

Address to Synod Southern River 2018

40 years ago, in 1978, Sietze Buning, Reformed storyteller and poet from Sioux County, Iowa, published the book *Purpaleanie and other permutations*. In it there is a poem which tells the story of a hopeless drunk, Benny Ploegster. It is entitled: *Excommunication*, and the story has never let me go.

For years the church elders had tried to change Benny's ways, but to no avail. Benny remained a drunk. The lure of the bottle was too strong, and no amount of church discipline was able to remove this stain from his troubled life. So finally the day came, after all the required announcements, the inevitable day on which he was to be excommunicated.

Benny could have done a variety of things. He could have labelled all churches a bunch of hypocrites and walked away, resigning his membership. He could have joined a more permissive church. He could have faked repentance and continued as a member as well as continuing to drink on the sly. He should, of course, have repented, and given up alcohol. But none of these things happened.

Instead, on the day of his excommunication, Benny came to church. (I imagine he sat in his usual spot, in the centre, a few rows from the front.) And when the form for excommunication was read out, Benny stood up, his suit still crumpled from the night before, his head bowed. His father beside him cried silent tears. The minister declared: *since by his stubbornness Benny daily aggravates his transgression, he is to be accounted as a gentile and a publican. We exhort you to keep no company with him to the end that he may be ashamed.* And so Benny was excluded from the Christian congregation and – we confess – by God himself from the fellowship and kingdom of Christ. He did continue attending the services, as regularly (or irregularly) as before – although obviously he did not partake of communion – until he eventually died of cirrhosis of the liver.

Buning writes: *it was not in protest, although the dominie thought so, and it was not in stupidity, although the congregation thought so, that Benny stood up for his excommunication. Like Jacob wrestling with God, our Benny was wrestling with us and with God. His standing up said: I am God's child, all right, God's naughty child, but still God's child: Benny.*

Preparing for this synod, preparing to stand here today, I was forcibly reminded of Buning's poem. The situation is not the same, but there are parallels. This is probably the last time that I – or anyone else – will be standing here representing the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, sister church to the FRCA. Your deputies have made an unambiguous proposal: *with sadness to terminate the sister relationship with the RCN*. This fairly represents the conclusions and the mandate they were given by Synod Baldivis 2015. And it seems inevitable to us – barring a miracle – that you will adopt their proposal. For the RCN have not made moves in the direction which Baldivis hoped against hope would prevail. In terms of Baldivis, there has been no repentance; on the contrary, the RCN have moved further on the path of deviation from Scripture, and therefore the mutual relationship has now become untenable.

In terms of Baldivis. But also in terms of Armadale 2012. And of previous synods. For the FRCA have consistently come to frame developments within the RCN as knowing and growing unfaithfulness, and their own response as admonition and a call to repentance. In terms of Benny: sin on the one side, and discipline from the other.

Brothers, we can only say that we have accepted your critical stance with utter seriousness. We acknowledge that you are genuinely concerned with our wellbeing. And that your desire is to do full justice to Gods word and its authority. Your concern mirrors that expressed in the 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical inerrancy (as quoted in what has become a bedrock text 'Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood'): *we are conscious that great and grave*

confusion results from ceasing to maintain the total truth of the Bible whose authority one professes to acknowledge. The result of taking this step is that the Bible that God gave loses its authority, and what has authority instead is a Bible reduced in content according to the demands of one's critical reasonings and in principle reducible still further once one has started. This means that at bottom independent reason now has authority, as opposed to Scriptural teaching. If this is not seen and for the time being basic Evangelical doctrines are still held, persons (and churches, JP) denying the full truth of Scripture may claim an evangelical identity while methodologically they have moved away from the evangelical principle of knowledge to an unstable subjectivism, and will find it hard not to move further.

We have tried, and we have failed, to convince you that we share this concern. That we realize, and genuinely resist, the risk of rooting new arguments outside of the Bible. That we have no interest in manipulating Scripture or subjecting it to hermeneutical twists because its teaching makes us culturally uncomfortable. Yes, wrestling with God's Word, we have come to insights which we ourselves would have thought impossible a mere generation ago. My colleague and fellow delegate Dr. Oosterhuis will do the best he can to give account of the most recent – and to you most shocking – outcomes. We owe each other that, and more yet, we owe it to the Lord of the church. But, like Benny, if the moment comes that you exclude us from communion with you, we will stand, and say: *we are still God's children. And therefore still part of the family. We belong together.*

Unlike Benny, when we bow our heads to what at this point seems inevitable, it will not be to acknowledge our disobedience. This is not pride, and it is not stupidity. Yes, we have failed to convince you that we too submit to God's Word and its authority. We have failed to convince you, but we know that we hold as high a view of Scripture as you do. We reject as unfounded and unfair

your deputies' dismissal of our response to your admonitions: *instead of repentance, there has been the repeated patronising assertion that the new hermeneutical approach and its results are the only way forward in a modern world.* That hurts, brothers. One: *the new hermeneutical approach is your characterization of our approach to Scripture, which we have repeatedly tried to demonstrate does it injustice.* You may disagree with new outcomes, but we have consistently applied time-honoured biblical and Reformed principles. Two: we have never claimed that these outcomes are *the only way forward in a modern world.* We recognize and respect the validity of biblical arguments which seem to lead to other conclusions. But to the best of our ability we have tried to *not conform to the pattern of this world, but to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.* Three: to call our response *patronising* takes you to a place where you don't belong, to a place where only God has access, the heart and its purposes. God knows how seriously we have listened, how prayerfully we have considered, and how decidedly we came our conclusions, in the conviction that it is to Him that we must all render account.

A wise man, apostle of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with his authority, once wrote – and that was with respect to a fundamental issue threatening to divide the churches of the first century – *who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand... each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.* This is the same wise man who earlier found himself and his beloved brother Barnabas head-to-head at the crossroads. Each fully convinced that *this* is what the Lord demanded of them, no, *that* is what the Lord required. *And they parted company, in sharp disagreement.* It has always been tempting, thinking about that incident, to take sides, to search for clues in the text that *one* was right and the *other* was wrong. When in fact the plain reading of Scripture is that sometimes this just happens. *Each one is fully convinced in his own mind.* But Christ's work

continues. And by his grace, differing convictions do not rule out reconciliation in the end. *The Lord is able to make him stand...*

Benny stood. In humility, in determination, and in failure. There was only one way forward, and he was unable to take it. We stand at this crossroads in our sister-church relationship. It is our deepest desire to find a way forward in communion with you. We, from our side, can only lay it in the hands of Him before whose judgment seat we all shall stand. We shall continue, regardless of the outcome, to see you as our sister-churches in Christ, and to offer you the privileges of pulpit and pew and sacrament which belong to that position. To his mercy we commit your churches. And may he have mercy on ours.