
Synods

In a few weeks the Christian Reformed Church will be holding its annual synod. The word, “synod,” is one that I never use except to refer to this annual gathering of pastors, elders, and deacons. This made me curious about the origins and meaning of the word.

“Synod” has its origins in the Greek language, and it literally means, “on the way together.” The word, “synagogue,” beginning with “syn” (often translated from the Greek as “with”), translated literally, means “brought together.” Or, we might use the expression “in sync” which means that we are in agreement.

A synod, then, is a gathering together of people who are travelling together on the same road, figuratively speaking. We should not picture a synod as being a group of people who are on the same highway, but rather as people who are on the same road, perhaps coming from a variety of places but all heading to a common destination. The question that a synod will answer is this: because we are on the same road with a common destination, how do we address the various things we find on the road? It is usually assumed that those who attend a synod have a common understanding of Scripture and have a common direction and goal.

The first synod to be held in the Christian church was held in Jerusalem (Acts 15) at around 48-50 AD. Its president was the apostle James, and it was attended by both church leaders from Jerusalem and missionaries who had been bringing the gospel to distant parts of the world. All those in attendance had one thing in common, namely that they put their faith in Jesus Christ and that they wanted the world to know God’s grace. Unfortunately, an object had been found in the road: what requirements are placed on Gentiles who come to believe in Jesus? Do we need to ask them to obey the Old Testament laws (circumcision being the first law, but also attend the feasts, practices and celebration of the OT), essentially asking Gentiles to become Jews in practice and culture as they became Christians. The Jerusalem Council concluded that except for a few restrictions, Gentiles were free from practicing the OT law. Faith in Jesus Christ is what brings us into God’s family and keeps us there, not adherence to OT laws.

As the years passed, more synods were held, addressing a number of topics. The word, “synod,” was not used but was substituted with the word, “council,” which implies that those in attendance were gathered to deliberate together to determine what the Bible said about various topics. In the early 4th century, for example, a council/synod was held in Nicea in which the topic of the nature and person of Jesus Christ was discussed. The question: what Jesus just like God or was he truly God. The council, after consulting Scripture, concluded that Jesus is God, the second Person of the Trinity.

Following divisions in the Christian church (1054 AD) into the eastern and western parts and the shattering of the western church into multiple fragments in the centuries following the Reformation, it has become seemingly impossible for the Christian church to call a synod in which all Christians from around the world are represented. It is perceived that not all churches are on the same road, although most would agree that all Christian churches have the same goal, namely, to make Jesus known to the world and to live in obedience to him. After the Reformation, denominations began to hold their own synods (councils),

working within themselves to face the obstacles placed in their way by culture and the world. Thus, the Christian Reformed Synod is attended by members of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, although, at each synod, representatives from other churches of the reformed traditions are invited to attend as well. The CRC synod deals specifically with issues faced by our denomination.

It might be interesting to note that at one time in the not-so-distant past, there was something called the “Reformed Ecumenical Synod,” later known as the “Reformed Ecumenical Council,” in which churches from around the world who were of the reformed tradition, gathered together to discuss the issues that faced us in common. Good discussions were held about a variety of issues although, unlike in the denominational synod, the conclusions were not seen as binding for all members. That synod/council has since been disbanded and replaced with a weaker body which tends to avoid the more robust conversations of the past, much to the loss of churches of the reformed tradition.

The purpose of a synod, thus, is to provide like-minded churches the opportunity to gather together to talk about how it is that followers of Jesus Christ can live faithfully in the world into which God has placed us. Over the years our synod has served the churches well by addressing questions raised in the churches through careful searching of God’s Word and by robust conversation. We do so as we recognize that we are on the same road together, trusting in Jesus Christ as our Saviour and Lord and seeking to have others know that as well. It is always best that we gather together to talk about those things that face the church in our time and place, for it is often in the voices of others that we hear God’s voice. Knowing that we are the road together, heading toward the same goal gives us a sense of assurance that as we navigate life with fellow believers, we do so with the best wisdom available to us, wisdom that has been given to us by the Spirit as he works in the hearts and lives of fellow believers.

Pastor Gary