation is exhorted to challenge him for his sinful way.<sup>71</sup>
4. If after some weeks it is clear that he has hardened himself in his desire then the consistory will have to announce that he is declared not to be a member of the congregation anymore.<sup>72</sup>

## 3. Withdrawal in the context of apostasy

A member renounces the faith and therefore requests to withdraw from the church. How should a consistory deal with this request? The question can perhaps be put in its most awkward form as follows: when a member, not in

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<sup>67</sup> See appendix 4 for sample letter.

<sup>68</sup> Permission of classis or synod is not required in this instance in my view since that is to protect a consistory from acting hastily contrary to the wishes of the member. In this case, the member has requested his removal from the membership of the church.

<sup>69</sup> See appendix 5 for sample announcements

<sup>70</sup> See appendix 4 for sample letter.

<sup>71</sup> Permission of classis or synod is not required in this instance in my view since that is to protect a consistory from acting hastily contrary to the wishes of the member. In this case, the member has requested his removal from the membership of the church.

<sup>72</sup> See appendix 5 for sample announcements

overt rebellion, but professing to have lost faith in God, tenders his resignation, not (apparently) to escape discipline, but to reflect honestly the change in the state of his own heart, should this resignation be accepted without further process by the consistory? It is assumed, of course, that much in the way of counsel and private exhortation would ensue, but given their persistence, should the resignation simply and passively be accepted? The same procedure as 2 above is recommended:

1. Explain to him that the implications of his resignation and encourage him to retract. Ideally this should be done in person, but if that is not possible written correspondence may be required.<sup>73</sup>
2. In your pastoral contacts try to determine his motives and intentions. Perhaps further instruction is needed. If so, continue to instruct as long as there is opportunity.
3. If, after some weeks he persists in his request to resign in spite of further instruction, announce to the congregation his desire to withdraw while the congregation is exhorted to challenge him for his sinful way.<sup>74</sup>
4. If after some weeks it is clear that he has hardened himself in his desire then the consistory will have to announce that he is declared not to be a member of the congregation anymore.<sup>75</sup>

#### **4. Withdrawal while attending church elsewhere**

There are also withdrawals of those who are not under any formal discipline but are regularly worshipping somewhere else and are rarely attending the services in their own congregation. We will consider three different scenarios, two of which our church order already addresses but are included here for clarity.

##### **a) Requested withdrawal while attending elsewhere**

Someone requests withdrawal from the FRC because of changing religious convictions. For instance, one common type of request for withdrawal is when someone wants to join an evangelical Arminian Baptist church. Another example is when someone joins with a liberal denomination or congregation. Technically, this is the only way that one has to join a church with whom we have no ecclesiastical relationship as a denomination. In these cases, the language that has been used in the previous circumstances (1-3 above) might be too severe. Nevertheless, as office bearers we have been called to care for their souls of which we need to give an account before God (Heb. 13:17). This requires that as elders we give the proper warnings and admonitions depending on the particular context. The following procedure is suggested when a member is leaving the Reformed faith. Obviously, the procedure would have to be adapted if someone were joining another Reformed denomination with whom the FRC has no ecclesiastical relationship.

1. Explain to him that the implications of leaving the Reformed faith and joining with a liberal and/or Arminian Baptist church. Exhort him to retract his resignation and encourage him to return to the Reformed faith. Ideally, this should be done in person, but if that is not possible, written correspondence may be required, which would vary depending on the church he is attending.
2. In your pastoral contacts try to determine his motives and intentions. Perhaps further instruction is needed. If so, continue to instruct as long as there is opportunity.
3. If, after some weeks he persists in his request to resign in spite of further instruction, announce to the congregation that he has withdrawn and is worshipping in another congregation.<sup>76</sup>

##### **b) Re-baptism while attending elsewhere**

Our church order does address the situation where someone is re-baptized in article 77 D. It does not mention if the member who was re-baptized is in regular attendance in his own congregation, or whether he is regularly attending elsewhere. It is probably more common that they are worshipping elsewhere, although the procedure would probably

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<sup>73</sup> See appendix 4 for sample letter.

<sup>74</sup> Permission of classis or synod is not required in this instance in my view since that is to protect a consistory from acting hastily contrary to the wishes of the member. In this case, the member has requested his removal from the membership of the church.

<sup>75</sup> See appendix 5 for sample announcements

<sup>76</sup> See Appendix #5 for sample announcements

apply to both. It also implies that the member has not requested to resign. The procedure recommended in Article 77 D is very similar to (a) above. Article 77 D reads:

Members of the church who have themselves re-baptized, actually withdraw themselves from the communion of the church, although this fact is not always to be regarded as a breaking with the church. It is the task of the consistory to apply ecclesiastical admonition and discipline for a period of three months, because the act of so-called re-baptism is completely in conflict with God's Word and with the confession and Order of the church. If during these three months they refuse to repent of their sin the consistory shall consider them as having withdrawn themselves from the communion of the church. Discipline will be discontinued upon a sincere confession of guilt and a recanting of the errors which are connected with re-baptism.

If we break down the procedure in this article it would be something like the following:

1. Inform the member who has been re-baptized that by this very act they have withdrawn from the congregation where they were a member. Explain to him how the act of re-baptism is contrary to God's Word and the Confessions.
2. In your pastoral contacts try to determine his motives and intentions. Perhaps further instruction is needed in the meaning of God's covenant. If so, continue to instruct as long as there is opportunity.
3. If, after some weeks (3 months is suggested in article 77D) he has no remorse and changed convictions regarding his re-baptism despite continual pastoral admonition, announce to the congregation that he has withdrawn and is worshipping in another congregation.<sup>77</sup>

**c) 'Passive resignation' while attending elsewhere**

There may be some cases where a member regularly withdraws from worship in his own congregation because he worships elsewhere but yet no formal request for withdrawal is made. This happens frequently when they are worshipping in a church that doesn't value the biblical requirement of church membership. How should a consistory respond in these situations? Synod FRC 1981 makes the following conclusions.<sup>78</sup>

In conclusion, we would agree that "scratching" is not in keeping with the principles of the church order since apart from the process of censure a consistory may not arbitrarily terminate the membership of anyone. However, while it is often considered to be "scratching," passive resignation is not of the same nature. Would it not be legitimate to give members, who are so passive about their church duties, the option of also resigning their church membership passively? This has been called "scratching" members' names from the membership list, but that is not an accurate name for every form of this procedure:

- 1) If it is not done arbitrarily nor as a high-handed act of the consistory. It should be done under conditions warranting ecclesiastical censure. "Scratching" implies some arbitrariness.
- 2) But also this must not be done before repeated private admonitions nor without the knowledge of the person concerned.
- 3) Nor is it then against their will. They are notified in writing that if they do not respond positively within (for example) 30 days by attending the means of grace, the consistory will interpret this lack of response as a resignation. The delinquent members thereby willingly ratify their resignation.<sup>79</sup>

Deputies recommend to Synod:<sup>80</sup>

- 1) That preference be given to the current stipulation in Article 77, sub 1, namely to deal with delinquent members according to the procedure of ecclesiastical discipline;
- 2) Further, that a passive resignation as outlined in the above respect does not conflict with the nature and the character of the church.

If we break down the procedure it would be something like the following:

<sup>77</sup> See Appendix #5 for sample announcements

<sup>78</sup> For entire report see appendix #2

<sup>79</sup> See Appendix #5 for sample announcements

<sup>80</sup> Both of these recommendations were accepted by synod. See *Acts of Synod of the Free Reformed Church of North America – 1981*, pg. 10

1. Inform the member of his obligation to attend the worship services and participate in the life of the congregation where he is a member. Challenge him to return to the congregation.
2. In your pastoral contacts try to determine his motives and intentions. Perhaps there are some unresolved conflicts with members or consistory that need to be resolved.
3. If after continual pastoral admonition (preferably in person but necessity may require it to be by letter) inform him that if he does not return to the worship services within a certain period of time (30 days is suggested) his name will be removed from the membership. Announce to the congregation that he has withdrawn and is worshipping in another congregation.<sup>81</sup>

## **VI. Conclusions & recommendations**

1. Synod affirms that resignation/withdrawal from the Christian Church is contrary to the nature of the church as stated in scripture and outlined in our confessions.
2. Synod encourages the churches to continue to emphasize by teaching and admonition the requirement of membership in a local congregation as explained by our confessions, particularly in light of the unbiblical views of membership that are so prevalent today.
3. Synod encourages the churches that they thoroughly educate their members on the nature of their vow at confession of faith and the implications it has if they should become delinquent in doctrine or life.
4. Synod recognizes the tension that exists between one's legal 'right' in society to withdraw from organizations and that biblically one has no 'right' to withdraw from the church.
5. Synod recommends the above mentioned procedures and announcements as templates for use by consistories in dealing with resignations. (Section V.D.1,2,3,4 – Appendices 4-6)
6. Synod receives this report as its answer to Vineland's overture to Synod 2008.

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<sup>81</sup> See Appendix #5 for sample announcements

### **Appendix # 1 - FRC Church Order – Article 77**

After the suspension from the Lord's table, and subsequent admonitions, and before proceeding to excommunication, the obstinacy of the sinner shall be publicly made known to the congregation, the offence explained, together with the care bestowed upon him in reproof, suspension from the Lord's table, and repeated admonition, and the congregation shall be exhorted to speak to him and to pray for him.

There shall be three such public admonitions. In the first, the name of the sinner shall not be mentioned. In the second, with the consent of the classis, his name shall be mentioned. In the third, the congregation shall be informed that (unless he repents) he will be excluded from the fellowship of the church, so that his excommunication, in case he remains obstinate, may take place with the tacit approbation of the church. The interval between the admonitions shall be left to the discretion of the consistory.

77A. When members because of indifference regularly withdraw themselves from the worship services in their own denomination, the consistory shall repeatedly and patiently admonish them, and when they continue to be disobedient administer ecclesiastical censure.

1. Preference must be given to the above stipulation, namely, to deal with delinquent members according to the procedure of ecclesiastical discipline.
2. However, acknowledging a passive resignation does not conflict with the nature and character of the church. (see Acts of Synod 1981, C.O. report)

77B. When members regularly withdraw themselves from the worship services in their own denomination because they attend church elsewhere, the consistory shall repeatedly and patiently admonish them and when they continue to be disobedient, the consistory will deal with them as may be required in accordance with the Church Order.

77C. Admonition and discipline of members-by-baptism:

1. When baptized members who have arrived at the years of discretion because of indifference regularly withdraw themselves from the worship services in their own denomination, the consistory shall repeatedly and patiently admonish them, and when they continue to be indifferent and disobedient, exclude them from the church.
2. Members by baptism who have been excluded from the church, and who later repent of their sin, shall be received again into the church, after a period of probation, followed by public confession of guilt and confession of faith.
3. When baptized members who have arrived at the years of discretion regularly stay away from the worship services in their own church denomination because they usually attend church elsewhere, the consistory shall repeatedly and patiently admonish them. When they continue to be disobedient, the consistory shall deal with them as may be required in accordance with the church order.

### **Appendix #2 - Acts of Synod 1981 – Church Order Report<sup>82</sup>**

#### **C. ARTICLE 77**

In 1979 the consistory of Vineland overtured synod to "issue some guidelines for consistories concerning how to deal with baptized and confessing members who have become delinquent in their Christian duties in family and church." (Cf. Acts of Synod 1979, Article 23.) In the grounds it was stated that there was a special concern about "border cases" negligent in church attendance. It was expressed as desirable to deal uniformly as consistories and it was found difficult to keep firmness and patience tactfully in balance.

Concerning members by baptism who became delinquent, the Deputies Church Order advised in respect of Article 77, sub 3 as indicated in their report to Synod 1980. (Cf. Acts of Synod 1980, p. 29.)

Synod 1980 also required an explanation of Article 77, sub 1 regarding withdrawal from worship because of indifference. In answer to this request the following is submitted for Synod's consideration:

#### **1. THE PROBLEM OF INDIFFERENCE**

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<sup>82</sup> Acts of Synod of the Free Reformed Church of North America – 1981, pg. 40-43

The problem concerns delinquent members who, though they commit no other known censurable sins, regularly withdraw themselves from worship services in their own denomination and, while they do not respond satisfactorily to admonitions, give no instructions to the consistory concerning their membership.

There may be circumstances in a person's life which understandably affect church attendance. For this reason, the article concerned includes the phrase "because of indifference." However, such a conclusion of indifference may not be ruled out by what such a person says if it is not confirmed by what they do.

The dilemma often faced is: must the absence of a request to resign (or transfer) membership always be interpreted as a sincere desire to continue as a member? Practice shows that there are many such "border cases" who do not even value their membership enough to write a letter of resignation. In the face of such extreme indifference, has such a member not placed himself beyond the effective influence of discipline? Deny him the sacraments? He has no desire to even hear the gospel or witness the sacrament! May such members not be informed that they have placed themselves outside the church and thus their membership is terminated? This practice is usually called "erasing" from the membership list. Is this merely a convenient way to quietly escape the painful procedure of discipline or is it a legitimate way of making official what the member has already indicated by his action, i.e. that he wishes to resign?

## **2. "SCRATCHING" THOSE WHO ATTEND ELSEWHERE**

A warning must certainly be issued against hastily "scratching" or "erasing" (or hastily exercising public censure upon) those who attend elsewhere. As Rutgers advises:

It certainly will not do to scratch in this way a member who has declared that he wants to remain a member, simply because the consistory judges that such a member by "his action manifests that he has left the Geref. Church.' That would be in conflict with the requirements for ecclesiastical oversight; and such a judgment would not even coincide with reality: It would then have to imply, in order to be completely true, that such a member did not behave himself the way a member of the Geref. Church must behave, and for that reason is placed outside the fellowship of the church by the consistory against the will of the member himself. (*Prof. Dr. F.L. Rutgers, Kerkelijke Adviezen, Twede Deel, p.249.*)

What Rutgers advises must be considered. We must certainly instruct and admonish people about their responsibility toward the church as members. However, Rutgers seems to assume that all who are pressed about this after several visits will take their membership seriously enough to make the change. What do you do with members, who, though they may express some agreement with the admonition at a visit, virtually ignore the admonition by their actions? Admittedly, this is more often the case when someone is not very serious about any other church either. It soon becomes apparent whether someone is leaving the church because of conscientious objections. But what about those who remain careless about their membership? May they not be informed, finally, that by their action they have shown that they have left the church? Are censure and excommunication the only alternatives?

## **3. THE DECISION OF THE CHRISTELIJKE GEREFORMEERDE KERKEN**

This same issue was debated in the C.G.K. where opinions varied. This demonstrates that the issue is easier to solve in theory than in practice. The following quote is translated from the C.G.K. Acta 1962, Article 95:

"The overture of the regional synod of the West (D1) which reads as follows, is presented for discussion:

That the general synod modify Art. 77 sub 1 thus: When the members, because of indifference, regularly withdraw themselves from the worship services in their own denomination, the consistory shall repeatedly and patiently admonish them and, if they persist in their disobedience, administer ecclesiastical censure.

That the general synod add to sub.1: When members of a church regularly withdraw themselves from the worship services in their own denomination by usual church attendance elsewhere, the consistory shall repeatedly and patiently admonish them and, if they persist in their disobedience, the consistory, after fixing a probation time of a half year, can notify them in writing that it must regrettably conclude that they have withdrawn themselves from the oversight of the church and from the denomination.

Committee I reports on the overture (see Supplement XL,) (in which report the committee urges that the church should not be regarded as a society. Deputies C.O. -F.R.C.)

During an extensive discussion serious objections are expressed from different sides against the submitted overture and the proposal of the committee. Many members see in the proposal an expulsion that is in conflict with

the Reformed church order. A de facto withdrawal from the oversight of the consistory does not give the consistory the right to resort to expulsion, which the overture actually intends.

The synod decides to modify the first paragraph of the overture concerning article 77 sub 1 of the C.O. to read:

When members, because of indifference, regularly withdraw themselves from the worship services in their own denomination, the consistory shall repeatedly and patiently admonish them, and if they persist in their disobedience, shall administer ecclesiastical censure.

And to add this stipulation:

When members regularly withdraw themselves from the worship services in their own denomination by usual...  
\*\*\*\*\*missing sentences in the original acts of Synod 1981.\*\*\*\*\*

#### **4. PASSIVE RESIGNATION**

In conclusion, we would agree that "scratching" is not in keeping with the principles of the church order since apart from the process of censure a consistory may not arbitrarily terminate the membership of anyone. However, while it is often considered to be "scratching," passive resignation is not of the same nature. Would it not be legitimate to give members, who are so passive about their church duties, the option of also resigning their church membership passively? This has been called "scratching" members' names from the membership list, but that is not an accurate designation for every form of this procedure:

- 1) It is not done arbitrarily nor as a high-handed act of the consistory. It should be done under conditions warranting ecclesiastical censure. "Scratching" implies some arbitrariness.
- 2) It must not be done before repeated private admonitions nor without the knowledge of the person concerned.
- 3) Neither is it to be carried out against their will. They are notified in writing that if they do not respond positively within (for example) 30 days by attending the means of grace, the consistory will interpret this lack of response as a resignation. The delinquent members thereby willingly ratify their resignation.

#### **RECOMMENDATION**

Deputies recommend to Synod:<sup>83</sup>

- 1) That preference be given to the current stipulation in Article 77, sub 1, namely to deal with delinquent members according to the procedure of ecclesiastical discipline;
- 2) Further, that a passive resignation as outlined above does not conflict with the nature and the character of the Christian church.

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<sup>83</sup> Both of these recommendations were accepted by synod. See *Acts of Synod of the Free Reformed Church of North America – 1981*, pg. 10

### **Appendix # 3 - The Church Order Commentary**<sup>84</sup>

#### **P. 294**

We regard the resigning of one's membership as a very serious step. As a rule it is a very serious sin, **for often it is resorted to in order to escape the full force of discipline.** In such cases the Consistory should not yield lightly and should refuse to acquiesce or accept a resignation unless the party concerned insists on resigning. The promises made and the obligations assumed at the time of confession of faith give a Consistory the right to apply censure even to excommunication, and unless the sinner in question persists in severing his relationship with the church, the consistory ought to perform its full duty. No easy-going, weak sentimentality should cause a consistory to be remiss in its duty on this score. The sinner concerned and the church involved are both entitled to full exercise of discipline. This is in complete harmony with what the Synod of 1918 decided. (Art. 53, pg. 66)

It stands to reason that churches should be much more considerate of those members who wish to leave one of our churches because they no longer agree with our confessional standards and doctrinal position. If such members insist on leaving, because they feel compelled in conscience before God, after the consistory has endeavoured to show them their error, then the consistory may acquiesce in their action leaving, however, the full responsibility for their departure lies with them which fact should also be clearly stated to the congregation.

Those who remove from the church and fail to affiliate with one of our other churches by means of an attestation of membership, by their very removal and neglect place themselves outside of the church and its government. This is a very serious sin, but such people are no longer subject to church discipline in the full sense, although the nearest church, if possible, should admonish them persistently. If distance does not prohibit, the church which they have left should work with them diligently also.

Sometimes members of the church withdraw themselves from the meetings of public worship and seek edification elsewhere. They do not seek to resign but simple neglect their duty toward their own church. The Christian conduct of these members may be unobjectionable except for this one irregularity. The Synod of 'sGravenhage, Reformed Churches of Holland, decided in 1914 that consistories should continue to admonish such irregular members and if need be they should refuse to give them the sacraments, but that they should not excommunicate them.

#### **Pg. 315-316**

Synod of 1918, Article 53, decided as follows:

Synod, considering that withdrawal from discipline, to which one has freely subjected himself, and the breaking off of the fellowship with the Church to which one belongs, for reasons which cannot stand the test of God's Word, is a sin which should not be esteemed lightly, and that those who do so should be supplicated continuously and earnestly that they return from their erroneous way, and that these should not be released hastily; but (considering) also that one's affiliation with the Church as an organization as well as one's continuation in the organized church, should remain to be, according to Church governmental principles, an act of each one's own personal choice, (therefore synod) judges that no one can continue to be an object of Church discipline if he persists in resigning his membership.

We have no fault to find with this stand of Synod as to its essential principles. But we do believe that many Consistories accepted `resignation` too easily. We are therefore happy that the Synod of 1936 expressed itself on this matter as it did and adopted the following:

In such announcements (announcements regarding those that have broken with the church) it should be plainly stated that the person who resigned his membership in the manner indicated in the decision of 1918, by that very act has committed a grievous sin and that he obstinately refuses to listen to the admonition of the Consistory, though admonished repeatedly and seriously not to commit this sin. It stands to reason the expression like `accepting the resignation` should not be used in the announcement, because of the full responsibility for his sinful act must remain with the person who withdraws himself from the church. (Acts of Synod, 1936, p. 121)

It is true that membership in the organized Church can never be forced and should remain to be the result of voluntary acts on the part of all its members. But it is also true that the members at the time of their confession of faith solemnly promised to be true to the church and to submit themselves to church discipline if discipline should

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<sup>84</sup> Idzerd VanDellen and Martin Monsma, *The Church Order Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1941), pg. 294, 315-316

become necessary. Resigning one`s membership is a very grievous sin, and a consistory should proceed with censuring such a one unless he determinately persists in breaking his relationship with the church. Very often we fear consistories have accepted resignations rather quickly in order to be free from the sad duty of excommunicating the party in question. This should never be done. Discipline must ever run its full course unless the object of discipline makes it impossible. Then the full responsibility will also rest on his shoulders. And, Consistories should so labour with resigning members that they can truthfully announce to the churches that the utmost has been done to restrain the member in question from taking this step and that the responsibility is his.

**Appendix # 4 – Sample letter**

*\*\*Understand that this is only a sample of what could be contained in such a letter. Of course, pastoral exhortations depending on the situation would be added to this very basic content. \*\**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

This is a letter in response to your written request to withdrawal of membership from the Free Reformed Church of \_\_\_\_\_.

It is our sincere desire to meet with you to discuss this matter with you and the implications it has for you. We plead with you to receive us for a visit to discuss these urgent matters. Your spiritual well-being is of great importance to us. As servants of Christ our desire is that you would be complete in Christ!

Your request for withdrawal from the church implies that you are not transferring to a Bible believing church. Withdrawal from the church means that you are cutting off yourself from the body of Christ. This has severe consequences for your spiritual life, especially when we consider God's purpose in establishing his church. We are encouraged in Ephesians 5:21 to *'submit to one another in the fear of God.'* The assistance referred to is within the context of the church of Jesus Christ.

You have confessed with us as a congregation that no person of whatsoever state or condition, he may be, ought to withdraw himself, to live in a separate state from church; but that all men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with it. The Belgic Confession rightly affirms in article 28 that all those, who separate themselves from the same (the church of Christ as manifest in a local church) ...act contrary to the ordinance of God.

At the time when you did public confession of faith you answered the following question: *Do you promise that you will submit to admonition, correction, and church discipline in the event (which God forbid) that you may become delinquent either in doctrine or life?* By answering this question in the affirmative you made a vow in the public assembly of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ and solemnly took that vow upon your lips in the presence of the Head of the church, Christ himself. By requesting resignation from the church you are breaking that vow! In this act of resignation you are rejecting the authority of Christ as represented in the lawfully appointed elders. (cf. Mt. 16:19; 18:18; HC. Q. #85)

...

We would ask to you to allow us to visit with you about this matter. Please phone your pastor or elder to discuss a suitable time to meet with you. We would ask you to respond to us by \_\_\_\_\_.

## **Appendix # 5 – Sample announcements<sup>85</sup>**

### ***A. Withdrawal while under discipline***

#### 1st Announcement

“With this announcement the consistory informs you that \_\_\_\_\_ has sinfully requested to resign from the Christian Church while under discipline. This shows that he has chosen to harden himself in his sin rather than repent. He has been informed that by his request he is expressing a desire to be outside the kingdom of God. We encourage you to approach \_\_\_\_\_ in the spirit of humility, as Paul mentions in Galatians 6, encouraging him to repent of his sin and turn to the Lord Jesus Christ who is willing and able to forgive. (1 John 1:9)”

#### 2nd Announcement

“Previously we have announced the desire of \_\_\_\_\_ to resign from the Christian Church. Despite many admonitions by the consistory and congregation he has persisted in his desire to resign. By resigning from the church he is excluded from the kingdom of heaven until he repents and is no longer under the discipline and pastoral care of the church of Christ. His membership in the congregation has been terminated and his name has been removed from our membership rolls. Continue to pray for his repentance.”

If the one who requested resignation was under the latter steps of church discipline before his request to resign, there can be no argument against reading the form for excommunication. It may have to be adapted according to the circumstances. The announcement already uses similar language to the form of excommunication.

### ***B. Withdrawal after receiving pastoral admonishment***

#### 1st Announcement

“With this announcement the consistory informs you that \_\_\_\_\_ has requested to resign from the Christian Church despite the pastoral admonitions by the elders. He has been informed that by his request he is expressing a desire to be outside the kingdom of God. We encourage you to approach \_\_\_\_\_ in the spirit of humility, as Paul mentions in Galatians 6, encouraging him to repent of his sin and turn to the Lord Jesus Christ who is willing and able to forgive. (1 John 1:9)”

#### 2nd Announcement

“Previously we have announced the desire of \_\_\_\_\_ to resign from the Christian Church. Despite many admonitions by the consistory and congregation he has persisted in his desire to resign. By resigning from the church he is excluded from the kingdom of heaven until he repents and is no longer under the discipline and pastoral care of the church of Christ. His membership in the congregation has been terminated and his name has been removed from our membership rolls. Continue to pray for his repentance.”

### ***C. Withdrawal in the context of apostasy***

#### 1st Announcement

“With this announcement the consistory informs you that \_\_\_\_\_ has requested to resign from the Christian Church despite the pastoral admonitions by the elders. He has been informed that by his request he is expressing a desire to be outside the kingdom of God. We encourage you to approach \_\_\_\_\_ in the spirit of humility, as Paul mentions in Galatians 6, encouraging him to repent of his sin and turn to the Lord Jesus Christ who is willing and able to forgive. (1 John 1:9)”

#### 2nd Announcement

“Previously we have announced the desire of \_\_\_\_\_ to resign from the Christian Church. Despite many admonitions by the consistory and congregation he has persisted in his desire to resign. By resigning from the church he is excluded from the kingdom of heaven until he repents and is no longer under the discipline and pastoral

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<sup>85</sup> These announcements are only meant to be templates and consistories would be wise to adapt them for their own circumstances including elements of teaching in the announcement. See appendix #6 for a more extended announcement with some of these elements included.

care of the church of Christ. His membership in the congregation has been terminated and his name has been removed from our membership rolls. Continue to pray for his repentance.”

***D. Withdrawal while attending church elsewhere***

***a) Requested withdrawal while attending elsewhere***

*Announcement*

“We have received a request of \_\_\_\_\_ to resign from the FRC of \_\_\_\_\_ because he is worshipping in another denomination. (perhaps include the name of the church) We wish him God’s blessing as he sits under the preaching of the Word there and exercises his gifts in that congregation.”

***b) Re-baptism while attending elsewhere***

If there is a request for resignation because they have or intend to join a Baptist church the announcement of a) above could be used or a combination of a) and b) depending on the circumstances.

*Announcement*

“We have been informed that \_\_\_\_\_ has been re-baptized and thereby he has withdrawn from the FRC. (According to Church Order article 77 D) Attempts have been made to teach him how so-called re-baptism is in conflict with the Word of God but without fruit. Therefore we have removed him from our membership and he has been informed of this action.”

***c) ‘Passive resignation’ while attending elsewhere***

*Announcement*

“We have attempted to contact \_\_\_\_\_ who we understand is attending worship services in another denomination. We have asked him to return to worship in his own denomination. We have written to him asking him to return to the worship services in his own congregation but he has not responded to us within the requested 30 days. Therefore we have removed him from our membership and he has been informed of this action.”

## **Appendix # 6 – Sample extended announcement**<sup>86</sup>

Dear Congregation:

Whenever someone among us confesses their faith publicly, vows are made before God and in the presence of His people. One of the vows that every confessing member of this congregation has made is that:

**“We will submit ourselves to the admonition, correction and discipline of the church in the event that we become delinquent in either our life or doctrine.”**

With sadness the consistory announces that this vow has been broken among us. \_\_\_\_\_ has been admonished by the consistory to \_\_\_\_\_, but to this point has not heeded the admonition and correction of the church. He has in fact requested to withdraw his membership from the church of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The consistory asks you to pray earnestly for him. Perhaps the Lord would lead you to take up contact with him on this matter and use you to bring him back into His fold. If there is no change the consistory will exclude him from the church on \_\_\_\_\_. May God graciously forbid that this should happen.

We together confess in Article 28 of the ***Belgic Confession of Faith*** regarding: **The Obligations of Church Members**

We believe that since this holy assembly and congregation is the gathering of those who are saved and there is no salvation apart from it, no one ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself, regardless of his status or condition.

But all people are obliged to join and unite with it, keeping the unity of the church by submitting to its instruction and discipline, by bending their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ, and by serving to build up one another, according to the gifts God has given them as members of each other in the same body.

And to preserve this unity more effectively, it is the duty of all believers, according to God's Word, to separate themselves from those who do not belong to the church, in order to join this assembly wherever God has established it, even if civil authorities and royal decrees forbid and death and physical punishment result.

And so, all who withdraw from the church or do not join it act contrary to God's ordinance.

“Let him who thinks he stand take heed lest he also fall”

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<sup>86</sup> This announcement was written in reference to someone who requests to withdraw after having received pastoral admonition from the consistory but was not yet under formal discipline and is only intended to be a further example of how teaching to the congregation could be included.