ROMEN OR JERUSALEM?
BRAM VAN DE BEEK ON THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

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Within the scope of this article it is impossible to describe the ecclesiology of Bram van de Beek in detail. Not only because ecclesiology is the most difficult part of Christian dogmatics,¹ but also because his thoughts on the issue are dispersed throughout his writings. His ecclesiology is still developing and he is still working on the volume on pneumatology and the church in his series Speaking of God.² Any analysis of his ecclesiology is premature until he offers his elaborated view. Nevertheless, certain developments can be traced from what he has written thus far. One of these is his growing emphasis on the institutional unity of the church.

1. Church Unity is Relative

In 1996 Van de Beek contributed to a volume on the unity of reformed Christians published on the occasion of the forty-fifth anniversary of the society for reformed students C.S.F.R. The article opens with the confession that the author does not find organizational unity of churches necessary. “To me the unity of the church is not an article of faith and therefore it does not have a status confessionis.”³ He appeals to the fact that the word ‘one’ in the creeds dates from the synod of Constantinopel (381). One organization is superfluous, because the church is already one in Christ.

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² A. van de Beek, God doet recht: eschatologie als christologie [God does Justice: Eschatology as Christology], Spreken over God 2.1 [Speaking of God], (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2008), 11. Two earlier volumes are A. van de Beek, Jezus Kurios: christologie als hart van de theologie, [Spreken over God 1.1], (Kampen: Kok, 1998). Translated as A. van de Beek, Jesus Kyrios: Christology As Heart of Theology, [Studies in Reformed Theology, vol. 1], (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2002). A. van de Beek, De kring om de Messias: Israël als volk van de lijdende Heer [The Circle Around the Messiah: Israel as the People of the Suffering Lord] Spreken over God 1, 2, (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2002).
³ A. van de Beek, “Één in Christus,” (One in Christ) in A. van de Beek a.o., Het brood dat wij breken: om de eenheid van een verdeelde kerk, [The Bread We Break: The Unity of a Divided Church], (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1996), 44–58, 44. C.S.F.R. stands for Civitas Studiosorum in Fundamento Reformato.
There are several references to the unity of the church in his early publications.\(^4\) This unity in pluriformity, however, is not the unity of an organizational worldwide institute.\(^5\) This kind of unity he “gladly leaves to Rome, where people like to speak of the ‘una sancta’”.\(^6\)

Van de Beek criticizes the use of the catholicity of the church as an instrument of power. Originally the word catholic means the communion of all local churches, but Augustine is the first to use the word to claim, over against the Donatists, that his church is the true church. Catholicity thus becomes a weapon in a church conflict.

Unity in the New Testament refers to the unity of the congregation rather than to that of all the churches. The need for an organizational unity occurs only around 400 A.D.; the church adopts the prerogatives of the Roman Empire. “So the one church under the one bishop of Rome maintains the unity in all diversity over against all schismatic movements. Unity in this sense is a matter of power.”\(^7\)

According to Van de Beek, the ecumenical ambitions of the World Council of Churches are still colored by imperialism. The advocates of the reunification of Protestants in the Netherlands see unity as a solution to secularization; the underlying idea is that unity makes Christians stronger. He even interprets the emphasis on organizational unity as schismatic. All schismatic overemphasize one partial truth; unity is the favorite partial truth of the ecumenicals.

After offering an exegesis of John 17, Van de Beek explains how his position relates to that of Hendrikus Berkhof (1914–1995), his predecessor

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\(^4\) In all pluriformity, people who confess Christ as Lord are one. A. van de Beek, “De pluriformiteit der kerk” [The Pluriformity of the Church], in A. van de Beek, Tussen traditie en vervreemding: over kerk en christenzijn in een veranderende cultuur [Between Tradition and Estrangement: On the Church and Christian Life in a Changing Culture], (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1985), 98–103, 100. We already are one in Christ and we have to seek ways to find agreement with each other. A. van de Beek, “Kerk in veelvoud van verbrokeling” [Church in Plurality or Broken into Pieces], in Van de Beek, Traditie en vervreemding, 104–114, 114. It is a very strong expression of the unity of the church when Van de Beek equates dividing the church with the unpardonable sin. A. van de Beek, De adem van God: de Heilige Geest in kerk en kosmos [The Breath of God: The Holy Spirit in the Church and the Cosmos], (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1987), 84.

\(^5\) The positive valuation of the plurality or pluriformity of the church remains in his later writings. The true unity of the church exists only in Christ and in this world it has the form of plurality. A. van de Beek, Gespannen liefde: de relatie van God en mens [Tense love: The relationship of God and Human Beings], (Kampen: Kok, 2000), 124.

\(^6\) Van de Beek, “Eén in Christus,” 44.

\(^7\) Van de Beek, “Eén in Christus,” 45. The abuse of power in the church is an important motive to stress the plurality in the unity of the church in Van de Beek’s earlier publications, cf. Van de Beek, “Kerk in veelvoud,” 104–105.