

HEREWITH I *withdraw...*

One day the consistory receives a letter that says: “I have decided to withdraw my membership in this church.” Some call it “resignation.” And then what? Not every question a consistory is confronted with finds an answer in the Church Order. This is one of those occasions that makes the reply the sole responsibility of the consistory. It might be the easiest to simply say: “Okay. We accept your withdrawal.” But somehow that’s not how it is supposed to work, is it? After all, elders are not just administrators. They are shepherds who love the sheep and care for them. Of course, in our society everyone has the right to end his membership in any organization, for whatever reason. But there is a spiritual aspect to church membership which implies submission to Christ as the Head of the church. That makes a big difference.

Or does it? What determines the proper response?

MEMBERSHIP

Is it actually necessary for a Christian to be a member in a local church? There may not be an express command in Scripture, but there are enough biblical reasons to say yes. To begin with, Christ himself has entrusted to the church the means of grace: the preaching, the sacraments, and church discipline. In other words, for these means of grace to work in your life, you need to be in the church. The Bible also calls believers to submit to the oversight of elders (Heb 13:17; 1 Pet 5:5) and urges us to meet together and stir up one another to love and good works (Heb 10:24, 25; see also the beautiful picture in Acts 2:42–47). Moreover, we hear that the church is the body of Christ, and we are told what it means that we are all individually members of it (1 Cor 12:12–31). These aspects are reflected in the Reformed confessions. The one universal church of Christ is present as local congregations, and we confess that all [believers] are obliged to join one of these manifestations of the body of Christ, and that no one ought to

withdraw from it (BC, Art 28). The church is characterized as a communion, and we confess “that everyone is duty-bound to use his gifts readily and cheerfully for the benefit and well-being of the other members” (HC Q/A 55; see also Ch. 26 of the Westminster Confession of Faith). Furthermore, when you make public profession of faith in a Reformed church, you promise “to submit willingly to the admonition and discipline of the church.” This is a public vow in the presence of Jesus Christ, the Head of the church. This makes withdrawing, especially when confronted with admonitions or discipline, a matter of breaking your vow.

All of this does not prove that it is impossible to withdraw from the church, but it makes very clear that deciding to do so is a serious matter.

WHO DECIDES?

Perhaps we can learn from how Reformed churches handled this in the past. Given the length of this column, I can only give a very brief summarizing overview.¹ Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, synod decisions, in response to questions from consistories, reflect the conviction that no one can decide for himself to withdraw his membership from the church of Christ. If someone would announce his withdrawal, it was considered an act contrary to God’s will. Thus withdrawal was seen as a sin which the consistory had to respond to with discipline, following the procedure as outlined in the Church Order and in the Form for Excommunication. That does not mean that there was never any exception, but the dominant view was that only death or excommunication could end someone’s church membership, and not an individual’s decision.

In the Reformed churches after the Secession of 1834 this was still the primary position, but in the course of the nineteenth century this would be challenged. More than once the

¹ For more details see a study report presented to Synod 2009 of the Free Reformed Churches of NA. https://frdna.org/uploads/Study_Report_Synod_2009_WITHDRAWAL_and_RESIGNATION_FROM_THE_CHURCH_59665865d4.pdf

question came on the table: is it up to the individual to terminate his membership of the church, or can this only be decided by the consistory? The major assemblies did not always give clear answers, which led to the practice that the churches were free to choose between accepting a withdrawal or responding with excommunication. The shift came in the twentieth century. In the Reformed churches after the union of 1892 the view was generally accepted that church membership is a voluntary act of the believer, and thus he is also free to leave. When a person decides to withdraw his membership, no one can force him to remain a member, and the consistory can no longer treat him as a member, as in applying discipline. Although this position is generally accepted today, also in our Canadian Reformed churches, it does leave some important questions unanswered.²

OUTSIDE, BUT. . .

While respecting the freedom of every church member to withdraw his membership from the church, do we realize sufficiently the spiritual seriousness of this step, even if someone is going to join another church? Or do we look at the church as a coffee franchise? Some prefer Tim Hortons, others Second Cup or Starbucks, or another one. But in the end . . . who cares? It's all coffee anyway. In our individualistic days we may be inclined to think about the church in a similar way. But how does that fit with the biblical picture of the church, reflected in the Reformed confessions, as mentioned earlier? Do we acknowledge that withdrawing from a faithful church of Jesus Christ and breaking the vows of profession of faith remains a serious sin? Yes, the one who withdraws places himself beyond the boundaries of the church and can no longer be reached by the shepherds with the ultimate remedy for sinners. But that does not mean that a consistory must immediately stop all pastoral action. After all, God calls us to join his church and be a living member of it.

This means that a withdrawal is not just something between a member and some elders. No, the elders must warn that, yes—you can walk away from the church, but you can never walk away from God. And, as Paul points out: “He will judge those outside the church” (1 Cor 5:13). This means for the elders that such judging is no longer their responsibility. But it means for the one who withdraws that his accountability towards the Lord remains. And the elders do have the pastoral duty to point that out to the person involved, with the urgent call to repent.

HUMBLE WISDOM REQUIRED

Although the above may seem pretty straightforward, a few other questions will often become part of the discussion as well. Should the reason(s) why someone decides to withdraw from the church have any impact on how the consistory should respond? And would it make a difference for the consistory which church he is going to join (if any) after his withdrawal?

The fact is that reasons can be different. In many cases someone withdraws from the church, and thus from the supervision of the elders, to escape church discipline. This is nothing less than a hardening in the sin that led to this member's discipline in the first place, and a refusal to acknowledge that in this way the Lord himself is seeking his repentance.

But a person can also withdraw in anger and frustration because of a conflict in the congregation or with the consistory. Or he is disappointed in how the consistory has bungled a sensitive issue in the congregation. Or he is upset because of an injustice done to him or others. In those circumstances the correct response of this member would be an appeal to classis. But let's be honest—the appeal process does not always lead to restored peace in the church either. And the reality is that ministers and elders are not perfect. Sometimes they say and do things that are not helpful in tense relations. Consistories can aggravate tense or complex situations by unwise decisions. I do not suggest that any of those circumstances provides a good excuse to withdraw your membership from a faithful church of Christ. Nevertheless, in those cases, when the consistory is seen as being party to what has led to someone withdrawing, there is wisdom in letting the member go, especially when he is going to join another faithful church. It will leave an unresolved conflict, which is not how it is supposed to end in the church of Jesus Christ, and that's unfortunate. But distance can soften grudges.

This is also why faithful churches should not admit as new members those who have withdrawn from other faithful churches without researching the reasons why they want to join. 



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² See article by URCNA pastor Greg Lubbers, first published in Oct. 2006 in *The Outlook* magazine.
<https://www.christianstudylibrary.org/article/ungodly-departure>