

Question for Schuyler

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“What do you believe is the proper way to deal with brothers or sisters who have left our Protestant Reformed churches for another, and in our view lesser Reformed church? I believe that they have sinned by going to a lesser church, but if they are still attending church faithfully and seem to walk a holy life, how must we associate with them? From what I have seen of this, there have been mostly two reactions. 1. We have little or no fellowship with such a one, or 2. We act like nothing is wrong and still continue the same friendship as before. We all know that scripture calls us to cut off those who walk impenitently in sin, but what about this situation?”

Some believe that the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRCA) encourage shunning, and that the Protestant Reformed (PR) people practice shunning. Shunning is a practice common among cults. When a person leaves a cult, the members of that cult cut off all contact or fellowship with the former member, which leads to emotional hardship, especially if the former member was so wrapped up in the life of the cult before his departure from the cult that he has no family members or friends outside of the cult.

The PRCA do *not* practice shunning.

To answer the reader’s question, we should distinguish between different kinds of people who leave a church.

Some people leave the PRCA (or another true church. We do *not* believe that the PRCA and her sister churches are the *only* true churches in the world) because they love the world. Perhaps they leave so that they can marry an unbeliever, a divorced person, or simply to fornicate outside of marriage. Perhaps they leave to pursue a life of drunkenness, pleasure seeking, or worldliness. Perhaps they leave because they hate the preaching of the truth of God’s

word. “Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world” (2 Tim. 4:10). “They went out from us, but they were not of us” (1 John 2:19).

Some people leave the PRCA (or other true churches) through Christian discipline. Either they are excommunicated, or they effectively excommunicate themselves by leaving while under discipline. One who despises the admonition of the elders, asks for his membership papers *while under discipline*, and leaves the congregation commits a serious sin. In addition, if another congregation receives such a person, the elders commit a serious sin, for they should have inquired about the reasons for his departure from the former congregation). “If he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican” (Matt. 18:17).

There is also a difference between the departure of a baptized member and the departure of a confessing member. Both cases are serious, but the latter is worse because the confessing member breaks his membership vows when he departs, and he sins against greater knowledge. He was thoroughly instructed in the truths of God’s word, the obligations of holy living, and the implications of church membership before he left. “When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it, for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed” (Eccl. 5:4). By the way, the PRCA are *not* the only churches that practice Christian discipline or the only churches that take church membership seriously.

Having said all that, our reader’s question is different. He does *not* ask about a member who leaves to join the Roman Catholic Church, or to become an atheist, or simply to live as a godless worldling, an Esau who despises his birthright (Heb. 12:16). He does not ask about a member who leaves under the cloud of church discipline. He asks about a person who, for whatever reason (he has a romantic interest outside of the PRCA, he finds another church or congregation more attractive, he moves to a location where there is no PRCA congregation, etc.), leaves the PRCA, and joins another true church, or another Reformed denomination, but one that has significant weaknesses in its confession of the truth. Some Reformed denominations in America and Canada, for example, compromise on evolution, marriage, common grace, the covenant, and some even harbor defenders of the Federal Vision. Many of these things are well known. Synodical decisions are on public record, and they are reported in church magazines. Moreover, such a person is still “attending church faithfully and seems to walk a holy life.”

There is a world of difference between a PRCA member who becomes a Roman Catholic, an atheist or a godless heathen, and a PRCA member who joins a weaker Reformed church. There is a world of difference between a PRCA member who renounces the godly life required by Christ and lives like the world, and a PRCA member who continues to lead a godly life outside the PRCA in another true church. And, yes, it *is* possible to be a Christian, to lead a godly life, and confess the truth in another church than the PRCA.

Do we view and treat godly ex-PRCA members in weaker Reformed churches as “heathens and publicans” (Matt. 18:17)? Do we apply 1 Corinthians 5:11 to godly ex-PRCA members in weaker Reformed churches so that we refuse even “to eat” with them? About godly ex-PRCA members in weaker Reformed churches do we say, “Note that man, and have no company with him” (2 Thess. 3:14)? Notice that by “godly ex-PRCA members in weaker Reformed churches” I do not mean those who have left the PRCA to commit adultery or to live in the world or to commit idolatry in the false church. Such are *not* godly ex-PRCA members, but ungodly, impenitent apostates. There is a huge difference between the two. I cannot stress that enough.

The answer is: “Of course not!” That would be to make a major category error. If they are our friends or family, we should continue to interact socially with them. We should continue to invite them to family weddings, celebrations, meals, and other social functions. We should still love them, even if we strongly disapprove of their actions in leaving the PRCA. Certainly, love includes admonishment and rebuke, but not only that. We must not spend every moment with them in rebuking them. (They will know that we disapprove, but we do not need to enforce our disapproval at every opportunity). We do not misapply 1 Corinthians 5 here, which is about *excommunicated* members, with whom we do not fellowship. “If any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner, with such an one no not to eat” (v. 11). Eating, which is fellowship, is inappropriate because it gives the excommunicated person the impression that his sin has not affected the relationship between him and the other members of the church. The issue is not the *act* of eating, but the *symbolism* of eating (fellowship). As Christians we *do* eat with unbelievers (although we do not fellowship with them, because we do not have Christ in common with them), and with saints from other churches (even saints in other churches who left the PRCA), but we refuse to fellowship with

excommunicated members, those who walk impenitently in sin. Paul warns that, if we do not apply this rule properly, we will have to leave the world and human society altogether (v. 10).

Having said that, when a person leaves the PRCA, there are consequences. Fellowship for all kinds of reasons is more difficult. If you normally see a member at church or at church functions, his absence will make opportunities for fellowship more difficult. You will have less in common, and conversations, social occasions, and even meals might be more awkward than before. In addition, an ex-PRCA member exposes himself (and, crucially, his children) to weak preaching, false doctrine, and other influences in a different denomination. Given the corporate responsibility involved in church membership, this is serious: if the church that the ex-PRCA member joins compromises on Genesis 1-11, divorce/remarriage, common grace and the well-meant offer, and the covenant, he makes himself responsible for supporting (by his presence and offerings) such errors. In addition, although *he* might remain uninfluenced by such errors, *his children* will most likely not escape unscathed. God cuts off negligent parents in their generations, even when he graciously saves the parents themselves.

The issue is never “perfect” versus “imperfect” churches. (*All* churches, including the PRCA, are imperfect). The issue is this: “Where is the truth of God’s word most purely and consistently preached and confessed? Where are the sacraments most faithfully administered? Where is Christian discipline most faithfully exercised?” Perhaps even more crucially, the issue is this: “What is the general trend in the denomination in which I am, or in which I contemplate becoming a member? Is there a slide toward compromise of the truth of God’s word and the Reformed confessions, or is, by God’s grace, the church holding fast to the truth?”

Where in good conscience I can say, “This church most faithfully and consistently displays the three marks of the true church (as outlined in Belgic Confession, Article 29),” is the church where my family and I should be.

It is *not* true that to leave the PRCA is to place yourself on the path to hell. We must never tell a godly ex-PRCA member that, and we must never by our attitude to such a godly ex-PRCA member communicate that we think he is on the path to hell. The path to heaven does *not* run exclusively through the PRCA. The PRCA have never taught that, and, if there are some

members who think that and who show that they think that, they must know that their attitude gives the enemies of the PRCA occasion to slander the churches.

Nevertheless, truth is important. The Bible does not say, “Believe as little of the truth as is possible, just enough to get you to heaven.” The Bible urges us to “buy the truth and sell it not” (Prov. 23:23). The Bible commands us to “grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18). While leaving the PRCA to join another less faithful, yet true, Reformed church does not damn the soul, it does constitute the selling of *some* truth, such as the truth of God’s particular, sovereign grace, and the truth of God’s unconditional covenant with believers and their elect seed, truths that we surely hold dear in the PRCA.

Let us love our neighbor, and above all, let us love the truth!

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