

Celebrations and Intercessions

In our quest to learn what the Canadian Reformed Churches have agreed upon in the Church Order about worship, we have found so far that it is the consistory's responsibility to call the congregation together twice on the Lord's Day, and to ensure regular catechism preaching. That's in Article 52.

Article 53 comes under the heading "Days of Commemoration." It's about commemorating the "birth, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ," events we customarily mark at Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension Day, and Pentecost. But, despite the heading, Article 53 does not refer to particular days and what should be done on those days. The consistory is not obligated to call the congregation together for special worship services.

This is different, for instance, in the Church Order of our Australian sister churches. Article 65 of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia Church Order says that on the feast days listed "the consistory shall call the congregation together for church services." To be sure—traditionally the CanRC have always done the same. Special worship services were (and usually still are) held on December 25 to commemorate Jesus's birth, on Good Friday to commemorate his death, and sometimes on Ascension Day to commemorate his ascension into heaven. Easter (celebrating Jesus's resurrection) and Pentecost (the outpouring of the Holy Spirit) are always on a Sunday anyway. And, although it is not required anywhere in Scripture, there is as such nothing wrong with this tradition. However, it is not stipulated in our CanRC Church Order.

DAYS OR EVENTS

As churches we agree that it is valuable to commemorate those key events. But we do so "in the manner decided upon by the consistory." In other words, the "when" and the "how" of such celebration is left wide open and is entirely in the freedom of every local consistory.

This stipulation in Article 53 is actually the closest to the original position of the churches of the Reformation. In reaction to the many ecclesiastical feast days of the Roman Catholic Church, the Reformers had a strong aversion to such days. Subsequently the Protestant churches wanted to discontinue those special days, as human inventions, not ordained by God, and emphasized the Lord's Day (Sunday) as the only day to be observed.

However, the civil authorities did not go for it. They maintained those days as public holidays as the people were used to and felt entitled to. Instead, the government of the day put pressure on the churches to call people to worship on those days. Gradually the churches gave in to this, albeit grudgingly. Eventually they decided that ministers should preach on those days to keep the people off the street. After all, it is better to go to church than spend your free time in idleness, drunkenness, bar-brawls, and other trouble.

The result was that by the time of the Synod of Dort (1618/19) it was agreed that "the churches shall observe the special feast days" mentioned earlier. This is how it became the Reformed practice for the next centuries. And it is good to make clear that the Lord does not forbid his people from coming together for worship at occasions other than the weekly Lord's Day.

Nevertheless—the wording of Article 53 does underline that the observation of those feast days, or even the commemoration of these events, is *not* prescribed in God's Word. We can and

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may celebrate the great facts of Christ's redeeming work with joy and thankfulness in whichever manner our local consistory decides. But there is no command from God. The same can be said about traditions like advent and lent. In connection with this we see ourselves confronted with what is known as the Regulative Principle of Worship (RPW). This is the conviction that "to worship God truly, is to worship him only in the manner which he himself has prescribed in his Word."¹ It is interesting to compare this RPW with what we confess in Question & Answer 96 of the Heidelberg Catechism. But this would take us beyond the Church Order.

CALLING A DAY OF PRAYER

And then there is Article 54, with the heading "Days of Prayer." However, in contrast with the days in the previous article, this is not about annual events. It talks about a day of prayer for all the churches in the federation in time of war, general calamities, and other great afflictions—difficult circumstances that affect all the churches. Who is going to determine that there is a need for such a day of prayer? The churches appointed for that purpose by the last general synod.

In the old Church Order of Dort the rule was for the churches to "request the government to appoint and set aside public days of fasting and prayer." The reason was that on such a day public life was put to rest as much as possible, so that people could participate. They would come together on a regular weekday and sometimes they stayed in church all day, refraining from eating any food. Aside from times of prayer, two sermons were delivered and in between sermons Scripture passages were read.

During the nineteenth century the relationship between church and state changed, and the government was no longer involved in calling days of prayer.² General Synod 1905 appointed a classis for this purpose, and General Synod 1914 instructed the appointed classis that such a day should be held on a Sunday.

Immigration to North America saw Reformed churches established between the Atlantic and the Pacific, an area much larger than the Netherlands. In 1914 the synod of the Christian Reformed Churches acknowledged that in such a large country, calamities in one part may not be experienced in another part, and authorized all the classes to proclaim a special day of prayer as the need arose in a particular region.

General Synod 1958 of the CanRC made the rule to assign the task to proclaim a special day of prayer to two churches: one in the east and one in the west. This has continued until today. General Synod 2022 re-appointed Providence CanRC in Edmonton and

Rehoboth CanRC in Burlington-Waterdown. But the purpose is still to involve the whole federation.

CRITERIA FOR A DAY OF PRAYER

To make that work, the two churches consult with each other, and when they agree they set a date and inform the churches. That sounds pretty straightforward, but in practice that may not always be the case. What if a number of churches feel the need and request the two churches to proclaim a day of prayer, but these churches don't agree, or the request is denied? And does it necessarily have to be nationwide? Would it be possible for Rehoboth to call for a day of prayer in the east because an affliction is not so much felt in the west? Or the other way around? We can take this a step further. Would Article 54 as we have it prevent a classis from proclaiming such a day of prayer for the churches in that particular region? I don't think so.

In the late 1980s the two churches agreed to call a day of prayer, as per Article 54, regarding the issue of abortion. That proved controversial; not because anyone supported abortion, but it triggered the question: Is a gradual moral decline in our society the same as "general calamities and other great afflictions," so that it justifies a special day of prayer? Our ministers will bring this and similar matters before the Lord in the congregational prayers on the weekly Lord's Day. The wording of Article 54 indicates a severe and immediate crisis for the churches and/or the nation. Those are pretty narrow parameters for proclaiming a day of prayer.³

This is connected with the purpose of calling for a day of prayer. The goal is not to "pray away," so to speak, the disaster or affliction, but to show humility and genuine repentance, and pray for mercy and forgiveness. The attitude must reflect what is called "solidarity in guilt," the awareness that as God's people we cannot act as if we have nothing to do with the sin of the world.

This is also why the original article speaks about "a day of fasting and prayer." General Synod 1905 took "fasting" out, not because there is anything wrong with it, but simply because fasting was never done anymore in Reformed churches. But biblical fasting is a spiritual exercise in which one concentrates before God on humble repentance and prayer. **C**



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¹ This is the definition given by the late Rev. G. I. Williamson, for many decades minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. For those interested, Williamson presented a paper on this topic at the ICRC, held in Philadelphia in 2001, published in *Proceedings of the International Conference of Reformed Churches, June 20–27, 2001, Philadelphia, USA, Neerlandia, AB, 2001*, p. 213–234.

² This does not mean that political leaders could never play a role. At the outbreak of the first World War, President Wilson called for a special day of prayer in the U.S.

³ Rev. J. D. Wielenga, Letter to the Editor, *Clarion*, Nov. 10, 1989, (Vol. 38, No. 23), p. 502–503.