

An Open Declaration [*Openlike Verklaring*] concerning the Presbyterian Church government system



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The challenge posed by 18th-century rationalism to the 16th-century Reformed doctrine, initiated a trajectory in which Reformed churches assumed the responsibility of preserving the essence of the Reformation. The emergence of the Open Declaration [*Openlike Verklaring*] as a response to rationalism served as a call to unity and a reaffirmation of adherence to the Presbyterian Church government system established in 1618–1619. The objective of this study was to examine the significant contributions of the Open Declaration to Church Polity [*Kerkreg*] and the Reformed Churches of South Africa (RCSA)[*Gereformeerde Kerke van Suid-Afrika* (GKSA)] by focusing on three key elements: the declaration of faith and commitment; the acknowledgement of liturgical practices and ecclesiastical governance; and the plea for unity and ecclesiastical communion [*Kerkverband*]. Drawing on scholarly literature and relevant church documents, the analysis explores the role of the Open Declaration in shaping the identity and practices of the RCSA/GKSA within the broader context of Reformed church history. As a result of completing this study, it is discovered that the Open Declaration should be interrogated at local level and Article 48 should be read in the light of Article 29. Major assemblies should be understood from the local Church Council, Classis, regional Synod, and General Synod – not only Classis, regional Synod and General Synod.

Contribution: The proposed shared understanding of the Open Declaration aims to foster a sense of unity among delegates, emphasising the importance of aligning and binding decisions made by the Church Council, Classis, Regional Synod, and General Synod during meetings. In conclusion, local churches should revisit the Public Declaration, engage in local church dialogues to promote ongoing cooperation, prioritise theological education and training to foster unity, upholding the 16th-century Reformational theology, celebrate Holy Communion in one church building, pursue Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR), seeking biblical ways to address and resolve conflicts between local churches, and supplementing the mechanism provided by Article 31 of the Church Order.

Keywords: Open Declaration; ecclesiastical meeting or assembly; Church Order; RCSA/GKSA; CGK; conflict.

Introduction

The Reformed Churches of South Africa (RCSA)[*Gereformeerde Kerke van Suid-Afrika* (GKSA)] interpret the Presbyterian Church government system of 1618–1619 as acknowledging Christ as the Head of the church. This recognition is mediated through the Word of God and the Holy Spirit, and administered by various offices, including professors at theological schools, doctors, ministers of the Word, elders, and deacons. While each church is local in its manifestation, they are part of a broader ecclesiastical communion [*kerkverband*], which emphasises unity. This sense of unity within the ecclesiastical communion prompts the formation of higher assemblies – Classis, Regional Synod, and General Synod. These assemblies serve as platforms for local churches to come together and assist each other in maintaining good order within the church of Christ.

The Reformed or Presbyterian church government system is fundamentally rooted in the scriptural principle that Christ himself governs his church. Amidst challenges such as rationalism, understanding this principle becomes imperative, especially within the RCSA/GKSA. At present, there is a notable push for democratisation within the church, which can pose significant challenges to the sovereignty of Christ over his body, the church. The significance of the Open Declaration [*Openlike Verklaring*] (RCA 2009), addressed in this article, lies in its relevance to this ongoing dialogue. In navigating this context, a crucial question arises: How does the headship of Christ inform the complexities surrounding binding decisions in church assemblies? The Holy

Note: Special Collection: Theological perspectives on the Presbyterian church governance system.

Scriptures unequivocally depict Christ as the Head of his church, as evident in passages such as Ephesians 5:23 ('For the husband is the Head of the wife as Christ is the Head of the church') and Colossians 1:18 ('And He is the Head of the body, the church').

Howell (2004) argues that:

[W]ithin the tradition of Reformed Church Polity, believers pledge themselves to specific matters based on their shared faith and confession. The collective agreement among believers to adhere to church decisions is voluntary, stemming from their dedication to the Scriptures, Confessions and Church Order, which forms the basis for Church decisions. (p. v)

Howell emphasises that this shared faith and confession centres around the governance of the church by Christ himself. The narrative of Christ's governance within the church, as depicted in the New Testament, has experienced phases of *establishment* (formation), *distortion* (deformation), and *restoration* (reformation). Despite the unity of the church, its members are inherently flawed, relying on the righteousness bestowed upon them by Jesus Christ rather than their own merits.

Within the context of formation, deformation, and reformation, the concept of *Open Declaration* [*Openlike Verklaring*] has its origins in 18th-century rationalism. This period of rationalism influenced the deeds of secession in 1816 within the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), establishing the idea that a church is a union of individuals with shared intentions. Consequently, the majority decided the direction of their church. Under the pressure of the Enlightenment, they departed from the Reformed doctrine, service, and discipline of the 16th century. Bos (1950) adds that:

[I]n 1834 a Christian Reformed Church again sought to preserve the old reformed doctrine and life, the phenomenon of different 'churches' or 'denominations' began to emerge. The Christian Reformed Church then drafted an Open Declaration in the Synod of Zwolle 1854 to identify the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk [CGK]. (p. 189)

Reverent D. Postma came to South Africa from the CGK in 1858, and in 1862, he presented a draft of the Open Declaration [*Openlike Verklaring*] at the first Synod, which is still used in synods of the RCSA/GKSA today. It invites all who wish to adhere to the Dordt doctrine, service, and church government of 1618–1619 to enter ecclesiastical communion or correspondence (section 52) with the RCSA/GKSA (GKSA 1862:Art 12). According to Visser (1999):

... [V]arious meetings and major assemblies occur due to unity in confession, liturgy and church government that defines church membership [*Kerkverband*]. This unity is symbolized by the 'openlijke verklaring' open declaration, which ideally is read at the beginning of every ecclesiastical meeting. Delegates are expected to affirm their commitment by standing up, those who decline to do so may be excluded. (p. 45)

In the RCSA/GKSA, the Open Declaration has been restricted to major assemblies such as Classis, Regional Synod, and

General Synod, which presents a significant issue. Unity in confession, liturgy, and ecclesiastical governance should be assessed at the local church level. This involves questioning one another during Church Council meetings to ensure alignment with the broader ecclesiastical communion in beliefs and practices. Additionally, it requires using the spirit of Open Declaration to ensure that local church decisions are in harmony with those made at the Classis, Regional Synod, and General Synod levels.

By implication, the importance and maintenance of the RCSA/GKSA Church Order Article 31, (Vorster 1999), is emphasised and elaborated during local Church Council meetings. Article 31 stipulates that:

A decision reached at a church assembly by a majority of votes shall be considered fixed and binding, unless it is subsequently proved that it conflicts with the Word of God or the [A]rticles of the church order. If someone complains that he has been wronged by the decision of a minor assembly, an appeal from regional Synod to general [S]ynod is possible only when the appeal is made to the Bible, confession and church order or a verdict of the general [S]ynod. (p. 55)

The current RCSA/GKSA is grappling with the issue of ratification. Meijer (1995:6) posits that three fundamental principles warrant consideration in this context. Firstly, delegates are sent to a major assembly with the mandate and prerogative to deliberate and vote. They are duty-bound to advocate the perspectives of their respective local congregations. Secondly, major assemblies serve as manifestations of ecclesial unity. Thirdly, as stipulated in Articles 31 and 46 of the RCSA/GKSA Church Order, individuals, congregations, and ecclesiastical assemblies have the right to appeal or lodge a petition of protest against any resolution.

Building upon Meijer's (1995) principles, Vorster (1999:56) extrapolates that ratification rights cannot be accepted in Reformed Church Polity. The repudiation of ratification rights signifies that decisions made by major assemblies hold binding authority until proven to be in opposition to Scripture, Confessions, and Church Order.

The declaration of faith and pledge

The Open Declaration [*Openlike Verklaring*] can be divided into three main sections. The first part, which is the focus here, is the 'declaration of faith and pledge', which stipulates (RCA 2009):

The Synod meeting of the Reformed Churches of South Africa openly and each member for himself declare that we wholeheartedly believe in the Triune God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who reveals himself in Scripture. We believe that Jesus Christ is the only Head of the church and that He rules his church through His Word and Spirit. We wholeheartedly and with good conscience accept the Three Creeds of Unity that were accepted at the Synod of Dordt 1618-1619 the doctrine of Dordt, namely the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession of Faith and the Canons of Dordt. We promise to uphold this truth

through the merciful guidance and enlightenment of the Holy Spirit according to God's Word. (p. 498)

This introduction of the Open Declaration sets the foundation by affirming the core beliefs of the church. It begins with a declaration of belief in the Triune God – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – who reveals himself in Scripture. The call to faith in the Triune God underscores the church's dependence on him to foster unity, which is achieved through the powerful work of the Holy Spirit. The churches open a meeting with this declaration, which is emphasised in John 17:11–12: 'Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name'. The mention of the Holy Father signifies God's holiness; thus calling the churches to holiness. Those who seek to create divisions are called to order by embracing holiness. Belief in the power of his name reflects the churches' recognition of God's authority and sovereignty. Therefore, calling upon the name of God, implies trust in his power, presence, and ability, and a commitment by the churches to act in accordance with his will.

Calvin (1972) argues that the invocation of the Holy Father highlights:

[T]he way in which the church shall be kept; for those whom the heavenly Father has decreed to keep, he brings together in a holy unity of faith and of the spirit. Then our unity will be truly happy, when it shall be the image of God the Father and of Christ, as the wax takes the form of the seal which is impressed upon it. (p. 23)

The beginning of the Open Declaration further emphasises the belief that Jesus Christ is the sole Head of his church, governing it through His Word and Spirit. This underscores Christ's authority and highlights the significance of adhering to Scripture, Confessions, and Church Order. In his writings, Calvin (1972) eloquently articulates this principle:

That the inherent unsustainability of a divided church, emphasizing its unity in Christ. He asserts that the essence of the church lies in its catholic or universal character, where the divisions will signify a tearing of Christ Himself, an inconceivable notion. Despite the pervasive sense of dissolution wrought by widespread devastation, Calvin maintains a steadfast belief in the resilience of God's church. He perceives Christ's redemptive sacrifice as continually yielding fruit, protecting the church even in the midst of apparent ruin, akin to a miraculous preservation in a hidden refuge. (pp. 21–24)

Smit (2009) argues:

[T]hat since the latter half of the previous century, the church sought to articulate in calling for unity through the term ecumenism, set against the background and reality of its factual division in this world. (pp. 447–471)

Following the General Synod of 2023 in Potchefstroom, it became evident, both before and during its commencement, that certain members of the Regional Synod Pretoria temporarily withdrew from the proceedings. Throughout

the Synod, amidst numerous appeals and discussions, it became apparent that, despite the Open Declaration calling us to unity, the RCSA/GKSA is polarised into two distinct factions. One faction advocates the inclusion of women in the office of elder and minister of the Word, while the other vehemently opposes the ordination of women as elders and ministers of the Word.

It is important to note that the Extraordinary Synod had already decided against the ordination of women to the office of elder and minister of the Word. However, despite this decision, some churches within the RCSA/GKSA proceeded to ordain women as elders. Some had done so prior to the Extraordinary Synod, while others did so during ongoing discussions. This action was not in line with the spirit of the Open Declaration. Snyman (1977) proposes three steps to address this issue:

[T]he preservation and protection of church unity, both within and across the border, secondly, discussions to restore church unity where it does not exist; lastly, the calling to cooperation insofar as what should the agreement be. (p. 85)

Nijenhuis (1959) adds:

[T]hat what appears most peculiar within the Christian faith is not when a believer chooses to distance themselves from fellow believers and secede, thereby launching an assault on the core tenets of the Christian faith and departing from it. (p. 277)

He implies that such acts of separation and departure from ecclesiastical communion are uncommon within the context of the Christian faith.

In light of the Open Declaration and in keeping in line with its spirit, RCSA/GKSA churches that do not adhere to synodical decisions should recognise the importance of preserving and protecting church unity, as emphasised in the declaration's reflection of the unity of the Trinity. It is an undeniable fact that the RCSA/GKSA is divided into two factions: those who already have women in the office of elder, and those who adhere to the Synod's decision of 'no women in the office of elder'. Discussions aimed at restoring church unity within the RCSA/GKSA are necessary, whether at the Classis or Regional Synod level. Cooperation is essential to overcome the divisions among churches. Delegates should engage in patient deliberations rather than rushing to vote on matters.

The recognition of liturgy and church governance

The second part of the Open Declaration (GKSA 1862; RCA 2009), the topic under discussion in this section, concerns the 'recognition of liturgy' and church governance. It stipulates in GKSA 1862 and RCA 2009 that:

We accept the liturgy determined by the Canons of Dordrecht for our services. In church governance we maintain the Canons of Dordrecht, accepted in 1618–1619 and amended by the National Synods of the Reformed Churches in South Africa. (p. 8; p. 498)

Letšosa (2005) defines 'liturgy' as:

[A] term from the Greek word. It embraces Temple worship (Lk 1:23; Heb 8:2) as found in the Old Testament, as well as personal service to one's fellow being (Phlp 2:25), one's service to Christ (Rm 15:16), and the coming together of disciples (Ac 2). (p. 1)

Van der Walt (1982:5), in agreement with Letšosa, elaborates on liturgy as the power station of the Word of God. It involves 'looking at' and 'examining'. It is a priestly service of the believer. Liturgy is one of the most important aspects of the Presbyterian Church government system because, at its heart, lies the relationship and unity of Christ and his church, and Christians in their service to each other.

These definitions suggest that liturgy encompasses shared objectives, involving both individual and collective acts of worship and service. Church delegates participate in various church meetings, including Church Councils, as well as Classis, Regional, and General Synod gatherings, with a mutual understanding that the Open Declaration provides spiritual guidance. This shared understanding of the Open Declaration aims to promote unity among delegates, emphasising the importance of aligning and affirming decisions made at these meetings. Liturgy, as a priestly service of office bearers, underscores the spiritual role of these individuals. The gatherings of these entities offer opportunities for delegates to engage in worshipful service to Christ through their decisions and discussions.

The acceptance of liturgy, as determined by the Synod of Dordrecht, signifies that the delegates of RCSA/GKSA acknowledge and emphasise the connection between liturgy and the rich tradition of Presbyterian Church governance and worship. It is crucial in these meetings for members to reflect on whether we are still in recognition of liturgy. This acknowledgement of liturgy can be referenced in terms of Articles 48 and 52 of the Church Order. Article 48 stipulates that:

Each classis, regional Synod and general synod may conduct correspondence with neighboring classis, regional synods and general synods, when according to its judgment; this will promote the general welfare of the church. (p. 85)

Before delving into Article 48, it is important to acknowledge a discrepancy within it. In 1618/1619 and the subsequent amended Church Order of RCSA/GKSA, it is noted that in light of Article 29, there are four kinds of church assemblies: the Church Council, Classis, Regional Synod, and General Synod. However, Article 48 stipulates that correspondences should be directed to the Classis, Regional Synod, and General Synod, which is an error that this research aims to rectify. All matters should originate from the local church. Local Church Councils, in the spirit of the Open Declaration and recognition of liturgy and church governance, should actively engage with one another, particularly in instances where concerns arise, such as the issue of women in office as elders. Although Van Dellen and Monsma (1954:207) argue that Article 48 was formulated in this manner in the Church

Order of Dordrecht 1618/1619, it should be noted that, when one local church has an issue with another local church, it is the local church that should address it. Du Plooy (1982:182) and Spoelstra (1989:284) also add that churches should live as one family without ruling over each other in a hierarchical manner.

My contribution to Article 48 is that it should be interpreted in light of the principle outlined in Article 29, which emphasises that correspondences should be facilitated and take place on the local level. This principle aligns with Matthew 18:15: 'If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over'. Calvin (1845) lays down three steps of Matthew 18:15, which I apply as a model for church correspondence, especially in addressing the problematic situation in the RCSA/GKSA of disobeying decisions made by major assemblies. Calvin (1845) states:

First, is to give a private advice to the person who has offended. Second is, if he shall give any sign of obstinacy, to advise him again in presence of witnesses. The third is, if no advantage shall be obtained in that way, to deliver him up to the public decision of the church. He continues to argue that the design of these three steps is to hinder charity from being violated under the pretense of fervent zeal. As the greater part of men are driven by ambition to publish with excessive eagerness the faults of their brethren, Christ seasonably meets this fault by enjoining us to cover the faults of brethren, as far as lies in our power; for those who take pleasure in the disgrace and infamy of brethren are unquestionably carried away by hatred and malice, since they were under the influence of charity, they would endeavour to prevent the shame of their brethren. (p. 352)

It is within Calvin's steps that correspondences among brothers should be conducted. First, there should be direct communication with the brother. Churches should engage with each other to remind one another about the unity of ecclesiastical communion. By doing so, the churches will be adhering to liturgy and church government.

Plea for unity and ecclesiastical communion

The third part of the Open Declaration (GKSA 1862; RCA 2009), 'the plea for unity and ecclesiastical communion', is the theme under discussion here. It stipulates that:

We as a meeting declare that we strive for true shared unity, and that we as the body of Christ confess the true faith to the world. All who have received the same precious faith through the merciful work of the Holy Spirit, and who want to uphold it with us, are wholeheartedly called to ecclesiastical communion. Our wish is to have the closest communion of faith and ecclesiastical correspondence with all those church communities who profess the same as we do. May the Lord in his mercy grant that many will accept his Word through the work of the Holy Spirit. May all the elected be called as true believers and be united in one ecclesiastical community. (p. 8; p. 498)

The third and final part of the Open Declaration can be divided into four sections. Firstly, it invites office bearers to commit to confessing the true faith to the world. Secondly, it

invites those who share the same faith to join in ecclesiastical communion. Thirdly, it expresses a desire for close communion with church communities that profess the same faith. Lastly, it concludes with a prayer for the acceptance of God's Word and unity among believers.

Considering that, for the purposes of this article, the notion 'we as a meeting declare that' refers to the local Church Council, Classis, Regional Synod, and General Synod, it is upon the foundation of genuine unity among these entities that the local church truly embodies the church of Christ. Since its inception, the RCSA/GKSA has consistently advocated for unity and ecclesiastical communion. For instance, during the Synods of 1866 (see GKSA 1866:50:14) and 1873 (GKSA 1873:3), it was reaffirmed that the RCSA/GKSA remains united and in communion with Reformed churches worldwide, actively engaging in outreach efforts to these churches. During the latter Synod, the catholicity of the church was eloquently expressed in the foreword of the Synod's Acts.

Promoting church unity and ecclesiastical communion, while faithfully confessing the true faith to the world, necessitates intentional efforts and genuine dialogue among RCSA/GKSA ecclesiastical communion. Churches within this communion can adopt various approaches to foster unity.

Firstly, revisiting the Public Declaration: Churches within ecclesiastical communion can convene workshops or conferences to study the Open Declaration and its implications, thereby reinforcing their shared values and beliefs. This method serves as a cornerstone for nurturing church unity and addressing misunderstandings.

Secondly, local church dialogues: Promoting ongoing cooperation and dialogue among churches within ecclesiastical communion. This could involve organising conferences, consultations, and camps aimed at fostering mutual understanding and church unity. By embracing such an approach, churches can mitigate the risk of falling into the trap of independentism and collegialism, as cautioned by Venter (2024):

Resolutions of major assemblies should be subject to unrestricted revision as the assemblies are not meetings of a church or of the church itself. Influential opinions among Reformed authors hover between independentism and collegialism, both having been influenced by liberal thinking. (p. 1)

Instead, influential opinions among Reformed authors should be firmly rooted in Reformational thinking, aligning with the essence of the Open Declaration which aims to promote unity while avoiding divisive tendencies.

Thirdly, theological education and training play a pivotal role in fostering church unity and ecclesiastical communion. The theological training, provided by the RCSA/GKSA, is deeply grounded in 16th-century Reformational theology. The Open Declaration clearly stipulates that:

We wholeheartedly and with good conscience accept the Three Creeds of Unity that were accepted at the Synod of Dordt 1618–1619. The Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession of Faith, and the Canons of Dordt. (p. 498)

Theological training should guide ministers of the Word to delve deeply into the principles of the 16th century and to steer clear of the rationalism of the 17th century. This can help local churches reduce misunderstandings and foster the spirit of ecclesiastical communion.

Fourthly, it is recommended to celebrate Holy Communion in one church building once every 6 months. This act serves as the highest expression of shared faith and church unity. Reflecting on Christ's sacrifice on the cross can facilitate reconciliation and healing of divisions within the body of Christ.

Fifthly and finally, Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) should be pursued. Although the Church Order provides a mechanism through Article 31, local churches should seek biblical methods and processes to address conflicts that may arise between two churches. Establishing local commissions, composed of representatives from both churches, can promote healing and reconciliation. As Spoelstra (1989:205) highlights, 'churches correspond with each other by means of appointed delegates'. Delegates attending these meetings should adopt a problem-solving attitude in the spirit of the Open Declaration, thereby appealing for unity and ecclesiastical communion.

Conclusion

The church of Christ progresses through three distinct phases: establishment (formation), distortion (deformation), and restoration (reformation). The period, characterised by divisions and ongoing disagreements in meetings, can be referred to as distortion (deformation). The foundation of decisions made in church meetings is rooted in Scripture, Confessions, Church Order, and the decisions of church assemblies, including those of the local Church Council, Classis, Regional Synod, and General Synod.

The RCSA/GKSA bears the responsibility, guided by the Open Declaration, to uphold 16th-century doctrine and way of life against the influences of rationalism and democratisation. There should be no churches separating from the RCSA/GKSA; rather, the RCSA/GKSA should strive to maintain unity. The concept of ecclesiastical communion must be safeguarded against the notions of rationalism and democratisation.

This shared understanding of the Open Declaration aims to foster a sense of unity among delegates. They recognise the importance of aligning and binding decisions made by the Church Council, Classis, Regional Synod, and General Synod during meetings.

Churches within the RCSA/GKSA ecclesiastical communion should commit to several approaches. Firstly, they should revisit the Public Declaration. Secondly, they should engage in local church dialogues, promoting ongoing cooperation and dialogue among churches within ecclesiastical communion. Thirdly, theological education and training are of utmost importance in fostering church unity and ecclesiastical communion. The theological training provided by the RCSA/GKSA upholds 16th-century Reformational theology. Fourthly, there should be a celebration of Holy Communion in one church building. Lastly, ADR should be pursued. Although the Church Order provides a mechanism through Article 31, local churches should seek biblical ways and processes to address and resolve conflicts that arise between two local churches.

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