

Abraham Kuyper on Separate Christian Organizations

If then ye have judgments of things pertaining to this life, set them to judge who are least esteemed in the church.

1 Cor. 6:4

The third instrument, after church and school, of which the Christ avails himself for maintaining his Kingship over civil society is the network of Christian organizations which in distinction from the other social organizations are called into existence by his *confessors*. Here the question arose: May the subjects of King Jesus unite in one organization with those who reject Him, or does their conviction demand that they organize themselves *on their own terms* and consciously accept a separation between [185] themselves and others in society? In actual fact, that segregation of Christians in their own organizations has already taken hold in our country, as it has in other countries, especially as promoted by Roman Catholics. Yet that does not absolve us from the task of explaining whether on principle this separation is legitimate or illegitimate. We have to know that we are on the right track with these separate Christian organizations in the public square, and what rules we are duty-bound to follow here.

Now the first epistle to the church at Corinth contains an apostolic statement which clinches the argument in favour of separate organization. Two members of that church, who sat at the same Supper, had a dispute over some property and had gone to the ordinary judge to resolve the issue. This the apostle condemns. He does not want members of the Church of Christ to take each other to court. He suggests an alternative way for resolving such disputes: the church should appoint one or more of their own members to judge the case and decide the issue.

That Paul condemns worldly litigation is clear from chapter 6 verse 1: "Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unjust?" The saints, he points out, have no lack of good members who can resolve disputes in their midst. Why, he asks, do you not know that the saints will someday judge *the world* —that they [186] will someday judge *the angels* ? How much more shall we not be judges in these small matters. Shame on you that you did not think of this yourself. And to reinforce his words Paul repeats indignantly: "But brother goes to law with brother, and that before unbelievers!" Such action is so improper [187] that he concludes: "Why do you not rather take wrong and suffer yourselves to be defrauded?"

These apostolic words of the apostle cut so deep that many consider them not written. They argue that our situation differs from the situation Christians faced in the days of Paul when there were no other than *pagan* judges. Today we live in a Christian state where judges are appointed who are themselves members of a Christian church and therefore belong to "the saints" that Paul mentions. This is true, but only in part. First of all, church

membership has a different meaning today than it did in Paul's day; secondly, one does not need to be a Christian to be appointed a judge: a Jew, an unbeliever, an atheist is just as eligible for the post. In addition, the apostle speaks of judges appointed by the church, whereas even in a Christian country it is the government that appoints judges. There is no doubt, therefore, that Christian brothers who have a dispute over earthly affairs always do better [188] to seek a resolution among the brothers than to go to the civil judge.

But even if one should come to a different conclusion, this much is certain, that the apostle in matters of social life urges in the strongest words a separate, distinctive way of organizing for the confessors of the Christ. The context in which these words occur reinforces the apostle's meaning. In chapter 5, before he talks about litigation, he discusses in general to what extent Christians may "hold company" with unbelievers. And he lays down as a rule that although a person can hardly cut off all social intercourse with pagan society (else he or she would have to "go out of the world"), nevertheless it should be restricted to what is absolutely necessary. God's people are to guard against the danger that mixing with the pagans poses for the Christians themselves. Paul expands on this counsel in the second epistle to the same church (chap. 6: 14 ff.) where he issues a clear command to be separate: "Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers; for what fellowship has righteousness with unrighteousness, and what communion has light with darkness? And what concord has Christ with Belial, or what part has he that believes with an infidel? Wherefore *come out from among them, and be ye separate*, says the Lord; and I will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and [189] daughters, says the Lord Almighty." Just as it says in Revelation 18:4: "Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues."

Thus there can be no uncertainty on this point. Social mixing always poses a danger for Christians. It is then so easy to be made to follow worldly standards. What passes muster there can then so easily become acceptable to the Christian also. You then drift with the current, to which you cannot offer any resistance. And unconsciously you exchange the principle of the Christian life for the unpurified principle of worldly society. Hence the apostolic rule not to mix but to separate, and to strive for distinctive organizations among the brethren, as a principle demanded by *Faith* itself.

It was necessary at this juncture to ground this system of separate organizations in Scripture because we still hear voices, also among us, who argue that this rule is no longer susceptible of general application. People will point out, quite rightly, that we no longer live in a pagan society but in a society that still rests on Christian foundations; and the observation is also made that there are common interests which can really only be realized by cooperating with *all* stakeholders. In itself, this is quite true. That is why there was a time, not long ago, when no one dreamed of separate organizations but either did not organize, or organized without taking religious differences into consideration. The question, however, is whether there has not been a gradual change for the worse since that time. [190] And then it can scarcely be denied that the spirit of the world has pushed increasingly in the direction of general [*alzijdige*] organization—on a basis, however, that can never be ours. Especially in the social domain, the spirit of anarchism and socialism has

more and more taken hold of these organizations, and it is that spirit that carries the loudest voice there, using the organizations to make propaganda for these unholy, revolutionary principles. Granted, next to these anarchistic and socialistic organizations more neutral organizations have also emerged, yet almost everywhere in these, too, most of the talking is done by men who make no secret of their vehement opposition to any positive profession of the Christian faith. Without exception, therefore, the influence exerted by all these organizations is destructive for our Christian belief. They argue and act from principles that are diametrically opposed to ours. If now you join such an organization and rub shoulders with people whose fundamental views differ totally from your own, then what *they* think and judge becomes the starting point for the decisions to be made, and by your membership you support what you, in keeping with your Christian confession, cannot support but ought instead to combat. These anarchistic, socialistic or neutral associations are driven by a spirit that can never, and should never, be ours. Leadership in such organizations never rests with us, but always and inexorably with your opponents. They persist in their goals, and he who has embarked with them ultimately arrives where they want to land but where we may never land. Our principle is then sidelined, crippled and shelved. Conceivably, a certain degree of cooperation on an *ad hoc* basis is possible for looking after certain common interests, but mixing in these organizations themselves with the different spirit of their leaders will always lead to a bitter and sad fiasco for the Christian principle and prepares their victory and our defeat.

If you do not keep this in mind and enter such company, you run the danger as well that evil conversation [191] will corrupt good manners. In the organizations that we have in mind here, material interests invariably take centre stage. The aim is to gain more power over against the employer and to get higher wages for one's labour. Of course, in itself there is nothing wrong in standing up for your rights and trying to improve your material situation. This is the law of self-preservation that cannot be ignored anywhere in society. But that is exactly why in those organizations the temptation is so great, for Christians, too, to let the end justify the means, to allow material interests to prevail over spiritual issues, and to drift with a current that can never, and should never, be ours. The spirit at work in such organizations that are unbelieving on principle is so seductive and so contagious that virtually none of us, once he enters such company, can offer resistance to it. You absorb this poison without suspecting it. This is especially the case because, once taken up in such organizations, you see your Christian principle doomed to silence. If you meet together with your own, separately, then there is prayer, then there is the guidance of God's Word, then there is mutual correction, and you naturally have your attitude and conduct tested against God's Word through free spiritual discussion. If on the contrary you allow yourself to be incorporated in those unbelieving organizations, all of that will be silenced. You cannot defend yourself spiritually and before you realize it you are imbibing the views and ideas that cannot stand the test of the Christian confession. Then you bend without wanting to. You just go along, without calculating where you will end up. Your own spirit weakens and begins to sag, and before you know it you yourself have come under the sway of principles and ideas which in retrospect you have to reject anyway as incompatible with your Christian confession.

[192] Accordingly, this was felt so deeply by Christian groups in every domain of life that automatically a large number of separate Christian associations or organizations arose. Thus we have our own Young Men Societies, our Girls Clubs, our Workingmen's Associations, our Office Workers Associations, our Civil Servants Associations, our Choral Societies, our Student Federations; in short, there is almost no area in the social domain that lacked a reason for forming our own organizations and for establishing separate associations.

Initially we tried it with mixed organizations but we could not stick it out. Life itself urged and forced separation. At every point we collided. The contrast made itself felt in almost every discussion and every decision. We realized we were too far apart to be able to work together. And once we at last got together with our own group, we experienced a sense of relief, no longer having to carry on the exhausting battle with those of other minds, free to build each other up and strengthen each other in honouring and upholding our own principle, and together invoking the Lord's blessing on our work. In this way the principled separation which the Church should have sponsored but which to a considerable extent could no longer be shown to full advantage in the ecclesiastical domain emerged from the free life of society itself with vigour and with respect for the appropriate boundaries—first in the area of education, then in the field of social organizations. The overall situation became healthy again. And the result was that the Christian principle could once again be given voice in society, be given application, and again be posited self-consciously over against the principle propagated by the spirit of the world. Now it became possible to draw from one's Christian principle the many-sided consequences for practical life. People were won over who used to drift with the spirit of the world. He who used to [193] remain silent could now speak up again for his principle. Life again became a joy. Men everywhere studied how to apply the faith in the practice of life. Enthusiasm replaced the earlier apathy. Energy returned, inspiration rekindled. And by all that practical activity itself we supported one another in our most sacred beliefs.

This too was granted us under the Royal regiment of the Christ. Not we have accomplished all this, but He gave us the rich treasure of our own independent separate Christian organizations on every terrain. The course of affairs and the war of the spirits was so led by Him that the result could be no other than it has been. He himself, as our King, has caused these separate Christian organizations to emerge from life itself. It was not that we founded these institutions and our King noted their existence; it was the other way around: He desired them and they were determined in His counsel before we thought of them. His therefore is the honour of the great work that was accomplished. Granted, it is to be regretted that there was separation where no separation was called for. In particular, ecclesiastical bias did harm here, causing life in civil society to forfeit a measure of unfettered development.¹ All those who are in Christ Jesus ought to

¹ *Translator's note:* A reference to church-sponsored social organizations that competed with trans-denominational ventures in the field.

collaborate in the social arena, and the aim should always be to ensure the cooperation of all Christian organizations, at a minimum in the form of coalitions. But apart from this one evil that crept in, we may applaud without reservations the independent, separate organization of the various Christian vocational and interest groups, and they must continue to grow in strength, in self-consciousness, in resoluteness. For not only is this wholly new manifestation of Christian life in the social arena accomplished by Christ our King, but it is also destined to enhance the influence of [194] his Kingship in the midst of society. In every organization of this kind, obedience to our King must be the watchword. Seeking to do his will must be the rule of life, and the glorification of his Kingship must be the goal of all. In this way the spirit of Christ will oppose the spirit of the world in the midst of society with ever increasing clarity. It places everyone before the decision to join the Christian or the worldly organizations. That decision becomes a decision for life. More than ever before, everyone who chooses for the Christian organization senses that he a subject of Christ as his King, and it is in particular as a result of this that *Pro Rege* will automatically receive its due in the heart of society.

—A. Kuyper, *Pro Rege, or the Kingship of Christ*
(Kampen: Kok, 1912), 3:184–94 (§ XIX)
Translated and abridged by Harry Van Dyke