

## ARRANGING FOR JOY

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W. H. Auden has one of his Bethlehem shepherds acknowledge the inevitability of structure, maintenance, and routine in our world:

For behind the spontaneous joy of life  
There is always a mechanism to keep going.

Although people in the Reformed/Presbyterian family may be able to pretend for most of the year that the Christian life means only “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,” the month of June with its general synods and assemblies is a reminder that behind the most spontaneous and joyous expressions of the Christian life, there is always a mechanism to keep going, and to keep us going.

Not everyone feels good about that. I count some friends who regularly avoid that mechanism. They may attend presbytery or classis when necessary, but steadfastly decline all opportunities to attend sessions at the denominational level. Other friends maintain that Christian time, energy, and money would be better stewarded by changing to a biennial or even a triennial gathering. To most of these folk national assemblies are little more than carefully managed stages for bureaucratic maneuvers, power politics, personal ego trips, and career promotion.

As an attendee at most Reformed Church in America General Synods since 1981, I have been puzzling to understand why my attitude is both positive and expectant. It’s not because I’m unaware of the sad reality that even the highest judicatory is vulnerable to the lowest ends of some of its members. Nor is it because I find some natural delight in long sessions, dry reports, dull speeches, and routine recommendations. Nor is it because all synods are created equal in terms of issues or excitement.

My attitude, I think, has something to do with the people I meet there, that living segment of the communion of the saints. Not distance, I’ve learned, but greetings, introductions, and conversations engaged in across room or campus measure the time it takes to get from point A to point B. Past friendships renewed, present ones enriched, and future ones launched push me toward the positive.

My attitude owes even more to the fact that a contemporary church assembly always evokes images of that first such gathering described in Acts 15. Any year’s synod belongs to a tradition reaching back to the Jerusalem Council of the first century. A thousand and one differences distinguish this year’s council from that year’s council, but no one of them, nor all of them taken together, is as important as the essential similarity: at both, representatives of the church, equipped by the Holy Spirit, gather to discuss and determine how the church can best order its life and mission. Out of that welter of gifts, experiences, convictions, opinions, needs, hopes, and fears, actions are taken which inch, or thrust, the church forward toward the fulfillment of its ministry. There is something inescapably awesome and undeniably privileged about participating in that process.

Most deeply of all, however, my attitude is shaped by a genuine connection I perceive between the machinery of the church and the gospel of the incarnation. If we may believe the New Testament, not even God ministers in this world without the freedom and limitation, the strength and weakness of a body. The evangelist John put it at its most daring: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” God’s full and final ministry to our deepest need was so unspiritual, so incredibly concrete, that some very early witnesses could say, “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands. . . . that which we have seen and heard we proclaim to you.” Those simple but profound theological statements suggest that a structureless Christianity is as unthinkable as a bodiless Christ. To say it another way: what body is to person, structure is to church. That is not to say that everything about church structure expressed in a general synod or assembly is exemplary or even admirable. It is rather to say that such expressions are both necessary and promising, and are meant to be used in the service of Christ with the same confidence and commitment with which individual members use their bodies in ministry. Who knows from which church gathering will emerge a Credo on Race Relations, . . . a study of *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, an understanding of office that opens ministry to all God’s people, a Belhar Confession, or a *Rejoice in the Lord*? It is surely best so to hope and pray and work that some new things will emerge from amid this June’s mechanism, things to move delegates (and the whole church) to sing with Auden’s shepherds,

Music and sudden light  
Have interrupted our routine tonight.

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