

# A critique of 'Bound To Join'

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## Introduction

### My purpose

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate statements made by David J Engelsma in his book, *'Bound to Join'*.<sup>1</sup> The chief concern is that these statements are cultic in nature and are based on unbiblical, sectarian ideas of exclusivity.

The book was the publication of comments by Engelsma to a forum of European correspondents arising from a British Reformed Fellowship conference (henceforward BRF). The questions of the correspondents regarded what a Christian is to do when there are no sound churches to join, a situation facing very many people in the UK where churches of all stripes have apostatised to a lesser or greater degree.

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<sup>1</sup> Reformed Free Publishing Association, Jenison, Michigan (2010), p. xi plus 167.

## My background

The background of this writer is that of a UK Christian who is consistently Calvinistic in the doctrines of grace and would affirm the Reformed standards on these matters. However, on baptism he is a credobaptist, but with no affiliation to any Baptist denomination. On church matters he differs from Reformed Presbyterian confessions being independent, congregational and separatist. In this he is more like John Bunyan and John Owen than John Calvin, though he esteems Calvin very highly. He also affirms the need to form genuine Biblical churches that meet in homes under the leadership of equal, plural elders. Thus he denies rigid, hierarchical, formal, institutional churches with single ministers, as being unbiblical.

## Engelsma's background

Engelsma is a professor-emeritus of the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary and a former pastor of the Protestant Reformed Churches (henceforward PRC), a Dutch-American, Reformed Presbyterian church that was founded in 1924 by Herman Hoeksema. These churches affirm consistent Calvinism and deny the sincere, well-meant or free offer and common grace stance found in most modern evangelical churches, which is modernised Amyraldism. In this the writer would agree with them. Engelsma is also the editor of the PRC magazine, *The Standard Bearer*, the author of many fine books, a debater and a frequent conference speaker at BRF conferences.

At this point I wish to add that I have long held Professor Engelsma in very high esteem. He has been of great help to me in my development in understanding doctrine for over 20 years. I have often recommended him to others and passed on his books and tapes. I believe that on the issues of sovereign grace he is the most able communicator of truth today. Indeed, I was a member of a different forum on justification by faith, which I greatly appreciated. It is with a heavy heart that I have to contradict him, and contend against him.

## Associates of Engelsma

I will be referring to two associates of Professor Engelsma in this work as they repeat the claims made in his book and have recently disseminated them in the *British Reformed Journal* (BRJ), where this controversy began.<sup>2</sup> These associates are: Rev. Angus Stewart, senior pastor of the Covenant Protestant Reformed Church (CPRC) in Ballymena, Northern Ireland, and Martyn McGeown, pastor of Limerick Reformed Church, Republic of Ireland; a minister sent by the CPRC. Both these Irish churches are associated with the PRC; both the pastors were trained by the PRC under Engelsma and others, and both parrot the claims of Engelsma under review here. I have had email correspondence with Angus Stewart on these matters.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The journal is the publication of the BRF. The BRJ is now effectively a front for the CPRC, a fact not denied by Stewart in his emails to me. However, it was initiated about 21 years ago by an English believer to be a support for a disparate group of UK believers in Reformed theology but from differing church backgrounds. It has a subscriber's list of about 120 people. I have had many articles published in this journal in the past and many through fellowship with a godly PRC minister who greatly helped the development of the BRJ and who was open-minded and well-loved, Ron Hanko. Ron is now in Washington State, USA.

<sup>3</sup> The CPRC in Ballymena and the Limerick Reformed Church are closely associated churches to the PRC; the CPRC is called a 'sister-church' to the PRC (whatever that means); a term with no Biblicity. [How can a local church be a sister to a denomination? This is not like with like.] However, Stewart and McGeown would deny being in the same denomination since Reformed confessions do not support trans-national church bodies. However, to all intents, purposes and outside observations, they are effectively in the PRC denomination. McGeown was sent from the CPRC to be a missionary-pastor in Limerick, thus this church is closely linked to the leadership in the CPRC.

### **The need for the prior authority of Scripture over tradition**

This paper seeks to be absolutely Biblical; thus it will affirm Scripture over Reformed confessions if necessary. The writer esteems Reformed confessions and encourages their use as a guide to truth; however, confessions are not inspired and each age needs to form its own documents summarising Biblical doctrine since things change over time and issues that are not addressed in the historic confessions become of major contemporary importance. Likewise issues of major importance in the 16<sup>th</sup> century are of less importance today (such as vows and oaths). In fact this was common after the Reformation as each national situation produced its own confession, responding to its own needs. Thus the church after the Reformation produced scores of creedal documents; however Engelsma's denomination recognises the Three Forms of Unity alone (the Canons of the Synod of Dort; the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession). The BRF also recognises the Westminster Standards in addition. The need to produce relevant new creeds is a part of the ignored Reformation principle, *semper reformanda* (the church is always reforming).

However good a confession may be, it is not Scripture, and this is a significant issue in the current discussion. This paper will rely upon Scripture alone.

Before I discuss Engelsma's statements in detail, I need to make some introductory points of fact that are relevant to the discussion.

## **Marks of the Church**

One of the foundational arguments made by Engelsma relates to the marks of the church and this is a key issue in the debate before us. Thus we need to consider what these marks are.

### **The Reformed marks of the church**

Engelsma, following Reformed confessions (particularly the *Belgic Confession* Art. 29) identifies three marks of a true church, viz. faithful preaching of God's word, true practice of the sacraments and godly discipline of the church. There is nothing wrong with this but there are two observations.

The first is that this tends to put the focus on church leaders; that is, it is leaders who (in Reformed circles) only preach the word; it is leaders who (in Reformed circles) only administer the sacraments and it is leaders who enforce discipline. This is not the focus of Scripture. The second matter is that these just do not go far enough to faithfully represent Scripture.

A key problem with Reformed ecclesiology is its focus on leaders at the expense of the people. This tends to deny the Reformation truth of the priesthood of all believers; in practice Reformed churches manifest the priesthood of some believers. Thus Reformed leaders deny lay preaching and the congregation is largely silent and compliant in meeting, thus denying the teaching of 1 Corinthians 12.

### **The Biblical marks of the church**

Scripture does not focus on church leaders when describing what a church is but puts the focus on the body as a whole. Note that Paul, in writing to the churches, addresses the whole church and only once mentions the leaders in a secondary way.

To all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called *to be* saints: Rm 1:7

To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called *to be* saints. 1 Cor 1:2

To the church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in all Achaia. 2 Cor 1:1

To the churches of Galatia. Gal 1:2

To the saints who are in Ephesus, and faithful in Christ Jesus. Eph 1:1

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons. Phil 1:1

To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ *who are* in Colosse. Col 1:2

To the church of the Thessalonians. 1 Thess 1:1

To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Thess 1:1

The focus of Scripture is upon the body and not the leaders. This differs from most Reformed churches.

Furthermore, we must add some features to the Reformed list of distinctive marks in order to be Biblical. The Reformed list is good but insufficient. It is noteworthy that what we must add gives more focus to the people as a whole in the body.

### *The presence of Christ*

For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there in the midst of them. Matt 18:20

There is no true church unless Christ is spiritually present amongst them. In history there were often cases where Reformed Presbyterian churches had apostatised and became liberal, but still claimed the marks of a true church. In truth, however, they had ceased to be churches and the lampstand had long been removed by the Lord. In the UK such churches joined with dead Congregational churches to become the liberal United Reformed Church.

True churches only exist where Christ is present with the people. If this is rejected because it is not an objective sign then I say that that person reveals his immaturity. All genuine believers know when Christ is present or not in a meeting, or even when they meet a believer for the first time. The Spirit bears witness in our hearts when we meet other believers. The PRC tends to downplay the ministry of the Spirit in a believer.

This is a major feature of a true church; it is ignored by Engelsma.

### *Where Christ is pre-eminent*

And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence. Col 1:18

The true church is not only where Christ is present, but where Christ is also pre-eminent. Sadly, there are churches which claim to be Christian but where Christ is clearly not the focus in any meaningful way.

There are churches where the worship is not submission to, and reverence for, Christ but personal entertainment and whipped up enthusiasm. There are churches where prayers are never based upon the glory of Christ but on satisfying present human needs. There are churches where leaders become the pre-eminent features of the church meeting. There are churches where tradition is the chief focus of the church. There are churches where doctrinal standards are the chief emphasis in a church. But true churches are where Christ is pre-eminent.

*The list of Acts 2:42*

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.

This is the first description of a church meeting after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and it is very significant.

We can say that continuing in the apostle's doctrine equates to the Reformed preaching of the word and that breaking bread (the Lord's Supper) equates to the Reformed doctrine of the sacraments.

But this list also mentions prayers (plural), indicating the supplications, petitions, worship and intercessions of all the saints, and specifically identifies fellowship (*koinonia*), which is the sharing of the saints with one another; mutual edification.

Neither prayer nor fellowship is identified by the Reformed confessions and this is a mistake since the NT clearly makes a big deal of these things. I Corinthians 12 alone spends a chapter explaining how important the mutual fellowship in the body is, something which Reformed leaders ignore completely, and even deny.

Thus the first apostolic statement about the marks of the church emphasise prayer and fellowship amongst all the Lord's people, something Engelsma ignores.

*Love in the Spirit*

We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of your love for all the saints; who [Epaphras] also declared to us your love in the Spirit. Col 1:3-8

Love manifest in outward actions is a major theme of the NT and is clearly a mark of a Biblical church. Paul identified that the church in Colosse had such love and thus he taught them what was needed to be built on top of that to mature as a church. [That is: to be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding, increasing in the knowledge of God; to walk worthy of the Lord; being fruitful in every good work; to be strengthened with godly might for all patience and longsuffering with joy; and giving thanks to the Father].

Sadly it is not uncommon for Reformed churches, who claim to be Biblical, to be fully absent of any practical love at all. I have known of Reformed churches that were instead full of gossip, back-biting, slander, lies and manipulation. The apostolic view is that a church with no love for the brethren is no church at all, just as a Christian with no love for the brethren is no Christian at all (1 Jn 3:14-15, 4:7, 20).

This is a major feature of a true church; it is denied by Engelsma.

*The church is a gathering of converted believers*

For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh. Phil 3:3

The meaning of *ekklesia* is 'a body called out' and derives from the Greek word which referred to the town electorate being called out to meet together to debate key issues. Those called out of the world as the church are the ones who have been converted; the elect in Christ. The body of Christ meeting in the local church consists of those locally who are in the body. It does not consist of non-believers. The local church is a gathering of believers and the gathering of believers is a mark of the true church. Churches that call themselves

‘Christian’, but which are filled with unbelievers, are not true churches. This is important since Engelsma denies it (see later).

### *Why this is important*

We could perhaps extrapolate from this several other chief features of a true church but this is enough. What is certain is that the Reformed marks of the church are insufficient.

These additional features are significant because they mean that a number of churches in the UK are, by these features, shown to be genuine churches (though perhaps imperfect). Despite this, Engelsma (and his CPRC sister church based in Ballymena under Angus Stewart) claim that they are not; thus their call to relocate from England and move to Northern Ireland. An English church may not baptise like the Reformed confessions stipulate (paedobaptism) but comply with all these other features of the Biblical church. This makes them a genuine (but differing) church not a false one.

### *Developing churches may not have all the marks but are not false*

The confessions drew up the marks of the church to counter the Roman marks of the church. However, it was observed even then that a church may not have all the marks yet, or even be a fully pure church, and yet was a true church. William Cunningham explains that many developing churches took time to get teaching ministry, but were true churches.

The absence of a regular ministry, appointed in the ordinary prescribed way, or even the absence of a ministry altogether for a time, is not necessarily, and in all circumstances, a sufficient proof of itself that a society of professing Christians is not a church of Christ. <sup>4</sup>

A church can be developing for a considerable time before it becomes fully pure and bears all the marks of a church. Even in apostolic times we note that elders are not mentioned until Acts chapter 11, but the churches were genuine nevertheless.

### *Man-made demands*

On the other hand churches in history have added man-made ideas to the marks of a Christian and a church, such as demanding total abstinence from alcohol or meat. This is unbiblical. In fact the PRC themselves are guilty of this by demanding that people, and especially leaders, abandon home-schooling and enlist their children in PRC schools (at significant cost).<sup>5</sup> This is extra-Biblical also. I know of one case where a PRC pastor was deposed for failing to do this. This was an act of discipline that had no Biblical basis. This is an example of authoritarian control, typical of a cult. [See conclusion.]

### **Aside: the issue of baptism**

We must come to the conclusion that receiving one another, a command of the Lord, must not be overruled by secondary issues. Those in whom the Spirit of God dwells must fellowship together even if they differ on the meaning and mode of baptism. Baptism is a command of the Lord, but saints who have been baptised in a certain way must not be shunned because they have not been baptised in the way, or at the age, you prefer.

My personal position falls between two stools. I am a credobaptist; that is I believe that baptism is a command to obeyed when you have become a disciple (Matt 28:19). It is the outward means of identifying your allegiance to Christ. This cannot be done as an infant.

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<sup>4</sup> *Historical Theology*, Volume 1, p27-35.

<sup>5</sup> *The Standard Bearer*, Volume 86, Number 1 (October 1, 2009), p5-7. Volume 86, Number 2 (October 15, 2009), p28-30. *Acts of Synod and Yearbook of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America 2009*. A pastor named Mitchell Dick was forced to resign because he was home-schooling his children instead of sending them to the PRC school.

The PRC doctrine of baptism arises from its view of covenant. I do not accept the PRC explanation of Covenant Theology, which is not a Reformation doctrine but something that slowly developed in the hundred years afterwards. This covenantal structure arose to unify the OT and NT but it is flawed.<sup>6</sup> It fails to see that the covenant only arises after the fall of Adam and not before (the word does not appear until the flood); it is the means whereby God establishes a relationship with those who have been enemies. It also fails to see the importance of the NT emphasis on the newness of the New Covenant; ‘all things have become new’ (2 Cor 5:17). Instead the New Covenant is claimed to be just a superficial variation in the administration of the Old Covenant – this is not newness. Consequently it fails to see the temporary nature of the Mosaic Law (the central part of the Old Covenant) which is finished in Christ (Gal 3:19; Rm 10:4). Thus Christ is the standard of human behaviour and not the Mosaic Law. Believers must now follow the Law of Christ, as empowered by the Spirit not the Law of Moses which has no power (Gal 6:2). This law is the fulness of the eternal moral in the power of the Spirit, but not the Mosaic Law, which was local and just for Israel. Neither can the moral law, within the Mosaic Law, be separated from the Jewish civil and ceremonial laws; indeed to do this is very unbiblical. We cannot pursue this line further here.

The PRC view of the covenant leads to being a foundation for many of their ideas about church and especially baptism. Thus baptism is said to be the seal of conversion and the antitype of circumcision. This is wrong. The antitype of circumcision is the putting off of the flesh in the cross of Christ and the seal of the believer is the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Regarding baptism, unlike Baptists I believe that the preferred method of baptism is not immersion but sprinkling or pouring (though immersion is not forbidden). The overwhelming testimony of Scripture is that baptism is a picture of what the Spirit has done in applying salvation to us and this is most often spoken of as a sprinkling or a pouring (Ezek 43:18; Heb 9:13, 11:28, 12:24; 1 Pt 1:2; Acts 2:33, 10:45). The arguments for immersion often rely on faulty exegesis.

### **Interim conclusion**

The basis on which the PRC and Engelsma claim that UK churches are false is faulty. Engelsma’s evaluation of a church does not go far enough and does not take into account the case of developing churches, especially developing house churches recently planted, (which were, ironically, the basis of the churches addressed by the Belgic Confession).

By focusing on the confessional marks of a true church (sound preaching, sacraments, discipline) Engelsma elevates the place of leaders and consequently the institutional features of a formal church. The Bible, however, does not do this but focuses upon the people being centred upon Christ in relationship to him and each other. Engelsma concentrates upon formal, institutional churches that have no time for developing house churches; Scripture elevates relationships, *koinonia*, and the development of small house churches. [These points will be proved in due course.]

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<sup>6</sup> What unifies the OT and NT is the Gospel, the counsel of God in salvation. The Gospel is mentioned in Eden (Gen 3:15) and is consummated in Revelation. From start to finish the Bible is unified by the Gospel of God, the counsel of God and the decree to save the elect.

## Marks of genuine teaching ministry

Another foundational argument of Engelsma regards what constitutes genuine ministry. For him, true ministry arises from the ordination of a true church after a seminary education and examination.<sup>7</sup> There are two problems with this.

The first is that Scripture teaches nothing about seminary education at all but godly training for ministry is from a teacher to a disciple in the line of relationship and experience ‘in the saddle’. This was how Jesus trained the disciples and it was how Paul trained Timothy, Silvanus and Titus.

The second is that everything depends upon Engelsma’s definition of a true church, and his writing makes clear that most evangelical churches are outside this remit. The implication (though denied) is that only his denomination (with the possible exemption of a couple of churches with which the PRC is in communion with) is genuine. Thus all ministry outside the PRC (and a couple of other Reformed Presbyterian churches) is false.

This stance (which is also the stance of the last BRJ, issue No. 55) would mean that men like John Bunyan, John Owen and AW Pink stand condemned as false teachers, along with all Baptists and Congregationalists. Yet the PRC have sold books by Pink have warmly commended both Bunyan and John Owen. Staunch defenders of sovereign grace, like Baptist Abraham Booth, worthy missionaries like Baptist William Carey, eminent theologians like Congregationalist Thomas Goodwin or Anglicans William Perkins and William Ames, and powerful defenders of the Bible like Anglican JC Ryle all become outlawed by this policy. We could continue; all Puritans are nullified as being sound teachers; Charles Spurgeon ceases to have any value at all and most missionaries from CT Studd to Hudson Taylor are false ministers. Yet it should also be noted that there were times in history when Reformed Baptists were more stringent and faithful teachers of sovereign grace than many contemporary Presbyterians.

It is folly to say (as Stewart has said to me) that the bad things in a teacher’s ministry can be avoided and the good things can be affirmed; therefore, Pink’s work, ‘The Sovereignty of God’, has been republished by the RFPA.<sup>8</sup> If, by definition, a church is a false church and its ministers have no truly ordained ministry, then that ministry is, by definition, unsound and false. Stewart used this very argument to prevent the BRJ editor from publishing a letter from me on the matters pertinent to this paper (see later). This stance is inconsistent and typical of the self-contradictory arguments evidenced by Engelsma in his book. In fact Pink’s position was even worse since he finally ceased attendance at any sort of church and advised his readers to do the same. He was the ultimate independent, yet he has been constantly supported by quotations in PRC ministry.

This teaching is also hypocritical. There was a time when the PRC itself was a fledgling, independent body with no authorisation from anybody. It was formed in 1924 when Herman Hoeksema was ousted from the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) and gathered those who left with him, who were effectively rebels to the CRC. The followers of

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<sup>7</sup> This is a doctrine of the Protestant Reformed Churches. Note: ‘*All true preachers are accountable to an instituted church (i.e. a true church, i.e. the PRC). ... The sacraments also may only be administered by men lawfully ordained by the church.*’ Martyn McGeown, *BRJ*, 55, p16. Note that Scripture does not command that the sacraments be administered by an ordained leader; neither does Calvin (‘*the efficacy of baptism does not depend upon the person who administers it,*’ *French Confession*, 28).

<sup>8</sup> The Reformed Free Publishing Assoc., the publishing arm of the PRC.

Hoeksema were, in effect, technically schismatics by definition.<sup>9</sup> Hoeksema and his ejected colleague<sup>10</sup> effectively appointed themselves as ministers (with the consent of the congregation) and developed a new denomination. Thus at the beginning they had no authority at all from a mother institution. Yet they now claim that people starting new house churches have no authority to exist and teachers in such churches have no authority to teach.<sup>11</sup>

This teaching is offensive both to Christ and to the majority of the world's Christians. Effectively it is saying that true ministry only derives from a central source and that source is the PRC, or perhaps also a couple of other associated churches. This is cultic. We will revisit this later. So what is true ministry?

### **Sent from God, not men**

He Himself gave some *to be* apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. Eph 4:11-13

The ascended Lord Jesus Christ sends the gift of men to his church, his body on earth. It is not for men to certify who is a minister but for the local church in consensus to recognise the gift of God in a man as a result of his teaching. Each local church has the responsibility for recognising the gift, not some central body who then sends a man to a distant church who don't know him at all.

The emphasis of Scripture is the gift but the emphasis of seminaries is the training. Usually churches are so short of willing seminary students (I believe the PRC this year only has one enrolling, plus it has many vacant leadership positions) that often they take on men before any gift has really been ascertained. I have frequently met men (not from the PRC I must say) who have been through theological seminaries and are appallingly hopeless on doctrinal understanding. I once spoke to the seminary professor of a famous British theological college in London who told me that his students found the Westminster Shorter Catechism (which was written for young people and children) hard to understand!

A true minister is sent from heaven; a gift from God to the church.

### **Begins as 'lay' ministry**

Now this gift must be recognised and the way it is recognised is through the person's gradual development in the local church. As he grows in knowledge and experience, he begins to speak words of encouragement in the local church, becoming more and more proficient in it. Wise elders will encourage and develop this ministry and the young man becomes more and more able.

However, PRC churches do not do this. I learn from Angus Stewart that 'lay' ministry is denied. Thus formal training must occur before any real chance of gifting is known for

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<sup>9</sup> I agree with Hoeksema's stance but my point is that the PRC began by seceding from the CRC, even though it was with good reason. By the PRC definition, at this origin point, they had no authority as a church at all and from the standpoint of their mother church they were rebels. If the PRC can begin this way, so can other churches; including house churches.

<sup>10</sup> Henry Danhof.

<sup>11</sup> Angus Stewart, *'I think this is the key to the issue between us, and between you and Prof. Engelsma. Since your ecclesiology is a form of modern house-churchism and I and Prof. Engelsma hold Reformed ecclesiology, we are not going to see eye to eye in ecclesiology. Those who hold to house-churchism [are contrary to the (sic)] Westminster Standards and the Belgic Confession'*. Personal email.

certain. This also denies the apostolic method of apprenticeship, training in the saddle under an experienced minister.

### **Seminaries are not Biblical**

Theological seminaries may have their uses but they are not Biblical and not a single church leader can claim that they are. Apart from denying the Biblical methods of apprenticeship and a developing lay ministry, seminaries all tend to push their students in a certain direction according to the whims of the denomination. This tends to push sectarianism and inhibit independent thinking.

Another problem is that graduated students tend to feel that they are accomplished instead of feeling that they are on the starting block. It seems to me that major development of doctrine stops at this point. In my view the first criterion of being a Bible student is total dependency upon the Lord Jesus coupled with a thirst for knowledge. Seminary education tends to do the opposite.

To illustrate, I once mailed Professor Engelsma with a mild criticism of his teaching on justification by faith. Though his teaching on this is excellent in a number of ways, there was one issue which I believed was mistaken. His reply was honourable and complimented me on my argument but what surprised me was that he said that he had not been trained on this issue at all and therefore could not comment. He did not change his view or struggle to consider the alternative (this forum is now being published shortly like 'Bound to Join').

### **Examples**

The key issue with the PRC is that ministry is only genuine if it arises from their training school or that of someone similar. But Scripture does not take this view at all. God is sovereign over whom he gifts and sometimes he gifts surprising people.

The church in Antioch was started by unknown Gentiles who had no authorisation from the apostles and no contact with them until Barnabus arrived, who confirmed that it was of God. Apollos, even though he was wrong on some issues and needed correction, was accepted as a preacher of the Gospel by Paul, though he had no apparent authorisation from the apostles. Even Paul's ministry continued and was blessed by God for some years before he even saw the apostles face to face. The Lord promised to guide the 11 disciples into all truth and yet the main portion of the NT was written by someone who was not present (Paul). In fact the chief portion of NT history was also written by someone who was not there and was not even a Jew (Luke). Further, Paul was ambivalent about preachers of the Gospel who had no relationship with the apostles (Phil 1:15-18). Philip was not ordained as an apostle or evangelist, yet he acted like one successfully and his evangelism was only later ratified by the apostles.

It seems to me that the NT goes out of its way to emphasise that God sends men as he chooses; and sometimes from unexpected sources, such as an enemy of the church (Paul). Furthermore, Paul and Apollos were ordained by no one.

### **Interim conclusion: genuine ministry is not restricted to PRC churches**

The PRC does not have a monopoly of teachers. Now they would deny claiming that they do but their teaching leads directly towards this conclusion and the claims of Engelsma in his book certainly point in this direction. Statements by CPRC ministers in the BRJ also make this point. If you deny the validity of virtually every other UK national church, and thus deny the ministry from these denied churches, but then affirm the validity of the PRC

and sister churches, you are implicitly stating that the only valid ministry is that which has been trained by the PRC. [See later.]

Instead, church ministry is a gift from the Lord and rises up in the local church as the membership recognises the gift of men who develop a teaching ministry. It sometimes arises from unexpected sources.

## **Marks of true Christianity**

Engelsma claims that true believers are only found in true churches and his implication is that outside the PRC (and perhaps a couple of other linked churches) there is no salvation. In order to deal with this error we must first understand what Scripture says about being a true believer.

**As many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. Jn 1:12-13**

**Then they said to Him, 'What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?' Jesus answered and said to them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent.' Jn 6:28-29**

**And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day. Jn 6:40**

**Whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved. Rm 10:13**

We could add many more similar Scriptures, but the point has been made. Salvation is by believing in Christ, by calling on the name of the Lord, by receiving Christ as Saviour. It is the work of God in the elect.

### **Grace plus**

There have been many church streams which make the mistake of adding a human work to the gift of faith given by God. Reformed churches normally speak out against such things. However, Reformed people can sometimes be led by their own logic into making this mistake themselves.

Such is the case of people in recent years, particularly in the US, who have insisted that Arminians cannot be saved. What they are doing is saying that a man can only be saved by receiving Christ PLUS performing a meritorious work, that is, accepting the theology of Calvinism. Now Calvinism is Biblical theology and believers must learn it in my view, but Calvinism is not the basis of conversion. God saves people to make them theologians not because they already are theologians.

Thus an Arminian, someone who has picked up basic Arminian ideas from an evangelist, can call upon the Lord sincerely and be saved, even though his ideas are mistaken. The disciples of the Lord were mistaken on many theological and practical issues, yet they were still accepted by Christ.

In my view the arguments of Engelsma (and other PRC adherents) are teaching (or at least implying) that salvation is grace PLUS joining a pure church. Thus someone who is not in a PRC church cannot be certain of their salvation since a prime condition is missing. Although they will deny this, there is no doubt that they imply that a person outside the PRC cannot be sure of their salvation. This challenges the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

### *The CPRC defence*

In his positive review of *'Bound To Join'*, Angus Stewart defends Engelsma from this criticism by saying that justification is certainly by faith alone but it is not alone; that is, justification by the instrument of faith is always succeeded by fruit, viz. the righteous deeds that flow from justification.

Of course this is true but it doesn't save Engelsma from the criticism. Justification results in righteousness but the newly born believer is not immediately able to live a perfect life of righteousness; indeed the believer never attains this state of perfection in this life. Engelsma and Stewart, however, are making absolutist statements: the genuine believer must be a part of a pure (i.e. perfect) church in order to be sure that they are saved. If they are not, their chances of being genuinely converted are minimised. This is like saying that a justified believer must live a perfect life of righteousness in order to be sure he is saved; something not possible.

Just as genuine believers live imperfect lives, there are many true believers who attend imperfect churches. This does not make them reprobate, but people faced with a difficult situation that is not of their making.

To make this suggestion about salvation is further evidence of Engelsma and Stewart's unsympathetic counsel to people in difficulty. The problem of the UK having a dearth of sound churches is not the fault of the correspondents but of UK church leaders for over fifty years.

### **Conclusion: salvation is not conditioned on being in a church**

It is unbiblical to add any condition, based upon human action, to becoming a true Christian. Salvation is by sovereign grace alone that does not rest on the strength or will of man in any way. Justification is by faith, not faith and joining a PRC church.

Now Engelsma would agree with this, but his emphasis on the necessity to be in a pure (i.e. PRC) church contradicts his own teaching. Since this is pretty obvious, it has to mean that his emphasis is wrong.

## **The problem in the UK**

Without doubt the church situation in the UK is dire; indeed I believe that it has never been so bad in all church history. The majority of Christians, according to census material, belong to Pentecostal and Charismatic churches. In this paper I make the presumption that readers will understand why I claim that these churches are unbiblical. They are churches who have engaged in syncretism with the world, the occult, the mystical and the pagan. They are false.

Apart from the Charismatics there are believers who have chosen to either stay in, or have returned to, the Anglican Church. That this is also an apostate body ought to be clear to discerning readers and needs no development here. No matter what your local Anglican vicar is like, to be in that body requires submission to the laws of that body, which are apostate.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Exemplified by the predominance of liberalism amongst synod members, the endorsement of homosexual priests and the authorisation of the leadership of women.

Outside these groups are the Baptists, which are split into various associations. The Grace Baptists are very varied at this point. Some are Reformed to a degree but virtually all accept the free offer and common grace and most are adopting, or have adopted, Charismatic practices. I know of few that can be recommended. The Baptist Union has long been an apostate body and began to degenerate in the time of Spurgeon; it is now much worse and frequently completely liberal. Regarding Particular or Reformed Baptists, and Strict Baptists, many of these have long succumbed to Hyper-Calvinism. There are very few chapels left and most have congregations of a handful of old people. A very few are larger and the Metropolitan Tabernacle would be the biggest, though this is a free offer church and very centralised around the leader who is now ailing. There is also a handful of people in an association of Presbyterian churches.

Apart from these there are really only the independents, most of whom belong to the FIEC or one of the newer associations. The vast majority of these have long been Amyraldian, while many are legalistic, dry and spiritually dead. Some are trying to revitalise their meetings by becoming more Charismatic; the larger ones are already semi-Charismatic. There are a very few independent churches that are preaching the truth because they have a sound leader, but these are really few and far between and all have small congregations and an uncertain future as the pastor ages.

So the correspondence submitted to Engelsma for counsel was sad and troubling. Isolated Calvinists throughout the land often have nowhere to go and that is a fact of life felt by many thousands of people. It is a situation that the BRF was formed to encourage, seeking to hold a testimony to the truth in a land full of idolatry. This is why I believe that Engelsma's counsel and tone was offensive to people in dire straits.

## The answer of David Engelsma

### The marks of the church

Engelsma repeatedly refers to the marks of the church throughout the book, particularly in Letter 16. We have earlier explained what these marks are<sup>13</sup> and why the confessional list is insufficient. Engelsma will have no truck with this and denies additional marks quite strenuously, and this affects his counsel.

### *No subjective marks allowed*

Engelsma denies the need for subjective marks and only accepts the objective marks of the confessions that he considers are easily observed.

The genuine marks, however, are objective. There is no doubt about their presence or absence.<sup>14</sup>

The marks are and must be objective.<sup>15</sup>

In fact this is not always true. For instance, his own denomination (contrary to Scripture) refuses to publish the reasons why a pastor has been disciplined and, on occasion, has even denied the defences of those loyal to the pastor to be admitted into judgment. So, in such cases of secrecy, there is no objective understanding of why the discipline took place. How

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<sup>13</sup> Sound preaching, proper administration of the sacraments and godly discipline.

<sup>14</sup> *Bound To Join*, p102.

<sup>15</sup> *Bound To Join*, p102.

can anyone be sure that this was Biblical (indeed it has often turned out to be unbiblical; see later). Thus this mark of the church fails his own denomination.

Another case is sound preaching. He says, '*The preaching of sound doctrine is as objective and incontrovertible as the colour of the church building*'.<sup>16</sup> Well he has earlier stated that the UK churches are virtually all apostates because their teaching is unsound. This means that the hundreds of thousands of members of these churches cannot discern sound teaching. He says the same about US churches, with memberships of millions. In my experience very few believers can identify sound preaching. If my criticisms of this book are correct, then it also means that PRC associated church leaders and members can't identify sound preaching either since they commended this book, and it contains much that is unsound (as we will prove).

So Engelsma's emphasis upon objective marks being easily understood is false.

Engelsma, as part of his continual self-contradictions in this book, having denied the need for subjective discernment, then commands such subjective discernment when he says, '*The members of the church are also qualified to determine that they are edified by the preaching*'.<sup>17</sup> This is a subjective judgment of the marks of the church.

It is impossible to determine the status of a church without spiritual reasoning, based upon the truth, which is largely subjective.

#### *The work and guidance of the Holy Spirit*

What Engelsma utterly fails to appreciate is the ministry of the Spirit and he does this as a result of his resting upon reason, logic, human confessions and objectivity. This is not Biblical.

Christ tells us, '*if anyone wants to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority*', (Jn 7:17). This is a subjective test. The believer who really wants to know God's will eventually learns what it is. Christ promises this. How is this done? The Lord tells us that it is the job of the Holy Spirit to lead us into truth, '*However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth*', (Jn 16:13). Now the Spirit always uses the word and the first application of this promise was to the disciples in inspiring them to write the New Testament. However, the promise is universal and timeless; it applies to all the elect. It is the Spirit's task to lead us into truth, usually by way of the Scriptures and teaching ministry. This influence of the Spirit is subjective within the believer.

The Holy Spirit is given to indwell the believer to make him see clearly the effects of God's love within the church. Just as the Christian is called to live by faith, and this is a subjective command, so the believer is called to see the working of God's love. Just as the believer is called to put off the old man and put on the new man (and this is also subjective) so he is called to discern the presence or absence of love in the body. As the Spirit enables us to live by faith and to put off the old man, so he helps us to see the impact of divine love in the Christian community. It is not an act of the human will unaided.

#### *The denial of love*

Engelsma repeatedly denies that love is a genuine mark of the church.

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<sup>16</sup> *Bound To Join*, p102.

<sup>17</sup> *Bound To Join*, p105.

I am referring to love ... [this] ought to characterise a true church. But none of these ... constitute the mark ... of a true church. ... Take love for example ... lack of love on the part of the congregation is not ground for leaving.<sup>18</sup>

In fact he denies that love can be easily discerned

Love and spiritual fervour are subjective. They are qualities the presence or absence of which is difficult to determine.<sup>19</sup>

In fact this shows us a great deal about the spiritual life of Engelsma himself.

Firstly, love is a key mark of the church and the apostles mention this repeatedly. Far from it being difficult to spot and subjective, the apostles demand that we must discern its presence. We are to behold love, 'Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God' (1 Jn 3:1).' It is not difficult to see. In the same way God's love to us was clearly manifested, 'In this the love of God was manifested toward us' (1 Jn 4:9).

Indeed, we know that we are saved because we love other Christians, 'We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death', 1 Jn 3:14. Thus love becomes a test to determine if a person is saved or not, 'He who does not love does not know God, for God is love', 1 Jn 4:8. 'If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in Him, and He in us', 1 Jn 4:12-13.

Furthermore, love is a test of a true church and this test is applied by the risen Lord Jesus.

To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, ' These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands. ... Nevertheless I have *this* against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent.' Rev 2:1-5

Clearly the Lord Jesus thinks that love is a mark of a true church and even if a church is orthodox, attests true ministry and condemns false teachers (as Ephesus did), but has no love, then it comes under Christ's condemnation. According to Engelsma's insistence upon objective marks, Ephesus would have been a perfect church; it was orthodox in its preaching and discipline; but Christ denies this and calls the church to repent because it failed an important subjective test.

To deny that love is a key mark of the church is to contradict Christ himself. Yet Engelsma is bold to do this.

### *The denial of genuine conversions*

Engelsma states, '*thorough conversion of the members is not one of the marks of the true church*'.<sup>20</sup> I think most people that read this almost fell to the floor with shock. He denies this since it is a '*subjective consideration*'. However, in many other places he (with other PRC teachers) write about the need for the fruit of conversion to be plainly seen and discernment made whether a person is saved or not based upon their growth in grace and righteousness. Church leaders must apply discernment about the state of a believer's condition all the time in order to properly counsel them. Believers also do this all the time, such as when praying for family members. We are constantly called to make a decision as to whether a person is saved or not and relate to them accordingly.

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<sup>18</sup> *Bound To Join*, p101-102.

<sup>19</sup> *Bound To Join*, p102.

<sup>20</sup> *Bound To Join*, p102.

The church is a place where true believers have been called out together; that is actually the meaning of the term *ekklesia*. The church is not a place for the gathering of anybody, but the gathering of the elect. The presence of believers in a local church is a plain mark of it being genuine. Churches that are full of unbelievers (such as Roman churches or liberal churches) are clearly not Christian churches at all. To deny this mark is exceptionally foolish; however, it is a common feature of large, formal, institutional churches.

### *Denial of righteousness*

Engelsma says, ‘No one may refuse to join a true church, or leave it, because of the sinfulness of the members. ... The marks of the true church have nothing whatsoever to do with the perceived holiness of the members.’<sup>21</sup> In fact this is a denial of his own marks of the church. The sinfulness of members (perhaps many members, as in his own illustrations) reveals a lack of discipline by the elders of the church. There is a difference between the slight mistakes every saint makes every day, despite seeking to maintain a true testimony, and the habitual, obvious sinfulness of some people (which is in view here). If there is an obvious sinful tendency of many in a church that is ignored, then that is not a true church. Indeed, there is the likelihood that the sinners are not even true Christians: ‘If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth’ (1 Jn 1:6). True churches do not tolerate open sin.

### *Interim conclusion*

Engelsma fails to appreciate marks of the church that are totally Biblical but are not confessional and some of which are subjective. This is a problem that directly affects the value of his counsel in being a member of a church. If a church is failing by preaching the free offer and credobaptism, but in every other respect is sound, then a believer may join that church even though it is not perfect. It is better than going nowhere. Furthermore, if the choice is between such a church and a Presbyterian church which denies the free offer but where Christ is not present, where there is no love, where there is much unrighteousness and where there are many unbelievers present, then my advice would be to join the former church.

The impression one receives when reading Engelsma on this matter is that it is propaganda used to support his ailing denomination and prop it up. It sounds like a plea to accept his church denomination, even though it is full of these wrong marks used in his arguments.

### **No true churches in the UK except the PRC associates in Ballymena and Limerick**

Now this is expressly denied by Engelsma and also by his colleague Angus Stewart. Having discussed this matter with Angus I can tell you that he strenuously denies it. However, I will prove that, in reality, this is exactly what they mean in practice.

### *A clear statement that there are no true churches in the UK apart from the CPRC*

Engelsma repeatedly applies Calvin’s statements to the historic, persecuted, fledgling, French church to the situation facing his correspondents in the UK. He says,

... an area where there is no true church, not even a true church that is less sound and pure than it ought to be, but only a false church.<sup>22</sup>

We make the point elsewhere that Engelsma is not comparing like with like; the British situation is not that same as Reformation France. Such a statement implies that not only are Calvinistic Baptist churches false (something Engelsma openly declares many times) but also the 13 Presbyterian congregations of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of

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<sup>21</sup> *Bound To Join*, p98.

<sup>22</sup> *Bound To Join*, p75.

England and Wales (EPCEW), between Cardiff in the east and Gateshead in the north which follow the Westminster Standards.<sup>23</sup> The PRC associates with two Presbyterian churches that adhere to Westminster in Singapore and Australia; why denounce the UK Presbyterians? Or is it that Engelsma did not research the UK situation before passing severe comments to his correspondents? Ironically these churches were described, and contact details given, in the BRJ issue 54.

It would be truly ironic, and indeed sinful, if Engelsma counselled a correspondent to relocate to Northern Ireland when a Westminster supporting Presbyterian church was in the region. Since the BRJ subscribers cover a wide area of the British Isles, this scenario is actually quite likely for some. This also almost equally applies to the Church of England (Continuing) congregations, which arose in 1994 after the Anglicans authorised the ordination of women and which adhere to the Thirty-Nine Articles.<sup>24</sup> This has four congregations between the Midlands and London (St Silas Wolverhampton, St Mary's Reading, St John's South London, Holy Trinity Frinton-on-Sea).

Aside: Engelsma is also wrong in applying Calvin's Anti-Nicodemite writings to his correspondents. Calvin's readers were refusing to join a persecuted house church or flee the country; instead they deliberately committed idolatry in joining Roman churches while trying to maintain the faith in their heart. The BRF correspondents were not doing that (though a few came close by being present in Anglican churches); they were desperately seeking to be part of a true church but there were none locally. [See later.]

#### *The advice to relocate*

Further proof is that Engelsma, Angus Stewart and Martyn McGeown have urged people to relocate from distant places in order to join their churches. There has been pressure put on people in England to relocate to Ireland. I have also been informed that two people were encouraged to move from central Europe, who subsequently left their families and joined the Ballymena church. I personally know of people that relocated to Ballymena from the UK mainland, against the wishes of their family, the spouse and the children. The last issue of the BRJ (number 55, which McGeown temporarily edited) made this point of the need to relocate very strongly.

Now if Engelsma and his colleagues really believe that there are some true churches in England, then there is no point in disrupting families and getting folk to move such vast distances off the mainland. One only encourages folk to emigrate if one believes that there are no true churches in their country. This is plain proof that they really believe that England has no Biblical churches.

#### *The logic of Engelsma's argument 1*

Engelsma openly denies that many of the church denominations and groupings in the UK are genuine churches. Such would include Arminians, Charismatics, Anglicans and Baptists.<sup>25</sup> His church polity, based on the Belgic Confession, would also condemn all independents. There are almost no genuinely Reformed Presbyterian churches left in England or Wales (thirteen in a new association), though there are more in Scotland. So this effectively means that there are no sound churches in England or Wales by Engelsma's criteria (Engelsma ignores the EPCEW). The denial that the PRC considers itself the only

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<sup>23</sup> [www.epcew.org.uk](http://www.epcew.org.uk)

<sup>24</sup> [www.cofec.org](http://www.cofec.org)

<sup>25</sup> For example the Baptists on page 34; Liberals, Roman Catholics and Arminians on pages 7, 85, 133; Charismatics on page 133; Lutherans on pages 150-151.

true church rings hollow in that their argument teaches otherwise; at least as far as England and Wales are concerned.

*The logic of Engelsma's argument 2*

In his book Engelsma tries hard to deny that the PRC claims to be the only true church in the USA; but this is hard to swallow. For example, '*The Protestant Reformed Churches do not regard churches that hold the well-meant gospel offer and common grace as false churches*'.<sup>26</sup>

Again, all Episcopal, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Liberal, Baptist, Arminian, Dispensational, Charismatic and independent churches are automatically condemned as false by the PRC's open teaching in many places; Engelsma echoes this in *Bound to Join* page 7. But what of Reformed Presbyterians in the US? Engelsma refuses to openly call them false, presumably because they are his neighbours. But after denying that they are false, he spends pages and pages explaining why their teaching is false and why their espousal of the free offer makes them affirm universal grace. The conclusion is inescapable, according to Engelsma's own reasoning that,

Churches that consistently proclaim as gospel the dependency of God upon the will of the sinner in salvation, the impotency and inefficiency of the cross (universal atonement that fails to save all) ... are false churches.<sup>27</sup>

This has to include Presbyterian churches that preach the free offer since they believe exactly this. But this contradicts his previous statement. Engelsma even says,

Although the Protestant Reformed Churches do not condemn Reformed churches that teach the well-meant offer and common grace as false churches, they do condemn the doctrines themselves as false doctrines that very seriously corrupt the gospel. ... They are very serious departures from the system of doctrine contained in the Westminster standards and from the faith defended by the Synod of Dordt.<sup>28</sup>

Churches [that are] Reformed in name are in fact denying cardinal doctrines of the Reformed faith. This is the case today with reputedly conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches in North America. ... [Such as] the denial of the gospel of salvation by sovereign, irresistible grace ... (the well-meant offer).<sup>29</sup>

Elsewhere he affirms (quite rightly) that churches which preach very serious false doctrines are not sound churches; yet here he says that they are true churches even though they teach false doctrines. His logic forces him to conclude that Reformed Presbyterian US churches are false churches, but he refuses to say this openly. In practice the PRC believes this to be true because they seek to build their denomination in isolation, even by taking people who were previously members of a different Presbyterian church. Also they seceded from a Presbyterian church in 1924. If it was a true church (even though it taught common grace and the free offer) why was it necessary to secede? [It is true that Hoeksema was thrown out, but his supporters did not need to leave, they seceded; that is, they left by choice to support Hoeksema.] The fact is that common grace and the free offer made the PRC start a new denomination. This alone implies that other Presbyterian churches are not sound.

Furthermore, Engelsma equates the free offer with Arminianism,

The teaching of the well-meant offer ... is a blatant form of the Arminian heresy ... it implies universal atonement ... it teaches resistible grace ... it implies that the salvation

<sup>26</sup> *Bound To Join*, p10.

<sup>27</sup> *Bound To Join*, p7.

<sup>28</sup> *Bound To Join*, p13.

<sup>29</sup> *Bound To Join*, p67-68.

of the sinner depends ... upon the sinner's acceptance of the offer by his own free, sovereign will.<sup>30</sup>

If the free offer is Arminian, then by definition, the churches proclaiming it are false. I repeat his quote,

Churches that consistently proclaim as gospel the dependency of God upon the will of the sinner in salvation, the impotency and inefficiency of the cross (universal atonement that fails to save all) ... are false churches.<sup>31</sup>

On pages 16-17 Engelsma questions whether any Biblical Christian can tolerate the presence of false doctrine in the church and sit under it; saying that rather we should reject it and oppose error. Clearly Christians cannot remain in such a church and must leave it since it is false.

There is no escape, the logic of Engelsma's argument is plainly that all churches except the PRC (and possibly one or two other like-minded churches like the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Australia) are false. In fact Engelsma states that the Christian Reformed Church (the church which the PRC came out of in 1924) illustrates the fact that the free offer and common grace leads to open Arminianism and even universalism (see page 14-16). A universalistic church is a false church.

Clearly, Engelsma is trying to have his cake and eat it. His argument clearly identifies other Presbyterian churches as false and even names one which he says teaches universalism. To claim that the PRC does not deny the validity of other US Presbyterian churches is shown to be a lie. The obvious implication, nay more than an implication, is that the PRC is the only safe church. I insist that such a claim is cultic and stands condemned.

*Note the following examples of Engelsma's self-contradiction:*

FREE OFFER CHURCHES ARE FALSE CHURCHES

Those churches that openly deny, vigorously oppose, and even blaspheme the doctrines of grace ... while teaching with equal vigour, conditional election, universal atonement, the goodness and spiritual ability of the unregenerated sinner, conversion dependent upon the free will of the sinner, resistible grace and the falling away of the saints are false churches. ... No believer may be a member of such churches. Every believer who finds himself or herself in one of these churches is duty bound to leave it, Now!<sup>32</sup>

This would apply to free offer, common grace, teaching churches (with the exception of the point regarding falling away) under Engelsma's own argument that the free offer rests upon universal grace.

I regard the false gospel of salvation by the free will of the sinner, making an inherently impotent cross effective for oneself, as being as much a denial of the gospel as is outright liberalism.<sup>33</sup>

The soundest, most conservative, and reputedly orthodox Reformed and Presbyterian churches in North America abandon the two great truths at the heart of the sixteenth-century Reformation of the church: the sole authority of Holy Scripture and the gospel

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<sup>30</sup> *Bound To Join*, p13.

<sup>31</sup> *Bound To Join*, p7.

<sup>32</sup> *Bound To Join*, p133.

<sup>33</sup> *Bound To Join*, p145.

of salvation by (sovereign) grace, centring on justification by faith alone. These churches are essentially one with Rome. ... Apostasy has done almost all it can do.<sup>34</sup>

#### FREE OFFER CHURCHES ARE NOT FALSE CHURCHES

Do the Protestant Reformed Churches regard those Reformed and Presbyterian churches that maintain the doctrines of a well-meant offer of the gospel and of a common grace of God as false churches? The answer is No. The Protestant Reformed Churches do not regard churches that hold the well-meant gospel offer and common grace as false churches'.<sup>35</sup>

The doctrine of the well-meant offer, adopted and taught by a Reformed or Presbyterian church in flat contradiction of the confessions that the church professes to hold, does not, by virtue of this fact, make that church a false church.<sup>36</sup>

The latter quote is immediately followed by a statement which, in effect, denies this by saying that the free offer will make the church false in the end:

As a grievous corruption of the truth of the gospel of salvation by sovereign, particular grace, the doctrine of the well-meant offer can develop and will necessarily develop in that church, as it has already done in other churches, so that over time it eradicates every vestige of the truth of sovereign grace. Thus this radically unreformed doctrine very definitely contributes to that church's becoming a false church.<sup>37</sup>

#### *Claims of exclusivity observed by his correspondents*

Letter five in the book (p30ff.) raises this same objection regarding exclusivity by a correspondent; clearly I am not alone in coming to the conclusion that the PRC claims exclusivity. Engelsma again adopts a double standard by claiming that false teaching does not necessarily make a false church, though he has said himself that it does earlier. The self-contradiction is obvious in a book, but may not have been so in email correspondence over a period of time and the editorial policy of the book has foolishly not cleaned this up.

One argument he makes here is that churches take time to become false by failing to repent of teaching false doctrine. Thus Engelsma says that churches adopting a false doctrine may not yet be really false. However, the situation in America is that the churches, which have adopted Arminian ideas of universalism present in the free offer, have held these for a hundred years. Clearly they are now false churches since they have not repented; so again, other US Presbyterian churches are false.

Indeed Engelsma plainly states,

There is something seriously wrong with the man who says, "I can be content with all kinds of doctrinal errors, with impure worship ... [and claims] It is still not an apostate church".<sup>38</sup>

There is no escape; Engelsma's logic leads to the conclusion that the PRC is the only true church in the US. Indeed he states this openly,

There still remain true churches of Christ in the world. Among them are the Protestant Reformed Churches in America.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *Bound To Join*, p158.

<sup>35</sup> *Bound To Join*, p10.

<sup>36</sup> *Bound To Join*, p16.

<sup>37</sup> *Bound To Join*, p16.

<sup>38</sup> *Bound To Join*, p35.

<sup>39</sup> *Bound To Join*, p158.

It is noteworthy that he names no others.

*Aside: hypocrisy*

It is hypocritical of Engelsma to identify churches that preach common grace and the free offer as false (though not stated plainly) and yet refer to men who taught these things as authorities. Calvin taught, in his tracts on predestination, the sovereignty of God in salvation. However, sometimes, as a preacher, he got carried away and preached the free offer to his congregation. He does this in his sermon on 2 Peter 3:9.

Also Engelsma greatly esteems Herman Bavinck as a theologian and was on the board of directors for the publication of his, mostly excellent, four-volume Reformed Dogmatics. However, Bavinck taught a form of common grace that was accepted and developed by Louis Berkhof.

It is unacceptable for Engelsma to unequivocally condemn modern church leaders who teach the free offer and common grace as false teachers and at the same time unequivocally lean upon Calvin and Bavinck for support in his theological statements.

*Aside: the historical context of the Belgic Confession*

When reading the confession on the matter of the marks of a true church, one must bear in mind that the contemporary issue at stake was opposition to the Roman Church and perhaps also to Anabaptists and Lutherans to a lesser degree. What was not in mind is the plethora of churches and groups that claim the name of Reformed or other evangelical churches today; this fragmentation occurred later.

Therefore, one must be very careful in using the confession as a hammer to cause division between Reformed churches. It is very doubtful that Guido de Brès, or the authors of other Reformed confessions, would support such a divisive spirit amongst people who largely agree on cardinal issues.

**Reprobation of everyone else**

A central argument with Engelsma is the confessional doctrine that ‘outside the church there is no salvation’ [*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*], which he takes to mean the visible church. I hold (with many others) that this means the invisible church.

Following on from the clear implication that only the PRC and associated churches are genuine churches, then their doctrine that salvation is only found in a genuine church means that salvation is only found in the PRC and associated churches. This is also denied but again the logic of Engelsma’s argument demands this conclusion.

We have proved that Engelsma affirms (in reality) that only the PRC churches are sound. He also affirms that salvation is only found in the true church.

Article 28 [of the Belgic Confession] declares, as the church has taught down the ages, “Out of it [the instituted church with the word and the sacraments] is no salvation.”<sup>40</sup>

“All men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with it” One reason is that “out of it there is no salvation: that is, outside the institute there is no salvation. ... As there was no salvation only in the ark, so there is salvation only in the instituted church.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> *Bound To Join*, p47.

<sup>41</sup> *Bound To Join*, p4.

Firstly we have to determine what exactly is meant in the Belgic Confession. This is what it says:

Article 28 That every one is bound to join himself to the true Church.

We believe, since this holy congregation is an assembly of those who are saved, and that **out of it there is no salvation**, that no person of whatsoever state or condition he may be, ought to withdraw himself, to live in a separate state from it; but that all men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with it; maintaining the unity of the Church; submitting themselves to the doctrine and discipline thereof; bowing their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ; and as mutual members of the same body, serving to the edification of the brethren, according to the talents God has given them. And that this may be the more effectually observed, it is the duty of all believers, according to the word of God, to separate themselves from all those who do not belong to the Church, and to join themselves to this congregation, wheresoever God hath established it, even though the magistrates and edicts of princes were against it, yea, though they should suffer death or any other corporal punishment. Therefore all those, who separate themselves from the same, or do not join themselves to it, act contrary to the ordinance of God.

Similarly, the *Westminster Confession*,

The visible church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel, (not confined to one nation, as before under the law,) consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, and of their children; and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, **out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation**. (25:2)

Note that the Westminster statement is not in absolute form but is qualified; it does not deny that people can be saved outside of the church, but not ordinarily. So the Westminster Confession does not support Engelsma (despite Stewart's claim that it does).

It is important to note the historical situation at the time Guido de Brès wrote the Belgic Confession. It was not the product of a fully developed institutional church but was forged to meet the needs of house churches suffering under persecution, many of which may not have had any teachers.<sup>42</sup> According to Engelsma, these were no genuine churches at all, yet this confession is an authority for him.

Engelsma takes the statement in the Belgic Confession to apply to the institute of the visible church on earth, but the natural reading is to relate it to the invisible church. The previous article states,

This Church hath been from the beginning of the world, and will be to the end thereof; which is evident from this, that Christ is an eternal King, which, without subjects, cannot be. And this holy Church is preserved or supported by God, against the rage of the whole world; though she sometimes (for a while) appears very small, and in the eyes of men, to be reduced to nothing: as during the perilous reign of Ahab, the Lord reserved unto him seven thousand men, who had not bowed their knees to Baal. Furthermore, this holy Church is not confined, bound, or limited to a certain place or to certain persons, but is spread and dispersed over the whole world; and yet is joined and united with heart and will, by the power of faith, in one and the same spirit.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> *The Belgic Creed is notable in another respect. It first saw the light, not in any synod or Church assembly, for as yet the Church of the Low Countries as an organised body did not exist; it had its beginning with a few private believers and preachers in the Netherlands. ... They compiled them, as we see these few Flemish teachers doing, to be a help to themselves and to their fellow-believers in understanding the Scriptures, and to show the world what they believed to be the truth.* JA Wylie, *The History of Protestantism*, Volume 3, 33.

<sup>43</sup> *Belgic Confession*, Art. 27.

Article 28 follows straight on from this and clearly is talking about the same church – the invisible, universal church.

Angus Stewart's defence of Engelsma's book<sup>44</sup> lists quotes proving that the visible church is in view, but these are selected out of context and some are from poor sources (such as Cyprian who developed authoritarian, monarchical bishops). Kevin Reed's critique of Engelsma (see conclusion) goes out of its way to prove the opposite.<sup>45</sup> Remember that Guido de Brès was writing a confession to oppose the statements of Roman Catholic doctrine where they specifically taught that salvation was only found in the church of Rome; de Brès was opposed to that concept.

General Reformed ecclesiology ... speaks in *absolute* terms only of the invisible, universal church.<sup>46</sup>

The interpretation of Engelsma (and Stewart) is wrong. The Belgic Confession relates to the universal church. Engelsma relates it to the pure visible church on earth, which we have already established, really means the PRC and a few others.

Like the heretic Cyprian, Engelsma uses the type of the ark to teach that Christians are only found in a visible church institution. In Cyprian's time all believers accepted that Christians were only found in the universal church, the body of Christ, but Cyprian changed this to mean the ark of the Roman Catholic Church; i.e. he introduced this idea to formulate a cultic notion. Engelsma is doing exactly the same.

In any case the ark is not a type of the church but a type of Christ. Salvation is experienced by being found in Christ and protected from the wrath of God outside of Christ. In fact the pitch on the ark refers to the atonement made by the blood of Christ, 'pitch' being from the same root word as 'atonement'. Salvation is in Christ. Christ is the ark. Those in Christ are the universal, invisible, church; the elect.

Furthermore, as even Engelsma acknowledges, there are many genuine believers who, for no fault of their own, are not part of a visible church. Such people include prisoners in jail (identified by Engelsma); terminally ill people on prolonged medical treatment for long periods of time; mentally infirm; physically handicapped; immobile through illness; or situated in isolated places with no ability to relocate and people with jobs in isolated places (such as Antarctic scientists). All these are still saved though they are not actually part of a local, institutional church. In fact if Engelsma's idea is to be accepted rigidly, then we are in contradiction to the NT which teaches the salvation of the thief on the cross who never attended church ever.

### *Interim conclusion*

Engelsma's interpretation of the Belgic Confession is flawed and is not even Reformed. It is the universal church, the body of Christ, which is referred to in article 28, as it is in other confessions. Engelsma's claim is actually a Roman Catholic doctrine, developed initially by the heretic Cyprian. By teaching that salvation is only found in membership of a visible church, and by earlier implying that virtually only the PRC is a true church, then the

<sup>44</sup> *Bound to Join: A Review and Defence*.

<sup>45</sup> Reed shows credal statements to prove that the universal church is in view, such as The Scottish Confession chap. 16. He also cites Nicolaas H. Gootjes who traces the language used in the Belgic Confession (article 28) to a modification of the language previously employed in the French Confession with an expression taken from Beza's confession where the universal church is meant.

<sup>46</sup> Kevin Reed, The Trinity Foundation, *Trinity Review*, Number 301, Special Issue 2011. [www.trinityfoundation.org](http://www.trinityfoundation.org)

further implication is that everyone outside of the PRC (and a couple of other associated churches) are reprobates. This is cultic.

### **Genuine ministry only in a formally instituted church**

Engelsma teaches, along with the PRC in general, that the only true church ministry is that which is ordained in a true church. As we have already established, in effect this means a PRC church, or that of a couple of other Presbyterian churches accepted by the PRC.

As we have already stated, this automatically means that godly teaching from Baptist, Congregational, Anglican, Separatist and independent church leaders are all wiped out as false. This, in itself, is a sectarian sign of great hubris.

Thus Engelsma talks about ‘*ordained ministry*’ and an ‘*instituted church*’.<sup>47</sup>

A true church is an instituted body, it is not merely a gathering where some learned ... teachers regularly gives lectures on the Bible.<sup>48</sup>

For him the only true church is a formally instituted, hierarchical organisation that meets in a dedicated building. He also teaches that denominations (‘*denominational federalism*’) are the logical outcome of this<sup>49</sup> (though he accepts that there is little about them in his creeds). However, we do not see this in the NT during apostolic times. We do not see hierarchical leadership, institutional bodies, formalism, clergy/laity separation, or dedicated church buildings, or denominations. In fact, the churches addressed by his own creed (the Belgic Confession) were house churches with little organisation, no denominational institution and frequently with no teachers either. They would not be considered as churches at all by Engelsma. The churches in France addressed by Calvin in the Anti-Nicodemite Writings were also disorganised house churches. Indeed, Calvin wished for more house churches.

In the killing times in Scotland, God greatly provided for his persecuted people, sometimes in amazing ways. Yet these people were persecuted and met in woods, caves and isolated barns. They often had no leaders, since these had been killed, but they broke bread, prayed and encouraged one another. Sometimes a harassed travelling preacher, such as Alexander Peden, would teach them. Yet this disorganised motley crew was the church in Scotland at that time and later developed into a more formal body.

I agree with him that preaching centres (such as Westminster Chapel under Martyn Lloyd-Jones) are not proper churches and that the sacraments must be properly administered, but I deny his definition of true ministry or the necessity of an institutional, formal, organised church.<sup>50</sup> There is no evidence in the NT for formal unity, and especially not for

<sup>47</sup> *Bound To Join*, e.g. p112.

<sup>48</sup> *Bound To Join*, e.g. p112.

<sup>49</sup> ‘*The unity of the church demands ... that the congregation be joined in a federation of congregations.*’ *Bound To Join*, p117.

<sup>50</sup> Angus Stewart fails to understand what I mean by this so I will explain. An organised, institutional church is one that has a hierarchical leadership, meets in a dedicated building called a ‘church’, is formally institutional and has a single pastor, usually with greater powers than any other officers. This leader presides over a laity, which is separate from the official clergy, which is mostly silent in church meetings. These meetings are formally organised following a set, pre-prepared liturgy authorised by its parent denomination. It is rigid in structure, authoritarian in leadership and opposed to open, free participation in meetings. The centre of the meeting is the formal sermon and consequently the focus of the meeting is a man not Christ. Leaders are salaried and giving is always to the church for distribution as it pleases, mostly towards an unbiblical building structure. Contrary to this I champion the church as an organism based upon the interdependent ministries of all present; the church is a family not an organisation. This is facilitated by

denominational federalism. Yes there is support of one church for another and a unity in the Spirit. There are even synods where common issues may be debated, but this is never a formal, instituted, organised, hierarchical body, but a collection of churches meeting together. In fact in Acts 15 we see the predominance of the people in the decision making process, not an authoritarian declaration by a few leaders representing them.

The NT emphasises spiritual unity where the church members are of one another; formal membership on a roll is not required and never taught.<sup>51</sup> It teaches a unity in the Spirit.<sup>52</sup> It does not emphasise the ministration of a single pastor figure but mutual edification.<sup>53</sup> Admonishment is carried out by one another.<sup>54</sup> There is teaching of one another,<sup>55</sup> comforting of one another,<sup>56</sup> everyone being submissive to one another (including elders).<sup>57</sup> It emphasises that each member has gifts to be used in the edification of the whole body.<sup>58</sup> It emphasises that the church is a family and the household of God, not a hierarchical organisation where the majority are silent and do nothing in a meeting.<sup>59</sup>

Furthermore, there is no mention of a church building; there is silence on a formal single pastor who teaches with elders who don't. There is condemnation of following the hierarchical management system of the world, which is the system of organisation followed by almost all institutional churches. There are no salaries for single ministers; in fact giving is chiefly for the poor and needy. There is no such thing as a manse. Paul models the case for a church leader making his own living as well as fulfilling a ministry.<sup>60</sup> Authoritarianism is condemned.<sup>61</sup> There even is no instrumental music in church worship (and wasn't for hundreds of years).<sup>62</sup>

On the whole, the picture given by the NT for a genuine church does not look very much like the church exemplified by the PRC at all, and certainly not the church pictured by Engelsma in *'Bound To Join'*.

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meeting in a home, according to the Biblical precedent, where all can participate according to their gift under the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit. Order is maintained by a team of equal elders and no one man is dominant; though usually one man will do more teaching than others (though all must be able to teach). The centre of the meeting is the Lord's Supper. The preparation for the meeting is usually a shared meal. The giving of the church is predominantly to the poor and needy, first in the church and then to outsiders. There are no salaries for leaders and giving to leaders is ad hoc as God leads and only to those who cannot both work and teach (usually itinerant ministries such as evangelist). Full-time leaders must live by faith.

<sup>51</sup> Eph 4:25.

<sup>52</sup> Eph 4:3.

<sup>53</sup> 1 Thess 5:11.

<sup>54</sup> Rm 15:14.

<sup>55</sup> Col 3:16.

<sup>56</sup> 1 Thess 4:18.

<sup>57</sup> 1 Pt 5:5.

<sup>58</sup> 1 Cor 7:7, 12, 14:26; Eph 4:7; 1 Pt 4:10.

<sup>59</sup> Eph 2:19; Gal 6:10. Note that *oikeios* means belonging to a family or a home.

<sup>60</sup> 1 Cor 4:12; 2 Thess 3:7-12.

<sup>61</sup> 1 Pt 5:3.

<sup>62</sup> The use of instrumental music was only widespread in the Roman church after 1200 AD. It began to appear in some eastern churches a couple of hundred years after the cross whereupon it was condemned by church fathers, such as Chrysostom, as pagan and fleshly. The Reformers had no instrumental music, Luther compared it to Baalism. Many Reformed churches in the UK had no instrumental music until Victorian times. Even then, Spurgeon had none. It is impossible to make an apologetic for instrumental music if you hold to the regulative principle.

### Harsh, unfeeling counselling

The impression one gets when reading the book the first time is that the author is a shocking counsellor. Here he is faced with people in a terribly distressing situation resulting from the judgment of God upon the British church; times have never been so bad. In this circumstance, sensitive Christians who hold to the doctrines of sovereign grace, but from various church backgrounds, sought counsel from a respected Bible teacher.

His approach, continued over months (presumably) of forum emails back and forth, was to clobber people with harsh counsel, a forceful demanding approach, doctrinal invective and no heart whatsoever. Over several chapters he just quotes page after page from Calvin's book on the Anti-Nicodemite writings, which has little application to these people and which is applied wrongly (Calvin wrote to idolaters who celebrated mass in a false church; these people are not willing idolaters but are in various grades of erring churches). He incredibly demanded that people relocate even if it meant abandoning a reluctant spouse. His advice is not only unbiblical, but it is harsh, unfeeling and abusive.

Esteemed author Kevin Reed agrees with me,

The book is woefully deficient from a practical, pastoral perspective. When one considers the pleas of the original correspondents to the professor, as catalogued at the beginning of the book, one senses the burden carried by people seeking pastoral guidance about what to do, when facing the tragic reality of lacking a sound church in their vicinity. Engelsma's response is to hit them over the head with a series of combative, disjointed letters harping on the duty of church membership.<sup>63</sup>

One example of thoughtless behaviour is the way Engelsma addressed a former member of the BRF committee who had dared to disagree with some of the professor's counsel in emails. Engelsma disparagingly terms him '*Dr. Fierce*', as if to subdue his arguments by belittling his character. No matter how combative and passionate this person's emails may have been, it behoves a pastor counselling needy people to act lovingly and not sarcastically. It was not a false teacher he was confronting, but an associate who had asked for help.

### Wrong advice to relocate

Due to the dearth of genuine churches in the UK, the main thrust of Engelsma's advice is to relocate, and the clear implication is to relocate to the CPRC in Northern Ireland (as some families have already done). However, this is extreme and unnecessary. Neither does it help to fulfil the calling of God upon believers to evangelise their homeland.

Remember that the correspondents addressed in the book are BRF conference attendees who well know the close association between the PRC and the CPRC in Ireland. Angus Stewart is the Chairman of the BRF and the driving force behind it today and the BRF conferences are always platforms for the chief preachers from the PRC, Herman Hanko and Engelsma, [however, the BRF was not originally formed as a PRC vehicle]. The PRC does not support any church in England, Wales and Scotland; indeed it has met with strong opposition from other UK Reformed bodies.

There are alternatives to leaving the country.

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<sup>63</sup> The Trinity Foundation, *The Trinity Review*, Number 301, Special Issue 2011. [www.trinityfoundation.org](http://www.trinityfoundation.org)

*Plant a new one*

The first is to form a new local church based on Biblical principles. Just as in the early church, a meeting in a home is ideal [I will develop this later]. In fact this was Calvin's preferred option for the persecuted French church:

As for those babblers who ridicule us, wondering if one cannot get to paradise except by way of Geneva, I answer: would to God they had the courage to gather in the name of Jesus Christ wherever they are, and set up some sort of church, either in their houses or in those of their neighbours.<sup>64</sup>

Engelsma's claim that Calvin called for French believers to relocate to Geneva (p72, 78) is historically incorrect. Furthermore, the very churches for which the Belgic Confession was written (the chief support used by Engelsma) were house churches, many of which had no teachers due to persecution. Under Engelsma's rule, the very churches for which his main authoritative confession was written for, were not genuine churches.

However, the PRC hates independent house churches and considers them to be false, unless they have been planted by an authorised minister of the PRC.<sup>65</sup> Throughout history most churches that were planted began as house churches (including some PRC churches), so this is a foolish response. The real problem for the PRC is not the venue but the congregational independence.

*Find a distant one*

You don't have to leave the country to find a church that you can reasonably settle in. With patience over secondary issues one can usually find a place where the truth is taught and the sacraments practised Biblically. It may not be perfect, but neither is the PRC (in my humble estimation I hold that a number of PRC practices are actually unbiblical).

*Temporarily meet informally with other believers*

In dire straits, it may be that you cannot meet in a church but you may be able to meet with a few like-minded believers and enjoy the benefit of spiritual fellowship, being able to pray together and encourage one another in the word. It may be that teaching is lacking, but you try to manage as best as you can. Time would be spent interceding that God would raise up a teacher to help bring the gathering into a proper expression of the church in time. This is better than sitting at home alone doing nothing.

Furthermore, remember that many of Calvin's contacts in France met in this way, awaiting his help by sending missionaries from Geneva. It was also the situation facing Guido de Brès in the Lowlands.

*Impact on national evangelism*

If every true believer followed Engelsma's advice and left the UK mainland what impact would that have on the evangelisation of the nation. Remember we are saved to be a witness and our testimony is first to be directed to our own locality and homeland. Believers here need to seek the Lord to pray that he will send men to plant and build up

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<sup>64</sup> John Calvin, *Come Out From Among Them, Anti-Nicodemite Writings of John Calvin*, p192.

<sup>65</sup> Note correspondence with Angus Stewart: '*the issue between us is house-churchism vs. Reformed and Presbyterian ecclesiology ... Those who hold to house-churchism have civil liberty to promote their views as they wish but it would be foolish of the BRF (and contrary to its purpose) to allow you to promote these views in a journal dedicated to biblical and Reformed doctrine (inc. ecclesiology) as summed in the Westminster Standards and the Belgic Confession.... house-churchism, which you claim is biblical and which I and the Reformed and Presbyterian churches deny is biblical.*' Personal email.

indigenous churches. If we fail in this we have not served the Lord faithfully. Giving up and getting out is not a Biblical option.

### *Interim conclusion*

Engelsma's advice is not only unbiblical but it is contradictory to God's plan for believers in the UK. It speaks more of building up a sectarian empire than serving the body of Christ.

### **Sinful advice to split families**

Engelsma gives the extreme counsel to separate from a spouse if they hinder your desire to relocate some distance to join a true church. He seeks to justify this by misusing Scripture and chiefly by referring to Calvin. Let's see what he says plainly.

The rule is that membership in a true church ... must prevail over the earthly family relation.<sup>66</sup>

He must move if necessary. If his wife refuses to move with him, he must go anyway. Right worship of God with the true church takes precedence over marriage.<sup>67</sup>

He has no sin in the break-up of his marriage.<sup>68</sup>

The believer must move to a foreign country, despite the fact that the unbelieving mate refuses to accompany him or her.<sup>69</sup>

Right worship of God with the true church takes precedence over marriage.<sup>70</sup>

Circumstances may complicate the matter, especially her being the mother of children, whom she might have to leave as well.<sup>71</sup>

In the extreme case, the believer must move to a foreign country, despite the fact that the unbelieving mate refuses to accompany him or her.<sup>72</sup>

In my view this counsel is not only extreme, it is false and wicked. To suggest that a mother can fulfil God's will better by abandoning her husband and children instead of keeping them and putting up with a few difficulties in an evangelical church is sinful in the extreme.

Although Engelsma quotes Calvin in support, to be fair to Calvin he was addressing people in the most extreme of all circumstances, being put to death for your faith and thus his counsel is at times harsh, such as: 'leave everything you own and flee the country'. But the people Engelsma is addressing are not in this situation but are Reformed believers attending evangelical churches that are not as pure as they would like.

### *Wrong priorities*

Engelsma has made a significant mistake in judging that membership of a church is to take precedence over honouring family responsibilities. I must emphasise that this is a fallacy.

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<sup>66</sup> *Bound To Join*, p72.

<sup>67</sup> *Bound To Join*, p74.

<sup>68</sup> *Bound To Join*, p74.

<sup>69</sup> *Bound To Join*, p77.

<sup>70</sup> *Bound To Join*, p74.

<sup>71</sup> *Bound To Join*, p75.

<sup>72</sup> *Bound To Join*, p77.

One promise of the Gospel was exemplified in the ministry of the one who prepared the way for the Messiah; Malachi tells us that he would,

**Turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers. Mal 4:5-6**

Luke 1:17 confirms that this was fulfilled in the ministry of John the Baptist. The power of Christ's message is to unify families as God intended as one of its fruits. This is because honouring the family is a major issue of God's law for man. Over and over again the responsibility of fathers, mothers, and children are explained throughout the entire Bible.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, Paul makes the point that the honouring of father and mother is the first commandment to include a promise of life (Eph 6:2). The matter is sealed by Paul when he says,

**If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. 1 Tim 5:8**

If we were to relocate to a distant country in order to join a decent church and ignore the needs of elderly parents a long way away, we would be worse than an unbeliever. This command cannot be ignored and is in direct opposition to Engelsma's counsel. Amazingly Engelsma stoops to use 1 Cor 7:15 in his defence, which is about the unbelieving spouse departing, not the pure believer instigating a break up. I insist that breaking up a marriage is sin; period! That such counsel should come from a man who has written books on the importance of marriage and family is shocking – and I don't care what Calvin says; sola Scriptura!

But what of Matt 19:29 ('And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life'), used in defence by Engelsma? To this we can add,

**For I have come to 'set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law'; and 'a man's enemies will be those of his *own* household.' He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. Matt 10:35-38**

**Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. Matt 6:33**

Luke 14:26 and Matthew 10:37, ['If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple'] are explained as follows. This is a Hebraic form of emphasis, seen also when Jesus tells us that to obtain eternal life we have to hate our own selves (Jn 12:25). It means that when there is a conflict between our parents and God's will, then God must come first. In comparison to God's command, the will of our parents should be hated if in opposition, just as our own desires must be hated if they oppose God. As Jesus himself confirmed, in normal circumstances we must honour, obey and listen to our parents, especially if they are believers.

First note that we ourselves are part of this stricture, we must not put ourselves before Christ but must take up the cross (that is, die). Consequently nothing must come before Christ and his kingdom must take first place. Surely all this is obvious?

The believer must put Christ first in all things, even above his own preferences. If a parent, who must ordinarily be obeyed, insists on making you sin you should put Christ first and refuse to sin. If a parent is opposed to you fulfilling the will of Christ, then the parent

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<sup>73</sup> For example: Deut 21:18-21; Ex 20:12; Lev 19:3, 20:9; Prov 1:8, 15:5, 23:22, 30:17; Mal 1:6; Matt 15:4; Eph 6:1-2; Col 3:20.

should be ignored at that point alone. [For instance if a person is called to the mission field and a doting mother objects.] On many occasions in history a parent wanted a child to become a lawyer or of doctor but instead the son became a pastor. This is the sort of thing in mind here. [But note that the responsibility to family would mean that a missionary must return to his family if they were in need.]

Christ's kingdom must come first, even above our own lives; but we must remember that our families are also part of Christ kingdom. The kingdom is where Christ is submitted to as king and encompasses all the elect, thus the church is the sphere of the reign of Christ; the kingdom. But the kingdom is also where any Christian is and especially a Christian family. The Christian household is also an expression of the kingdom; it is where Christ reigns and Christ is present in a certain street. It is wrong to set the church against the family.

Furthermore, Paul tells us that a husband should love his wife in a sacrificial way, in the manner that Christ loves the church (Eph 5:25). This means to love her at your own expense. Engelsma teaches the opposite.

There are no Scriptures which tell us to put the local church above the family in our priorities and this is the cultic mistake made by many Charismatic churches, which tend to separate families by focusing members' interest on the church alone. It is cultic to prioritise church above family.

The Scriptures above do not sanction putting the church above families but are explained in many ways, some of which I have explained. The vast multitude of texts which emphasise the importance of the family to God show us that God sets a higher priority on family life. Ordinarily the two work together, family and church taking an equal place in our responsibilities; but where there is a clash, then honouring family comes first. It is cults that emphasise church over family. This is a further worrying example of the cultic way the PRC is developing (some would say that it has been cultic for some time).

#### *The recourse to Calvin*

Engelsma, as part of his constant referrals to the Anti-Nicodemite writings, enlists the support of John Calvin in encourage a person to leave their spouse in order to relocate to a true church. The problem is that Engelsma is not comparing like with like.

Calvin is referring to an extreme situation that then existed in France whereby Reformed Christians were likely to die for their faith if they remained there. Calvin, a Frenchman, was torn apart by this and did all that he could to help individuals and house churches there. The problem with the Nicodemites was that they claimed to believe the truth in their heart and honour the Lord, and yet were free to publicly attend a Roman Catholic church and celebrate the mass in order to preserve their lives in France. They were like Nicodemus who went to Christ in the dark for fear of the Pharisees. Calvin explains that this is idolatry and inexcusable. His counsel was to form new churches meeting in secret in homes or leave the country; at this point a spouse may object, hence the counsel to separate in such extreme circumstances.

This is not the situation facing the believers who approached Engelsma for help and his advice is harsh, unsympathetic, misguided and wrong.

Most of the isolated Reformed believers in the UK are not tempted to join an apostate church, such as the Roman Catholic Church, but a less than pure church; such as a Grace Reformed Baptist church, a Strict Baptist chapel, or a Calvinistic independent church that

may espouse the free offer. Being in such a church does not constitute idolatry but less than favourable circumstances.

By emphasising relocation over family life, in effect Engelsma is saying that if your wife wants to stay in a 4-Point Calvinistic independent church, or even a free-offer Reformed Presbyterian church, then you must leave her, and your children, to relocate to Ballymena in order to be slightly more pure in doctrine.<sup>74</sup> This is not only absurd but sinful counsel. Calvin would have no truck with this and Engelsma is wrong to enlist his support by taking Calvin out of context.

Those on the correspondent list who were uncomfortably remaining in Anglican churches is a more difficult problem since this is an apostate body. However, most would be members of local Anglican churches where the vicar was an evangelical, or even Reformed in theology, and they comforted themselves by this. In my view this is wrong as they are supporting an apostate body and submitting to an organisation that has departed from Scripture in its synodical laws. Evangelical pastors in post ought to leave to avoid hypocrisy and sin. However, even this does not constitute the same sort of idolatry of a Roman mass. Neither does it require leaving the country and forcing a separation from a spouse. There are many alternatives to this, as we have demonstrated.

### **Sola Scriptura**

It surprises me that a Bible teacher of the standard of Engelsma does not sufficiently base his arguments on Scripture; indeed, there is not much Scriptural exposition and argumentation in the book (though there are many references). There are pages and pages of quotes from Calvin (out of context) and there are repeated references to the confessions and lengthy quotes from the Belgic Confession, but there are not lengthy expositions of Scripture. Indeed, a reviewer who was trained by the PRC and who favours the book comments,

I would have liked to have seen him quote from the Scriptures more often, however. How good it would have been to see a thorough exegesis of, for example, Ruth chapter 1, or I Kings 12 with 18:30-32.<sup>75</sup>

This is unsound procedure. Any development of doctrine must absolutely rest upon Scriptural exegesis, exposition and argument. How much more important is it, then for a book of counsel which advises people to break God's law and leave their spouses, or to disrupt their families and relocate abroad, to have a genuine Biblical foundation for the argument.

The reason that there is so little Scriptural exposition is because Engelsma's' disputed points are not Biblical and are contrary to God's law.

### **Reading Scripture**

Engelsma denies the value of the simple reading of Scripture both in church and in personal devotions.

The Reformed faith does not consider the mere reading of Scripture by the church to be a means of grace.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Although Engelsma majors on the situation where a believing man is married to an unbelieving woman, he makes general statements about leaving a spouse and the emphasis on relocating supersedes the marriage bond in his argument. Though some of his correspondents were married to unbelievers (p81), the majority were Christian couples.

<sup>75</sup> Rev. David Higgs, *The Evangelical Presbyterian*, July 2011, p12.

<sup>76</sup> *Bound To Join*, p137.

Other writers have pointed out that this is a denial of Reformed statements and particularly contravenes the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*.

The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching of the word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith unto salvation.<sup>77</sup>

The simple reading of Scripture was, perhaps, the chief means of effecting the Reformation. It was as Scripture was translated into vernacular languages that the truth of God took hold in nations. If God's grace was manifested in the Reformation, it was chiefly manifested through Scripture reading. The Dark Ages were dark because the light of God's word had been hidden from men.

This is a significant mistake made by Engelsma and is part of his tendency to emphasise the role of men (leaders) in the means of grace. This is a cultic tendency.

## My answer to the UK problem

### Introduction

In issue 54 of the BRJ the editor, Michael Kimmitt, raised the same heartfelt concern that the correspondents of Engelsma did; what to do when there is no church locally that you can attend. In this he made the point that, contrary to *Bound To Join* (which was reviewed in the previous issue) genuine believers with nowhere to go are not *extra ecclesiam*, rather they are in a predicament that is not of their making. He made some suggestions of alternatives, including some Calvinistic churches that may be less than perfect and also the possibility of meeting in homes.

I wrote a letter to the editor taking up this strain and developing it since I believe that this is indeed a pressing issue for the church today (I have had many papers published in this magazine). Indeed as persecution comes upon us, as the end approaches, an underground church will be the only way for the church to survive, just as it did in apostolic days.

The editor not only decided to publish this but also said that it was excellent and had some support from others, including from the previous editor. However, Angus Stewart overruled the editor and a letter expressing the very opposite feelings, from a PRC sister church member, replaced it. In fact the official editor was absent in the next edition and a temporary editor put in his place (McGeown). This was because he was overruled by Stewart and felt it best to step down.<sup>78</sup> This behaviour is authoritarian and a symptom of cultic control. This meant that the tone of issue 55 totally reflected the PRC line advocated by *Bound To Join*, and it was this tone that first raised my fears about a cultic tendency before I had read Engelsma's book.

What should have happened is that both letters should have been published and the readers of the BRJ asked to comment. When the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Australia reviewed *'Bound To Join'* the editor clearly had grave misgivings; however, he even-handedly published two reviews, one in favour by a PRC trained pastor and the other a critical review by a non-PRC pastor. This is the spirit of Christian fellowship, unlike the

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<sup>77</sup> *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Q. 89.

<sup>78</sup> Angus' argument was that my overall position was contrary to the Three Forms of Unity and the Westminster confession and so should not be published. However, I had previously had many articles published, while, in fact, the PRC position itself is contrary to Westminster on several issues (see later).

stance of Angus Stewart who was not even the editor of the BRJ and went against the wishes of both previous editors.

Since it is relevant to this section of this paper, I reproduce it here.

Dear Michael,

You raised an interesting point in your recent editorial about meeting together informally but did not really develop it. Now I entirely agree with the comments made by my friend Angus Stewart about this; he is correct in his statement about how churches are composed as opposed to social fellowship together. But this is missing the point.

We are supposed to discern the times (Matt 16:3) and this means understanding how the wisdom of God applies to current situations where norms may be affected by circumstances, such as widespread apostasy or persecution. In these situations it is sometimes necessary to adopt something that is less than perfect for a time.

Now Scripture shows us that this happened frequently with God's servants when circumstances called for it. When David's soldiers were starving they ate holy (consecrated) showbread that was sanctified to the Tabernacle and which only priests could eat (1 Sam 21:2-6). The Lord himself upholds this as acceptable, but unusual, practice as a defence for his own seeming stretching of the law (Matt 12:3-4). Deut 23:25 allowed for plucking grain from someone else's field, but strictly speaking this was threshing which broke the law that forbade servile work on the Sabbath (Ex 20:10; 35:2-3; Num 15:32-36). The sating of the hunger of Christ and the disciples was more important than a minor aspect of the law. It was lawful to do good on the Sabbath (Matt 12:12). A better law (sustaining life) overpowered another law. Thus it was acceptable to go and find a lost sheep and get it out of a pit on the Sabbath (Matt 12:11). When priests kindled a fire to burn the sacrificial lambs on the Sabbath they actually broke the letter of the law (Matt 12:5). Jesus even commanded a man to break the law to make a point (Jn 5:8-12 with Ex 23:12; Neh 13:19; Jer 17:21).

There have been many times in history when persecution stopped the local church from functioning perfectly. Elders were killed and meeting places had to be found in secret, often in woods, caves and barns in deserted spots. People fellowshiped and broke bread as best as they could, often without a fully functioning eldership, in order to obey a more important command of God – to meet together. In the Scottish killing times, faithful and courageous preachers often travelled from place to place (in great danger) in order to edify local groups of faithful, leaderless believers.

Our present UK situation is different, but no less serious. We live in times when God's judgment is upon the nation and there is widespread apostasy of a level unknown in previous centuries. Every previous historical heresy is now present in the church including (amazingly) Docetism. In this time faithful believers find it almost impossible to meet in most cities. I am constantly asked for advice regarding where to worship and most often can offer no help. In the majority of towns in this country there is no true Gospel witness. Even the better churches (those that do not accept Charismaticism or liberalism) are mostly Amyraldian at best. Many churches claiming to be Reformed are on actually on a slippery slope towards Charismatic worship and Arminian theology.

In this awful mess I know of many people who have no choice but to follow Pink's advice and stay at home and read good books. They do not deny the need for gathering together, but they have no one to gather together with. They yearn for fellowship but are lonely in their ones and twos, listening to good sermons and praying for God's people.

Now it is also my belief that there are many such folk who are actually quite close to each other geographically, and I think that they should begin to find each other. Angus' comments, though correct, are the sort of thing that prevents these folk from real fellowship. They feel that they can only go to an accredited church that meets in a dedicated building and has elders and deacons. It is my contention that this is wrong for the time.

Rather than folk going nowhere at all, I believe that they should meet together in a home and seek the Lord for development into a new church. They should consider themselves to be missionaries in their own countries.

Now the first thing to say is that there is no doubt that Scripture intends believers to meet in homes not in dedicated buildings. This is incontrovertible and yet everywhere denied. There is no other precedent in the NT than meeting in a home. This is not a model to be ignored as just for that particular time, but was for a

reason. Local churches are small in the NT and are meant to be families not organised events. Participation in edifying one another is also another clear apostolic teaching which is impossible in larger organised churches (Rm 14:19; 1 Cor 14:26; 1 Thess 5:11). Churches are places of one-anothering ('one another' appears over 60 times in the NT). I could say much more (and have done many times elsewhere) but this is enough to make my point that there is nothing wrong with meeting in a home, always.

As Paul went on his missionary journeys, many people in a region believed (Acts 13:48, 14:21). He then moved on in preaching the Gospel elsewhere. On returning to the brethren he strengthened them and appointed elders who had manifested themselves in the intervening period as teachers raised up by God (Acts 14:21-23, 15:41). Sometimes Paul himself could not do this and sent a delegate to fix what was lacking and appoint elders (Titus 1:5). Thus a church could be planted and continue for some time without elders. Indeed, this is normal. When a church is planted from scratch, teachers must rise up from the congregation and become recognised before they can be set apart formally.

Dare anyone say that these planted fellowships were not churches because it was a while before elders arrived? Indeed, the churches in Judaea had no elders until Acts 11 and while apostles had authority they were chiefly missionaries in nature rather than elders. Local churches are not led by apostles but by elders. The situation in Jerusalem also shows us that deacons only become necessary when the need arises. It was a long time before deacons were appointed and was only necessitated by the friction between Hellenists and Jews regarding the distribution of alms. A true church does not need a deacon until the need arises.

I have known good people leave the country in order to join a decent church when there were many isolated, like-minded brethren living in their locality. The problem was in thinking that there had to be a functioning church in a building before they could meet up. This is nonsense. They should all be fellowshiping in homes now. Hopefully, in God's providence, such home meetings will grow into proper churches, with a functioning eldership in due course.

When a child is growing up it has all the characteristics of a human being but is not a mature adult. It is growing up to be one, but it still functions as a person. It cannot be called something else; it is human. The same applies to churches. When a group of people gathers together to break bread, read Scripture, sing praise and edify one another in teaching, they are a church. Yes they may be lacking in certain characteristics, chiefly elders, for at time, but they cannot be called something else. This is not just two or three gathering for a coffee, or for a chat, this is a meeting established to glorify God. The main constituent is the Lord's Supper. That is the centre of the gathered church and that is what chiefly constitutes it (Acts 20:7).<sup>79</sup>

Acts 2:42, 46 shows us this in action;

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. ...  
breaking bread from house to house.

Remember that elders are not mentioned until Acts 11. These were meetings in homes that constituted immature churches in development. This is what we need in this country today.

I could say more about the fact that only churches meeting homes will be able to withstand the impending persecution that will erupt, but that is another matter. We need the Lord's people to find each other and gather together in homes instead of remaining isolated and discouraged. This is my fervent prayer.

### **The need for new churches**

The church in the UK is certainly under judgment and that is why there is a dearth or famine of the Lord's word and why there are so few Biblical churches. Those who are faithful to Christ in this time must recognise the fact that we are in days of small things and have to live under some difficulty. There is great distress amongst the Lord's true people in

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<sup>79</sup> This is not the place to argue at length that a sermon is not the centre of the local church. While teaching is key, the sermon is not the Biblical means of delivering it, rather this is the means for evangelism (along with proclamation and heralding). Teaching in church is according to mutual encouragement, exhortation, dialogue, discussion and answering questions; just as Jesus did with the disciples. The problem arises from 'preach' being the main translation of several Greek words in Scripture. In fact, the NT often uses the word *dialegomai* (translated as 'preach' in the AV, e.g Acts 20:7), which means 'to discuss, converse'. Thus the sermon overturned the Lord's Supper as the focal point of the local church. Thus it led to the focus upon men instead of Christ.

these days since true fellowship is so hard to find; for Engelsma to clobber such needy folk over the head with severe counsel, harsh advice and unbiblical demands is not the way to proceed. Indeed, I believe, sadly, that his book is a blemish on an illustrious ministry as a Bible teacher.

What the Lord's people need to do is to find each other, and having done so to form new churches meeting in houses. This needs to be done with great patience and long-suffering and the beginning will not be perfect. There are many needy folk out there thirsty for knowledge and spiritual understanding who may (hopefully) come to join such groups. However, they will have much to unlearn as they grow in the truth and it may take some years for them to get settled in Biblical doctrine. In my experience, with thirsty souls, it takes three to four years to get people to unlearn Charismatic errors and become firm in Biblical doctrine, for instance. [This shows how serious the effects are of imbibing Charismatic teaching and practices over decades.]

Such developing churches will have people present in various stages of maturity and great patience and forbearance in love will be required. In the same way Jesus taught the disciples and bore with them despite their obvious faults. We will not form perfect churches immediately.

The concept of forming such churches wherever the Gospel prevails is not unbiblical but very true to Scripture. Clearly such churches were initially without appointed elders, which appeared gradually as God gifted men and were formally recognised by an apostle or his delegate later, such as Titus confirming elders in Crete (Titus 1:5). Note that elders are not mentioned in Acts until chapter 11 but believers met in homes from chapter 2!

Calvin's chief concern (outside his pastoral responsibility for Geneva) was for his homeland, France, and the isolated home churches meeting as an underground operation seeking to avoid persecution. Most of these arose from local initiatives, not missionary enterprise, and many of these churches (yes they were churches) had no permanent teaching elders and thus Calvin sought to support them by sending teachers to help them develop. Much of Calvin's income was spent on such enterprises so that he had no great savings when he died. In the current crisis in the UK, Calvin would be supporting my position and not Engelsma's.

House churches should be established wherever the Gospel takes root and such home churches should be supported, even if they have no elders yet. Engelsma's position is that these are not churches at all and that people in them cannot be saved. Such folk must relocate to join a PRC church to be certain of salvation, even if that means emigrating. This is contrary to Calvin and Scripture. How does getting all true believers in England to relocate to Northern Ireland assist the proclamation of the Gospel in the UK?

### **The Biblicity of the home church**

Please see the appendix for Scriptures regarding this issue. No Reformed theologian can supply one apostolic text to support building a church meeting place of bricks.

We must abandon institutional ideas set in stone for centuries. We do not need churches meeting in buildings made of bricks and mortar, God does not dwell in temples made with hands but in the hearts of his people.

We can turn this country around, not by some fabricated Charismatic global revival, nor by some sentimental Reformed ideas of an emotional awakening. What we need is hard work to be prepared to function together in new churches based totally on God's word. There are

enough believers out there already to do this, but we must find them and convince them to work with us.

Abandoning the country is not the answer; this is a failure of our responsibility to serve the Lord where we are called. Neither should we link up with sectarian, cultic denominations with their unbiblical strictures. No, we must have faith that God will build his church and will raise up a testimony to the Son of His Love in these dark days.

## Conclusion

### **The value of 'Bound To Join'**

The book has a number of good arguments for leaving a truly false church, particularly towards the end of the book. Components of false churches are pointed out, explained and shown in their historical connection and the urgent need to leave such apostate works are pressed. Some specific false churches (e.g. Roman Catholicism and Charismaticism) are evaluated and condemned.

All of this is valuable and if these could be extracted from the book and published as a booklet under the title, 'Bound To Leave' then we would have a better work.

### **Summary of criticism**

The key issue at fault with this book is the wrong application of the Bible and the confessions to the British situation. The Bible commands that we come out of a false church and the confessions, especially the Belgic Confession chiefly referred to, directly relate to the need of Reformed believers to leave the Roman Catholic Church. Even though the Lutheran church had begun to go deeply astray from Scripture under Melancthon's leadership, the Reformed Confessions do not call Lutheranism a false church but an erring church, which is not the recipient of the same condemnation.

Contrary to this Engelsma considers that all the churches on the UK mainland, chiefly England and Wales, are full of false churches; in fact his implicit argument is that this is true of America as well. Thus the call to leave false churches in England and Wales (which I suspect are the domiciles of most of the correspondents) and consequently relocate to the only true churches accepted by Engelsma, the PRC sister churches in Ireland, especially the CPRC (though these are not named explicitly but it was the CPRC who organised the original conference where the forum was initiated).

The arguments pursued by Engelsma thus misrepresent some churches in the UK and do not give sufficient weight to the important counsel (advocated by Scripture, Guido de Brès and Calvin) to form new house churches based on the truth. They also fail to appreciate further marks of true churches as identified by Scripture which would mean that believers could find spiritual fellowship in some less than perfect churches. His arguments further develop into dangerous ground when he misinterprets the confessions and Scripture in order to make absolutist statements which result in unbiblical demands, such as breaking up a marriage and leaving spouse and children in order to be rooted in a slightly better church. All this is to be condemned.

His line throughout the book tends to manifest a cultic, sectarian tendency which is now being reproduced in the sister churches in Ireland and which has recently spilled out into the BRJ, now dominated by these churches (though originally the BRJ was set up to help isolated, diverse, Reformed believers in the UK).

It should be noted that I am not alone in condemning the cultic nature of Engelsma's remarks in this book. Several blogs have appeared dealing with this issue, not least the paper by Kevin Reed, 'Church Membership in an Age of Idolatry and Confusion' in the *Trinity Review*, which ought to be consulted.<sup>80</sup> The Trinity Foundation is a fine Calvinistic ministry founded upon the work of Gordon Clark. Reed's assessment of the book is,

If the book is used to brow-beat persons into submission to the Protestant Reformed Church's extra-Scriptural impositions in worship and family life, then the author has missed a preeminent emphasis of the Reformers, the Reformation creeds, and (most importantly) the Scriptures.<sup>81</sup>

Here is another caution,

The book will, we anticipate, not unite the Reformed camp. ... this book is, we feel likely to set believer against believer. A rhetorical use of history and the creeds, packaged in absolutist language, tends to do that. Engelsma's book will likely divide the Reformed camp. ... we must repudiate imperious ecclesiasticism just as keenly as impious individualism. Engelsma's book does not do that. So, take note of his concern - it is legitimate; but don't take on all that he gives by way of answer.<sup>82</sup>

The last two quotes are interesting in that they come from two bodies that would normally be in the same doctrinal camp as the PRC;<sup>83</sup> yet they are concerned.

What appals me is that though Engelsma's book is essentially an implicit argument that the PRC church is the true church and everyone should join it, in actual fact the PRC even fails its own standards since it has added additional commands to its membership over and above Scripture. The Belgic Confession condemns this:

As for the false Church, she ascribes more power and authority to herself and her ordinances than to the Word of God. *Belgic Confession*, Art 29, on the marks of the true church.

Although this paper is not an evaluation of the PRC, I simply mention a few points:

- A failure to enforce church discipline Biblically; such as the case of the pastor who was deposed for not sending his kids to a PRC school, as previously mentioned.
- The separation of teaching ministers from ordinary ('ruling') elders. In Scripture all elders must be able to teach and are called 'pastor-teachers'. [1 Tim 3:3; Eph 4:11]
- The toleration of 'devils' in ministry and the toleration of poor ministry.<sup>84</sup>
- Setting budgets as a guide for church members to pay in order to maintain ministry and church buildings.<sup>85</sup> [Christian giving must be under God's sovereign guidance and personal choice and is chiefly intended to supply the needs of the poor and needy. Giving is only to church leaders for ministry in rare conditions (itinerant preaching) and is personal giving as God leads, not a budget set by the leaders who get the money!]

<sup>80</sup> The Trinity Foundation, *Trinity Review*, Number 301, Special Issue 2011. [www.trinityfoundation.org](http://www.trinityfoundation.org). Kevin Reed is a member of the East Texas Reformed Fellowship in the USA. This is a body of believers who, for conscientious reasons, are seeking to establish a confessional Reformed Church that will be faithful to Scripture alone in all her doctrine, worship and government. It has connections with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Australia.

<sup>81</sup> The Trinity Foundation, Number 301, Special Issue 2011. [www.trinityfoundation.org](http://www.trinityfoundation.org)

<sup>82</sup> Editorial, *The Evangelical Presbyterian*, July 2011. The magazine of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Australia. This magazine also published Kevin Reed's critique.

<sup>83</sup> That is, they deny the free offer and common grace.

<sup>84</sup> *Bound To Join*, p103.

<sup>85</sup> *Bound To Join*, p100.

- A failure to explain church discipline, especially of pastors, to the congregation. It is the policy of the PRC not to publicise discipline decisions. [I have personal knowledge of several cases of this sort. Note the contradiction of 1 Tim 5:19-20.]
- Focus upon a dedicated material building when the precedent of the apostles is meeting in homes. [See appendix.]
- Closing down congregations when numbers were deemed too small contrary to Matt 18:34. [I have personal knowledge of this.]
- Treating pastors despicably when they had been unfairly criticised and ‘ganged-up’ upon by sectarian members; even refusing their pension after decades of faithful service. [I have personal knowledge of this.]
- It uses instrumental music to accompany singing, something the Reformers condemned and which has no Scriptural basis.

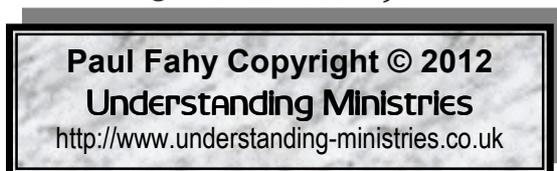
We could add more if we had time. By the standard of his own argument, Engelsma’s own denomination fails the marks of the true church. In addition, many other Reformed Presbyterian churches have criticised the PRC for its contravention of the Westminster Standards, even people who are generally favourable to them and have been trained by Engelsma. One such example is Rev. David Higgs.<sup>86</sup> The claims of such folk tend to be that the PRC contravenes the Westminster Confession in these areas:

- Eldership.
- Remarriage after a Biblical divorce.
- The covenant.
- Assurance.
- Antichrist.
- Denial of the reading of Scripture to be a means of grace.

Engelsma’s cavalier criticism of almost every other church in the world is proved to be hypocritical even by his own standards; and this is before Baptists or Congregationalists attempt a defence of their Biblicity (which I would endorse, in the main).

Much as I regret having to do this, I am bound to say that David Engelsma’s book, *Bound To Join* is based on unbiblical arguments, specious reasoning from the confessions and is harsh in its tone to the original correspondents. Some of his pronouncements are severe and contrary to God’s law. It is a book that should never have been published. Why it was published is a mystery since the original correspondence caused severe controversy and even led to the resignation of a BRF committee member in anger. It peddles sectarianism and this must be condemned.

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<sup>86</sup> *The Evangelical Presbyterian*, July 2011, p12.

## Appendix

# The church in the house

It is unequivocal that the apostolic church only met in houses and nowhere else. However much modern church leaders wish to affirm the practicality of purchasing dedicated buildings for the church to gather in, they cannot avoid the simple fact that the apostles never used this option. In many cities there were buildings available for public rent big enough to house large numbers. We see Paul use this for preaching the Gospel and holding debates in the Hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus for instance, but we know that Paul and the other apostles never used dedicated buildings for church meetings.

Not only do we see clear statements that when the church gathers on Sunday it meets in a house (Rm 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15; Philem 1:2), every instance of the church meeting in the New Testament is in a home and nowhere else. This is over and above the statements about churches in the house. This is the case early in the church's history, as in Acts 1:13, but also later in mature apostolic church history, as in Col 4:15 (60 or 61 AD). We will demonstrate this in this paper.

Wherever he goes in, say to the master of the house, 'The Teacher says, "Where is the guest room in which I may eat the Passover with My disciples?"' Then he will show you a large upper room, furnished *and* prepared; there make ready for us. Mk 14:14-15 ['Upper room' is *anogeon* meaning a first storey, i.e. 'upstairs', which more wealthy people were able to build above the main ground floor rooms. This was the prototype church meeting established by the Lord.]

And when they had entered, they went up into the upper room [*huperoon*] where they were staying: Peter, James, John, and Andrew; Philip and Thomas; Bartholomew and Matthew; James *the son* of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot; and Judas *the son* of James. These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers. Acts 1:13-14

As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing *them* to prison. Acts 8:3

So, when he had considered *this*, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying. Acts 12:12

Now on the first *day* of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight. There were many lamps in the upper room where they were gathered together. Acts 20:7-8 [This was an upper room (*huperoon*) in a private dwelling; this may refer to more temporary structures build on the flat roof of a house (cf. 2 Kg 4:9-11, 21, 32-35.)

Likewise *greet* the church that is in their house. Greet my beloved Epaphroditus, who is the firstfruits of Achaia to Christ. Rm 16:5

The churches of Asia greet you. Aquila and Priscilla greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house. 1 Cor 16:19

Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea, and Nymphas and the church that *is* in his house. Col 4:15

For if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?). 1 Tim 3:5 [In other words there is a direct correlation between a father

ruling his own family in a house, and an elders ruling the family of the church in a house. There is a big difference of management practice and structure between leading a small group in a house and a large group in a big building.]

*I write* so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. 1 Tim 3:15 [The church is the household or family of God (*oikos*), meeting in a house.]

To the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house. Philem 1:2

The church only moved into large public buildings (basilicas, hence classical church architecture) after the supposed conversion of Emperor Constantine when the church became acceptable to the world after the Edict of Milan in 313. This caused the ruination of pure church experience. After this time more and more formal errors of practice crept into the gathered church, such as:

- Formal, single, authoritarian leaders in churches and monarchical bishops in districts.
- Formal establishment of clear separation between clergy and laity.
- Introduction of new unbiblical leadership jobs. [These three items had been in gradual development for a hundred or so years but were formalised and set in concrete after 313.]
- Greater authority of large metropolitan city churches over provincial rural ones.
- Gradual dominance of the Roman church, and the Roman bishop as pope, over all western churches.
- Preoccupation with formal feast days, and especially Easter, based upon pagan celebration holidays.
- Slow incremental introduction of instrumental music over the next 900 years, not universally accepted until about 1200 (and later removed by the Reformers).
- Introduction of choirs.
- Introduction of rigid and formal liturgy.
- Introduction of rigid seating plans and pews.

Since it is the clear apostolic practice that the church is small, acts like a family and meets in a house, why is this universally ignored? If modern Reformed church leaders wish to be absolutely Biblical and contend against others for errors, why do they all disobey this precedent? How will they feel when the Lord calls them to account for wasting tens of thousands of pounds (in some cases millions) of his money on something material and unprofitable. This is to say nothing of the effects on his people who were shut into church systems and meetings that precluded and inhibited their participation; something meeting in homes was designed to encourage, 'But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all' (1 Cor 12:7).

The beginning of genuine church experience is a home church where open participation under godly teachers is practised.

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