

THE REAL CHURCH IN HISTORY

[495] This development of the idea of the church that can be observed in history itself has an undeniable shadow side to it. The idea of a single, all-inclusive church institution is forever disturbed by it. Nor can it be denied that the endless divisions of the confessors of Christ offer the world an occasion for pleasure and scorn and give it a reason for its nonbelief in the One sent by the Father, inasmuch as it does not see the unity of believers in Christ ([John 17:21](#)). As Christians we cannot humble ourselves deeply enough over the schisms and discord that have existed all through the centuries in the church of Christ. It is a sin against God, in conflict with Christ's [high-priestly] prayer [for unity], and caused by the darkness of our minds and the lovelessness of our hearts.¹⁶⁷ And it is understandable that repeatedly many Christians have allowed themselves to be led astray by the attempt to bring about or to maintain this fervently desired unity of the church of Christ, either by violent means—especially by the strong arm of the state—or artificially by syncretism and fusion.¹⁶⁸ On the other hand, we must not forget either

¹⁶⁷ J. H. Gunning, *De eenheid der kerk* (Nijmegen: Ten Hoet, 1896); idem, *Hooger dan de kerk!* (Nijmegen: Ten Hoet, 1897); idem, *Rekenschap* (Nijmegen: Ten Hoet, 1898).

¹⁶⁸ Cf. H. C. Rogge, "Hugo de Groots denkbeelden over de hereeniging der kerken," *Teylers Theologische Tijdschrift* 2 (1904): 1–52; F. X. Kiefl, *Der Friedensplan des Leibniz zur Wiedervereinigung der getrennten christlichen Kirchen* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1903; ed. note: Bavinck cites a 1904 edition); K. Brauer, *Die Unionstätigkeit John Duries unter dem Protektorat Cromwells* (Marburg: Elwert, 1907); J. J. I. von Döllinger, *Ueber die Wiedervereinigung der christlichen Kirchen* (Nördlingen: C. H. Beck, 1888; ed. note: Bavinck cites an 1896 edition published in Leipzig); J.

that the failure of all those attempts has something to teach us. History, like nature, is a work of God; it does not take shape apart from his providence. Christ, by his resurrection and ascension, became king at the right hand of God and will remain king until he has put all his enemies under his feet [1 Cor. 15:25]. He reigns also over the divisions and schisms of his church on earth. And his prayer for unity was not born of unfamiliarity with its history nor from his inability to govern it. In and through the discord and dissension, that prayer is daily heard and is led to its complete fulfillment. The profound spiritual sense in which the unity of his disciples was understood by Jesus necessarily excludes all violent and artificial attempts to introduce it. Christ, who prayed for it, is also the One—and he alone—who can bring it about. His prayer is the guarantee that it already exists in him and that in due time, accomplished by him, it will also be manifest in all believers.

Accordingly, for a correct understanding of the divisions of the church of Christ, we must consider the following:

1. All the divisions and schisms that presently exist in the church of Christ basically already have their roots in the apostolic age. Despite the fact that at that time the churches for various reasons felt much more spiritually united than is the case today, even between churches having the same creedal background, those churches were in many respects distinct. The apostles in Jerusalem and Paul, Jewish-Christian and Gentile-Christian churches parted company over many and even important issues. A serious difference of opinion broke out between Peter and Paul (Gal. 2:11) and between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:39). Heresies and schisms of various kinds already occurred then as well (1 Cor. 1:10; 11:18–19; etc.). The church of Corinth was divided into parties, quietly

ignored the scandalous life of one of the brothers, and in part did not even believe so significant a fact as the bodily resurrection of Christ and of believers. And a few decades after they were started by Paul, the churches in Asia Minor had sunk to a level far below the one they had initially adopted in doctrine and conduct.

2. The reason these divisions and schisms in the apostolic age do not leave such a deep impression is that in the New Testament we always have to deal primarily with local churches. At the time there was as yet nothing other than a spiritual bond that united all the churches. But when a hierarchy developed in the church of Christ and this hierarchy viewed itself as “the essence” of the church, it was this mistaken, unchristian idea of the church that throughout the centuries provoked schisms and heresies and alienated many true believers. Wherever and to the degree that the hierarchy developed, whether in the Roman Catholic, the Greek Orthodox, or the Anglican Church, there the sects sprang up again and again and, if they were not violently oppressed and rooted out, pushed the official church back and not infrequently overshadowed it. It is precisely the hierarchical idea of the church, an idea first of all intent upon the unity of Christianity, that throughout the centuries fostered discord and caused schism. Protestantism denies its own first principle if it seeks to maintain the unity of Christianity by any form of hierarchical coercion.
3. Precisely because the Word [Scripture] is the mark of the church and there exists no infallible interpretation of that Word, Christ himself gave to everyone the freedom to understand that Word personally as he or she interprets it. Morally, of course, we are bound in this connection to Christ, and we will all have to give an

account of how we have understood the word of Christ and put it into practice. But vis-à-vis our fellow humans and fellow Christians, we are completely free. Rome fears this freedom and charges Protestantism with individualism, subjectivism, and sectarianism. But that which is the weakness of Rome, inasmuch as it must maintain itself by hierarchical means, is the strength of Protestantism, since not a creature but Christ himself governs his church. It is perfectly true that, if the Word is the mark of the church and is put into everyone's hands, by that very token everyone has received the right to make judgments concerning the church and, if one sees fit, to separate from it. But we must completely respect this freedom, and no state or church must curb it. Even the horrendous misuse that can be made of it and has in fact been made of it may not even for a moment tempt us to abolish that freedom.

4. Undoubtedly the divisions of the church of Christ are caused by sin; in heaven there will no longer be any room for them. But this is far from being the whole story. In unity God loves the diversity. Among all creatures there was diversity even when as yet there was no sin. As a result of sin that diversity has been perverted and corrupted, but diversity as such is good and important also for the church. Difference in sex and age, in character and disposition, in mind and heart, in gifts and goods, in time and place is to the advantage also of the truth that is in Christ. He takes all these differences into his service and adorns his church with them. Indeed, though the division of humanity into peoples and languages was occasioned by sin, it has something good in it, which is brought into the church and thus preserved for eternity. From many races and languages and peoples and nations Christ gathers his church

on earth.

5. If therefore we again understand by churches, according to New Testament usage, the local churches spread out over the globe wherever Christianity has gained a foothold, then there are no true and false churches in an absolute sense. A church is a gathering of true Christ-believers at a given place. If somewhere there is no longer a single believer, neither actually nor potentially, then at such a place the Word of God is unknown, and there is no longer a church. And conversely, if the Word of God is still somewhat known at a given place, it will certainly have its effect, and there will be a church of Christ there, however impure and adulterated. In saying this we are not intending to foster indifferentism and syncretism. Nothing is indifferent, least of all in connection with “the truth which leads to godliness” [Titus 1:1]. The situation is not such that we can safely abandon and deny the so-called nonfundamental articles [of faith] if only we accept “the fundamental articles.” While with respect to others we must apply the saying of Jesus that those who are not against us are for us [Matt. 9:38], with reference to ourselves we must adhere to that other saying: He that is not for me is against me [12:30]. There are great differences in the purity of confessions and churches, and we must aim and strive for the purest. Those, therefore, who have come to believe that the Protestant church is better than the Roman Catholic Church and that the Reformed church is purer than the Lutheran, the Remonstrant, or the Baptist, must, without condemning their own church as false, leave it and join the other. And to stay in one’s own church despite much impurity in doctrine and life is our duty as long as it does not prevent us from being faithful to our own

confession and does not force us, even indirectly, to obey humans more than God. For a church that pressured its members to do that would, at that very moment and to the extent it did that, reveal itself to the conscience of its members as a false church, which accorded itself and its ordinances more power and authority than the Word of God.

6. One must therefore be cautious with the terms “schism” and “heresy.” Undoubtedly both of these are great sins. Guilty of schism are those who, though leaving the foundation of doctrine intact, nevertheless break with the church on subordinate points of worship or church government. Heretics are those who err in the substance of truth. The former break the communion of the church; the latter the communion of doctrine. Still, it is hard in practice to distinguish the boundary line that separates the legitimate and obligatory breaking of fellowship with a church or doctrine from an illegitimate one. For Rome this is rather easy, inasmuch as it recognizes only one church and one confession and anathematizes everything that lies outside it. But Protestantism can at most indicate some general rules and must in concrete cases leave the application of these rules to the conscience of believers. As a result the ideas of heresy and schism have acquired a certain elasticity that should make one cautious in using them. Since the [sixteenth-century] Reformation the church has entered the period of pluriformity; and this fact forces us to look for its unity in the spiritual bond of faith rather than in the external form of its government.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁹ W. E. Gladstone, “The Place of Heresy and Schism in the Modern Christian Church,” *Nineteenth Century* 36 (August, 1894): 157–94; P. Hinschius, “Häresie,” in

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