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# Spiritual Order

For the

## Church

Clarence Bouwman

Please note that in the text there are references which appear as follows: . These refer to the original page numbers in the printed book.

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## Introduction

A study relating to the Church Order does not seem so very relevant helpful to the questions we face in the daily lives we're given live. What, forsooth, has the government *of the church got to* do with our labours in the factory or our responsibilities towards our children?! Is church government not simply a minister's speciality - a field of study with which we need not burden our brains? Come to think of it, is church polity not simply church politics...?

No, dear reader, church polity is not church politics. Granted, in the church of the Lord too many situations (of the distant and the not so distant past) have wreaked of politics, and I am embarrassed that it is so; in the church of Jesus Christ there is room neither for politics nor for politricks. And I grant also that the sins of leaders (of the distant and the not so distant past) have eroded confidence in the value of church polity.

Yet precisely here is possibly the reason why a publication on church polity is very necessary. The temptation certainly exists to focus attention on people and their sins. Attention *ought*, though, to be focused on *God's instruction*. That is: the accent ought not to be on *how things have been done*, but rather on *how things ought to be done*.

And Yes, the Lord has given instruction about how things ought to be done in His Church. We confess together in Article 30 of the *Belgic Confession* that the "*true Church must be governed according to the Spiritual <sup>15</sup> order which our Lord has taught us in His Word.*"<sup>1</sup> With this statement, the Church echoes what she has heard God say in His Word, namely, that God has prescribed certain patterns of organisation and conduct for His Church. Since the Church is the Church of God, it may not happen that office-bearers govern God's Church in a self-chosen manner. It may not happen either that churches bind themselves and each other willy-nilly to particular ways of doing things. Instead, the Church must submit, also in matters of organisation and conduct, to the principles revealed by the Church's Head in the Word He gave to His Church. It is the intent of this publication to examine what the Head of the Church has revealed about the government of the church. The first part of the study explores the principles behind reformed Church Polity. A brief overview of the history of church polity is included. The second part builds on the inheritance received from the fathers, and attempts to demonstrate by means of numerous references to Scripture that the Church Order of Dort reflects the Spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in His Word.

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A note in relation to background and purpose would be helpful. I was born and raised in the Canadian Reformed Churches, received my training for the ministry at the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches in Hamilton, and entered the ministry within the bond of these churches. In 1987, after five years' service in Canada, I accepted a call to one of the sister churches overseas, and so joined the Free Reformed Churches of Australia.

From my position in Australia today I observe that the North American reformed ecclesiastical situation abounds with efforts to bring together into one bond of churches such federations as the Canadian Reformed Churches, the United Reformed Churches, the Free Reformed Churches and the Orthodox Christian Reformed Churches. All have adopted the Church Order of Dort - be it altered to reflect their specific circumstances. A new church consisting of (any combination of) the above churches will invariably adopt also the Church Order of Dort. The thorny question will be: which edition? We all by nature prefer our own heritage....

It seems to me that in this development it may be beneficial to look at the Scriptural principles behind the Church Order. Instead, though, of working through the literal Church Order of Dort (which, to my knowledge, nobody in North America uses in unaltered form), I have opted to take a contemporary edition as basis for the discussion, and yet one not involved in the current discussions in North America. Since I live in

Australia, what <sup>16</sup> better edition to follow than the Church Order of my own bond of churches, the Free Reformed Churches of Australia (FRCA). I see some advantages to using the FRCA edition of the Dort Church Order as base text for the pages that follow:

- To use the original text of the Synod of Dort would require numerous asides into the historical evolution of the Church Order, since there are various articles that have been altered, removed or replaced in any current edition used by the above-mentioned churches.
- To use a text currently in use in one of the North American churches is to lift out one edition over the other. In the current discussion, I would rather not do that.
- A Church Order is never fixed to the degree that it cannot be changed. By definition, a Church Order reflects the concrete circumstances in which the churches find themselves. To my mind, this fact comes alive quite graphically in the Order adopted by the Free Reformed Churches of Australia; witness the adaptations that have been made in relation to classes (see particularly the opening page to Part 2). Such working with the principles of Scripture may well benefit the discussions that will, under God's blessing, take place in the coming years in North America.

A number of appendices and indices have been included in order to help the reader find his way through various Church Orders. Further, the reader will notice that where the text discusses a given article of the Australian Church Order, I have included cross-references to the Church Order of the Canadian Reformed Churches. This provides the reader with a North American Church Order in the body of the book itself. I have chosen the Church Order of the Canadian Reformed Churches for this purpose since the FRCA Church Order is intentionally similar<sup>2</sup> to the Canadian Church Order (though the numbering turns out to be different, and here and there the wording too). Where difference in content exists between the Canadian and Australian editions, both articles (or relevant parts thereof) have been printed.

The reader should be aware, then, that my purpose in this book is not to provide an explanation of the adopted Church Order. Rev W.W.J. vanOene, my esteemed instructor in Church Polity while at seminary, has adequately done that in his book *With Common Consent* (1990). Rev G. vanRongen and Dr K. Deddens have done the same in simplified form in their *Decently and in Good Order* (1986). The above titles, as I see it, stand between the adopted Church Order and the practical life of the churches, and draw the link between the two. My publication seeks to take <sup>17</sup> a stand earlier in the piece, and draw the link between Scripture and Church Order. My primary question is not: How ought this article of the Church Order to function in the life of the churches? It is instead: Does this article agree with God's revealed will?

Various persons have assisted me in the course of preparing this publication. The pages that follow are the fruit of a post-confession course I taught in 1998 in my congregation of Kelmscott. The congregation, then, deserves the first thankyou for expressing such interest in the topic of the Church Order and encouraging me to study further in the field. The material I taught in that post-confession class has (again) been willingly and faithfully put to paper by Johanna vanderPlas. Thank you, Jo, for another job well done! In the course of editing these notes and preparing them for publication, I sought and received input and advice from Rev Karlo Janssen, Rev W.W.J. vanOene and Rev G. vanRongen; thank you all for your expert interaction with the material. Rev vanRongen has also kindly put the indices together, for which I thank him sincerely. I express my thanks also to Bill Gortemaker of Premier Printing for his assistance in bringing the publication to light. My deepest expression of thanks goes to my Sender and Saviour; in His grace He has given the interest and the strength to begin and complete this project. May He bless the work done, that it be of service in His kingdom and so of benefit in His church gathering work around the world.

Kelmscott, Australia

August 2000

## **Part I: From the Bible to the Church Order**

19

# Chapter 1


## ***Scripture Principles Forming Reformed Church Polity***

### **1. Understanding the Concept**

Just what might Church Polity actually be? Why, for that matter, is there such a thing as Church Polity?

#### **1.1 Christ is Master in Church**

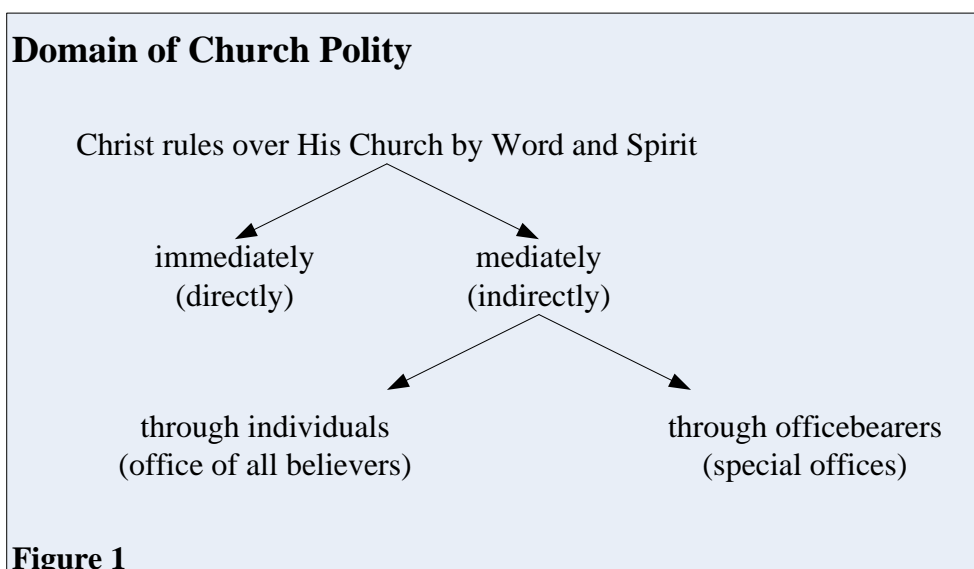
It is a given of Scripture that God is sovereign over all. This thought is a refrain in the Psalms: *"the kingdom is the Lord's, And He rules over the nations"* (Psalm 22:28); *"He is a great King over all the earth"* (Psalm 47:2); *"the Lord has established His throne in heaven, And His kingdom rules over all"* (Psalm 103:19), etc. As a result, believers throughout the ages confess Sunday by Sunday that *"I believe in God the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth."* The God who created the world in the beginning - He is now my Father in Jesus Christ - still rules the world sovereignly today (see Lord's Day 9 of the *Heidelberg Catechism*).

After Christ's triumph over sin and Satan on the cross of Calvary, God *"put **all** things under [Jesus'] feet..."* (Ephesians 1:22). One is master over the things 'under one's feet'. When the captains of Israel put their feet on the necks of the Canaanite kings, the symbolism was obvious to one and all (cf. Joshua 10:24f). Since God put all things under Jesus' feet, all in the world are subject to King Jesus. As Jesus also said before His ascension into heaven: *"**All** authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth"* (Matthew 28:18). Note how comprehensive Christ's authority is: the  ascended Christ rules over all things. This includes not just secular governments and authorities, but also His Church. In fact, the Scripture tells us that Jesus Christ is the *Head* of the Church, which is His body (Ephesians 1:20-23; Colossians 1:18).

Since Christ is the Head of the church, it follows that in the church of Jesus Christ things are to be done *Christ's way*. We confess this truth in the *Belgic Confession* with these words: *"We believe that this true Church (this is the Church as confessed in the previous articles) must be governed according to the **spiritual order** which our Lord has taught us in His Word"* (Article 30). Similarly, *"We believe that, although it is useful and good for those who govern the Church to establish a certain order to maintain the body of the Church, **they must at all times watch that they do not deviate from what Christ, our only Master, has commanded**"* (Article 32). The Church belongs to the Saviour, and precisely for this reason it is imperative that we - who by God's grace may belong to His Church - see to it that His Church is indeed governed according to His Word. A church that confesses Christ's sovereignty with the mouth, but does not honour Christ's sovereignty in the concrete deeds of church government, is not faithful to the only Master.

#### **1.2 How Does Christ Rule His Church?**

Christ has taught us in His Word how He rules His church. We confess it in Lord's Day 12, Q & A 31: He *"governs us by His Word and Spirit."* With the help of a couple of big words, I want to make a distinction here. Christ, I suggest, governs His church by His Word and Spirit 'immediately' and 'mediately' (see Figure 1).



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### 1.2.1 Immediately

With the first of these two big words I seek to express the notion that Christ rules without any intervening means. (In the word 'immediately', 'im' = no and 'media' = means. So 'immedia' = no means.) Christ rules His Church *directly* by His Word and Spirit, without using particular tools. In the school of life, Christ works directly upon His people to make them grow in faith, even in spite of the sins and weaknesses of the office-bearers. We may think here of a passage as Hebrews 12: *"If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons.... He [chastens] us for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness"* (vss 7ff).

### 1.2.2 Medially

Christ also rules His Church via a particular medium, that is, by means of tools. Specifically, God is pleased to use people, firstly via the office of all believers, and secondly by placing between Christ and His Church the special offices.

#### 1.2.2.1 THE OFFICE OF ALL BELIEVERS

On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was poured out not on the twelve disciples only, but on all believers. As a result, the apostle could write to entire congregations that *"... you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people..."* (1 Peter 2:9). Similarly, Paul asks each member of the church of Christ in Corinth: *"do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?"* (1 Corinthians 3:16; cf. 6:19).

With the gift of the Holy Spirit, all Christians have been anointed to the 'office-of-all-believers'. We are, then, all prophets, priests and kings. We are called 'Christians' because, as we each confess, *"... I am a member of Christ by faith and thus share in His anointing, so that I may as prophet confess His Name, as priest present myself a living sacrifice of thankfulness to Him, and as king fight with a free and good conscience against sin and the devil in this life, and hereafter reign with Him eternally over all creatures"* (Lord's Day 12.32). Since all in the congregation share the office of all believers, everyone has a place and task in the congregation. True, each person has different gifts. As a result, each has the privilege of complementing the other. As we read it in Romans 12:4-8, *"For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is <sup>23</sup> given to us,*

*let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness."* In the office of all believers, we all may be tools in the Saviour's hands through which He cares for His church.

#### **1.2.2.2 THE SPECIAL OFFICES**

It pleases the Head of the Church, though, particularly to use special offices. When Christ ascended into Heaven He gave special gifts to some people so that, in addition to serving in the office of all believers, they might also be enabled to serve in the special offices. *"And 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 the knowledge of the Son of God ..."* (Ephesians 4:11 -13). As Paul also says to the elders of Ephesus: *"Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has **made** you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood"* (Acts 20:28). Those called to a special office are particularly the tools the ascended Christ uses to lead and govern His body, the Church.

### **1.3 Church Polity Defined**

Church Polity does not concern itself with Christ's 'immediate' governing of His Church. Church Polity does not concern itself either with how individuals carry out the office of all believers. The focus of Church Polity is instead the special offices. The Lord of the Church has revealed in His Word particular principles concerning the way He wishes things to be done in His church. Where His will on a given matter has been clearly revealed in Scripture, the Lord's churches have no option but to act accordingly. The church *must*, for example, have office-bearers. A church *must* also exercise discipline.

Still, precisely how a church goes about obtaining office-bearers, or how office-bearers go about exercising discipline is not set forth in Scripture in non-discussable detail. Certain principles are revealed, to be sure. But details need to be extrapolated from these principles.

The question that then arises is this: should the churches all go their own way in determining how they shall work out the applications of Scriptural principles? Shall one church call to office via one procedure and another via another, or one church exercise church discipline in one <sup>24</sup> style and another via another? Should the churches, for that matter, be granted the liberty to change their practices year after year, according to the taste of the day?

The Lord has revealed in Scripture that He is a God not of *"confusion but of peace"* (1 Corinthians 14:33). Instead of haphazard approaches to a given aspect of church life, *"let all things be done decently and in order"* (vs. 40). That there be an agreed-upon way of doing things puts the brakes on pushing to get one's own way and it serves also to restrict opportunity for needless argument - both of which produce division. An agreed-upon way of doing things produces stability, and stability encourages peace and therefore growth in the congregations of Jesus Christ.

Church polity busies itself with fleshing out in practical formulations the principles Christ has revealed in Scripture about how He wishes things to be done in His Church. Since these practical formulations (they are the articles of the Church Order) are not so much lifted verbatim from Scripture as deduced (for good reasons) from the principles of Scripture, one cannot consider these formulations to be *laws* in the strict sense of the word. Rather, these formulations are *agreements* which - when one adopts the Church Order - one promises to maintain. That is why Reformed Church Polity does not ask one to *submit* to the Church Order (as one would to a government or to a set of laws); Reformed Church Polity instead asks one to *keep one's promises* - which, of course, a child of God is most eager to do (see Psalm 15:4).



Since these agreements are built on principles drawn from the Word of God, one must - if one would do justice to a study of the Church Order - pay attention first to the underlying principles.

## 2. Christ's Authority is Entrusted to the Local Church

Fundamental to scriptural Church Polity is the notion that Christ rules in the Church, and does so by means of office-bearers.

### 2.1 The Authority of the Apostles

In Matthew 16 we read that Christ gave authority to the apostles. The passage had recorded the people's doubts concerning Jesus' identity (vss 13f). So Jesus asked His disciples, *"Who do you say that I am?"* (vs. 15). Peter replied, *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God"* (vs. 16). Jesus then said, *"Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church...."* In Greek the <sup>25</sup> name 'Peter' means 'rock'. Jesus, then, says that He will build His church on Peter. Yet the Lord's intent is not to build His Church on the man Peter as such, but rather to build His Church on that which Peter would proclaim, namely, the good news that Jesus is *"the Christ, the Son of the living God."* Those who accept this gospel inherit eternal life, and those who do not shall not receive eternal glory. The gospel, and therefore the preacher of the gospel, has a fundamental place in Christ's church-gathering work. As Jesus also said to Peter: *"And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven "* (vss 17-19).

Yet Peter is not the only one who would proclaim this gospel; the other disciples would too. Jesus mentions specifically *Peter* because it is he who spoke first in answer to Christ's question concerning Who Christ is. The keys of the kingdom of heaven, then, were not given simply to the individual Peter, but in him also to the other disciples in their capacity as office-bearers. That becomes evident from Jesus' further words in Matthew 18, where discipline (one of the keys by which one binds and looses) is a power given to the church (vs. 17). Again, after His resurrection, Christ *"breathed on "* the disciples, *"and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained'"* (John 20:22,23). The disciples (now minus Judas Iscariot) were entrusted with the function of overseeing the entrance to heaven. In a word, the disciples received Christ's *authority*.

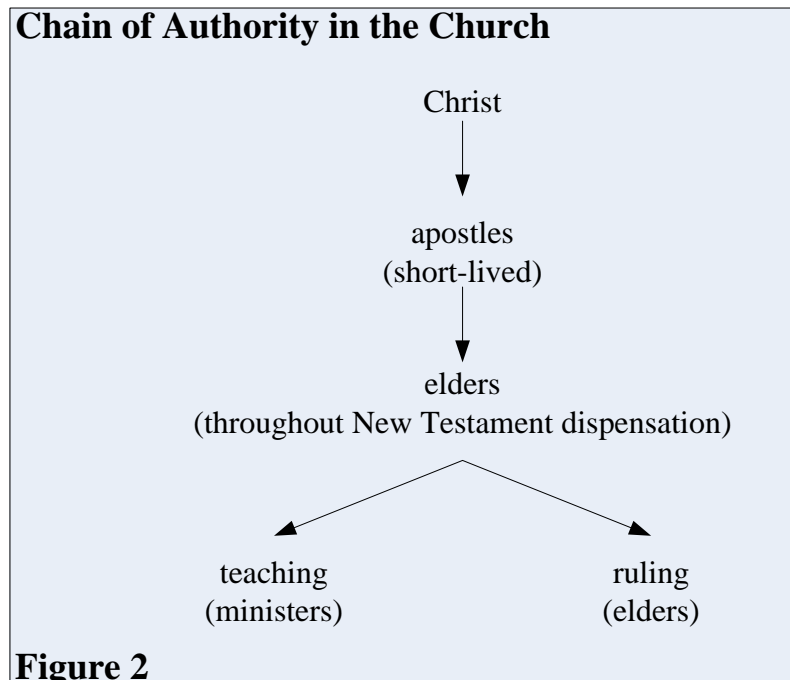
So it was that the apostles, after the Holy Spirit had been poured out on Pentecost, set themselves to preaching the gospel. By so doing they, in accordance with the authority they had received, opened the kingdom of heaven. Equally, they spoke candid words of admonition when necessary. For example, in Galatians 2:11-14 we read how Paul rebuked Peter to his face for his hypocrisy. Likewise, in 1 Corinthians 5 we read how Paul exhorts the Church at Corinth to exercise church discipline against a brother guilty of sexual immorality. Through both the preaching and the exercising of church discipline, we find the apostles busy with opening and closing the kingdom of heaven.

### 2.2 The Authority of their Replacements

But the apostles could not live forever. Who would receive their authority when they received the crown of glory? Other *apostles* could not be appointed in their place, since to be an apostle you had to be a witness of Jesus' work and resurrection from the dead. That is clear from Peter's words in Acts 1, when a replacement apostle was sought for Judas. Peter <sup>26</sup> said to the crowd, *"Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection"* (vs. 21f). When the apostles died there were no more witnesses of Christ's work and resurrection, and so no replacements for the office of apostle. So the office of apostle ceased.



Yet that does not mean that their authority ceased on this earth. For the Lord of the church moved His apostles to designate men who in turn received the authority to open and close the kingdom of heaven. After the apostle Paul, together with Barnabas, had proclaimed the gospel in Asia Minor, they visited the infant churches and *"appointed elders in every church"* (Acts 14:23). In Titus 1:5 Paul tells Titus that he left him in Crete *"that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you."* Elsewhere the apostle makes a distinction between the elders appointed in the churches. He speaks in 1 Timothy 5:17 of elders who rule and elders who labour in Word and doctrine. We have come to know these distinctions as elders and ministers. See Figure 2.



Here, then, is drawn out what the apostle wrote about the ascension of Christ. At His ascension Christ gave gifts to men; *"... He himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers"* (Ephesians 4:11). Of the four offices mentioned in this text, the office of pastors and teachers (i.e. elders) is the only one that is still present <sup>27</sup> today. The office of apostle ceased with the death of the last apostle. The office of prophet (Acts 11:28 and 21:10 speak of a prophet named Agabus) also ceased when the Bible was completed, for no new or further revelations were required (cf. Revelation 22:18ff). Timothy and Philip were both evangelists (cf. Acts 21:8 and 2 Timothy 4:5), but it is difficult to ascertain what exactly this office entailed. Certainly there is no instruction in the Scripture that there is to be in Christ's church a continuing office of 'evangelist'. So we are left with the *"pastors and teachers."* It is through them that the Lord is pleased to rule His Church today.

### 2.2.1 Let Honour be Shown

These "pastors and teachers" are variously referred to in Scripture as presbyters or elders, bishops or overseers, as well as shepherds and guardians. That the Lord has given to these office-bearers authority to speak and act on His behalf is demonstrated by the fact that the Lord would have the congregation members to show them honour. *"And we urge you, brethren, to recognise those who labour among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake"* (1 Thessalonians 5:12, 13). *"Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with*

*joy and not with grief for that would be unprofitable for you"* (Hebrews 13:17). Because the Head of the church has given authority to the elders, it is for all God's people to show these elders honour and respect - not because of their person, but because God has given authority to them.

### 2.2.2 Let Office-bearers Speak the Word of God

Similarly, that the office-bearer has received authority from God is made clear by the instructions God gives to the office-bearer. Their identity as spokesmen of God dictates that no office-bearer may speak his own words. The congregation is the Lord's, and the office-bearer a tool in God's hands to care for His people. So the elders of Ephesus were told to *"take heed ... to all the flock ..., to shepherd the church of God"* (Acts 20:28). Timothy was told to *"preach the word!"* Though people will *"heap up for themselves teachers"* and *"turn their ears away from the truth,"* Timothy must nevertheless *"do the work of an evangelist"* (2 Timothy 4:2-5). His very identity as office-bearer endowed with God's authority determined that his words and his conduct must agree with the wishes of his Sender. In the words of the office-bearer, then, the congregation must be able to hear the Voice of the Shepherd. <sup>28</sup>

### 2.3 The Principle of Local Authority

How far, now, does the authority of an office-bearer extend? The authority of the apostles was universal. Hence the apostle Paul could with authority write letters to the church in Rome, the church in Corinth, the churches in Galatia, the church in Philippi, Colossae, Thessalonica, etc. Similarly, when the apostle John was on the island of Patmos he was told by the Head of the Church to send a letter to each of the seven churches in Asia Minor. Have elders a similar authority? May elders of the church of Kelmscott exercise any degree of authority in, say, the church of Launceston - four thousand kilometres removed? Or in the church of Armadale - four kilometres removed?

The universal character of the authority given to the apostles died with the office. In Acts 14:23 one reads that elders were appointed in every church. None of the elders were appointed to serve all the churches. Likewise in Titus 1:5 we read that Titus had been left in Crete to *"appoint elders in every city."* Again, in Revelation 2 and 3 we are introduced to seven local office-bearers; each "angel" (presumably minister, that is, the ruling elder) was attached to a local congregation. It is also instructive that the church in each locality is described in the New Testament as a<sup>3</sup> "body of Christ" (1 Cor. 12:27). That is: each local church is complete in itself, completely a church.

Further, the fact that the Voice of the Shepherd is *locally* heard is also important in defining the *extent* of an office-bearer's authority. Jesus *Christ* gathers a catholic church, but does it through having His Word preached in *local* communities. The preaching of the gospel (a responsibility of the elders) in one town does not gather the church in the next town. As the Word is locally opened, and the particular needs of the local congregation supplied through that local preaching, the extent of the office-bearer's authority must also be local; they are responsible for and address this congregation and not that one. Of office-bearers too Jesus' Word is true: *"One is your Teacher [or Leader], the Christ, and you are all brethren "* (Matthew 23:8).

This principle of local authority has received concrete expression in Article 80 of our Church Order. There we read,

**FRCA: Article 80 - No lording over others (CanRC: Article 74)**

*No church shall in any way lord it over other churches, no office-bearer over other office-bearers.*

Within the bond of churches, no office-bearer of a given church can dictate what must be done in another church. The office-bearer's authority is local only. <sup>29</sup>

### 3. Towards a Bond of Churches

#### 3.1 From One Church to Many Churches

The Book of Acts has much to tell us concerning the formation of local churches. In Acts 5:11 we read *"So great fear came upon **all the church**...."* The church mentioned here is a reference to the church in Jerusalem. On Pentecost Day the apostles had preached the Gospel and many had come to faith (Acts 2:41). However, those who came to faith did not keep to themselves but rather sought each other out and met together. So we read in Acts 2:44 that *"all who believed were together, and had all things in common"* and in vs. 46 we are told that they *"continued together with one accord in the temple, ...breaking bread from house to house...."* Similarly, in Acts 4:32 we read, *"Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common."* The believers in Jerusalem formed one body and did things as one body. Together they formed the Church of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem.

This church gets mentioned once again in Acts 8:1, *"Now Saul was consenting to [Stephen's] death. At that time a great persecution arose against **the church which was at Jerusalem**; and they were all **scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria**, except the apostles."* The one church in Jerusalem was broken up through the persecution, so that Christians spread abroad. Like ripples on a pond, the believers at Jerusalem were spread abroad further and further, as far as Judea, Samaria, Galatia, (Acts 9:31), the two coastal cities Phoenicia and Antioch, and the island of Cyprus (Acts 11:19).

Did the scattered Christians of Jerusalem remain one church? Are we to envisage a single 'city church' becoming a 'regional church' by virtue of the fact that the members of the 'city church' were dispersed over numerous towns throughout the surrounding region? It appears not. Instead of suggesting the formation of a regional church (say, of Judea and/or Samaria and/or Galatia), the text of Scripture would have us think of numerous separate, complete churches arising in the towns to which the Christians were scattered. The evidence is as follows:

a. In Acts 9:31 we read of churches: *"Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified..."* A footnote to this verse informs us that some manuscripts have the word 'church' in the singular. The singular may well be the better reading, but the ambiguity of the textual witnesses indicates that one cannot build strong arguments either way on this text. <sup>30</sup>

b. Far more compelling is what the apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians. He writes in chapter 1:13, *"For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it."* This text is a reference to the persecution he had begun in the church in Jerusalem, as recorded in Acts 8:1. Note the singular; Paul speaks about the **"church"** in Jerusalem. The apostle goes on to relate that God called him through His grace to faith (i.e. on the way to Damascus), that he then went on to Arabia, returned to Damascus, and so did not go back to Jerusalem to see Peter until three years later (Galatians 1:15-20). Striking, now, is how Paul describes the ecclesiastical scene after three years had passed. For Paul says of himself that he *"was unknown by face to the **churches of Judea** which were in Christ"* (Galatians 1:22). Note the use of the plural. Note also that "the church in Jerusalem" has changed to "the churches of Judea". The conclusion follows: as a result of the persecution of the church in Jerusalem, this one (large) church was scattered into various (smaller) churches throughout Judea.

c. Further texts illustrate the continuation of this development:

- Acts 11:26: *"And when [Barnabas] had found [Saul], he brought him to **Antioch**. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with **the church** and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch."* Note that the church in Antioch is described as a complete body in itself, and not a part of a wider,

regional church.

- Acts 14:23: After Paul and Barnabas had preached the Gospel throughout Asia Minor, *"they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch"* and *"appointed elders in **every church...**"* Here we read of a plurality of churches, one per town, and not of a single regional church.
- Acts 15:41: *"And [Paul] went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches."* Again, not one church, but many churches.
- Acts 16:5: *"So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and increased in number daily."*
- Acts 20:17: *"From Miletus [Paul] sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church."* To these elders Paul gave this charge: *"Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd **the church of God** which He purchased with His own blood"* (vs. 28). These elders were made overseers of the flock in Ephesus (and not <sup>31</sup> the flock in Antioch or in Jerusalem), and this flock in Ephesus is *"the church of God which He purchased with His own blood"* - complete in itself.
- 1 Corinthians 12:27: Paul describes *"the church of God which is at Corinth"* (1 Corinthians 1:2) as *"a body of Christ"*. That is: this church in Corinth is (as the Greek original actually has it) a complete body in itself. By extension, each church in any given community is a complete body. The term 'church', then, is not to conjure up in our minds the notion of a regional or national entity of which each local church is a subset. The evidence of Scripture indicates instead that each local church is a complete church in itself.<sup>4</sup>

### 3.2 Churches are Autonomous but Not Independent

Although each of the New Testament churches were separate churches, we yet read of cooperation and interaction between them. The following points serve to illustrate this:

#### 3.2.1 Mutual Interest

Believers who had been scattered by the persecution in Jerusalem had passed on the Gospel not only to other Jews but also to Gentiles. Under God's blessing, many Gentiles came to faith. When it was heard in Jerusalem that Gentiles in Antioch had been converted to the Christian faith (let the reader recall that Jews were conditioned to keep the gospel for themselves; that's why Peter needed the vision of the clean and unclean animals, Acts 10), the church at Jerusalem sent out Barnabas to investigate. He received the mandate *"to go **as far as Antioch**"* (Acts 11:22). The words "go as far as" suggest that Barnabas was not to travel directly to Antioch to investigate developments there, but was instead to touch base with various of the churches along the way, till he finally ended up in Antioch. Of significance to our topic is the fact that the church at Jerusalem displayed an interest in what was going on in other churches. The church in Jerusalem did not consider itself an island unattached to and uninterested in the other churches; the church in Jerusalem instead recognised that there was a bond of faith between the various churches.

#### 3.2.2 Mutual Care

Several passages draw out that the early churches cared for each other.

- Acts 11:27-30 tells us of prophets from Jerusalem going out to Antioch. One of them, Agabus, prophesied a severe, extensive famine that <sup>32</sup> caused a need for assistance in Judea. In response to this prophecy, the believers in Antioch sent relief along with Barnabas and Saul to the elders in Judea. In so doing, they displayed an attitude of care to those with whom they shared a bond of faith.
- The same attitude was evident amongst the churches in Macedonia and Achaia. Even though they were very distant from the church at Jerusalem and did not know the

brethren there, *"it pleased those from Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor among the saints who are in Jerusalem"* (Romans 15:25,26). Paul set this deed of the Macedonian brethren as an example before the church at Corinth: *"Moreover brethren, we make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia: that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality. For I bear witness that according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing, imploring us with much urgency that we would receive the gift and the fellowship of the ministering to the saints"* (2 Corinthians 8:1-4). Further on in his letter (2 Corinthians 9:1-5) Paul encourages the Corinthians also to give for the benefit of the needy in churches outside of Corinth.

- The Thessalonians, who lived in the south of Greece, likewise made it their business to help out the brethren who lived in Macedonia, northern Greece. Paul encouraged the saints of Thessalonica, *"But concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another: and indeed you do so toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia "* (1 Thessalonians 4:9, 10).

### 3.2.3 Letters of Recommendation

Paul writes to the saints in Rome, *"I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in whatever business she has need of you; for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also"* (Romans 16:1, 2). Similarly, we read in Acts 18:27 of Apollos receiving an 'attestation' when he travelled from Ephesus to Achaia: *"And when he desired to cross to Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him; and when he arrived he greatly helped those who had believed through grace."* That letters of commendation were written concerning a member travelling to another church demonstrates that the churches saw each other united in the bond of faith. 33

### 3.2.4 Greetings

In sending each other greetings, the churches gave expression to the fact that even though they were separate churches, they recognised each other as sister churches in Christ, united by their faith in Him. For that reason the apostle John concluded his second epistle by writing, *"The children of your elect sister greet you"* (2 John 13). Equally, to the church at Rome Paul writes, *"The churches of Christ greet you"* (Romans 16:16). He draws his letter to the Corinthians to a close with these words: *"The churches of Asia greet you"* (1 Corinthians 16:19).

## 3.3 Churches Need to Federate Together

The above details of cooperation and interaction between the churches of the New Testament are descriptive of what happened at that time. The question that now needs attention is this: ought the Lord's churches today also to cooperate with one another? We look at the question first from a doctrinal point of view, and then from the angle of the communion of saints.

### 3.3.1 Doctrinal

The Lord has revealed in Scripture various characteristics of Christ's church. We confess this aspect of God's revelation in the Nicene Creed,<sup>5</sup> with the words, *"I believe one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church."*

#### 3.3.1.1 THE CHURCH IS ONE

Various texts from Scripture compel us to view the Church as one.

- Matthew 1:21: The angel told Joseph to *"call His name JESUS, for He will save **His** people from their sins."* Jesus did not come to save individuals, so many islands in a big sea, but a people. Note the singular; this is *one* people.



- Acts 15:14: James draws out the unity of God's own, when he says: "*Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name.*" The saved are not unconnected individuals, but are together a distinct people.
- 1 Corinthians 10:17: With reference to the Lord's Supper the apostle Paul says, "*For we, **though many**, are **one bread and one body**; for we all partake of that one bread.*" Note that the "one bread and one body" of which the apostle speaks comprises more persons than simply the members of the church of Corinth, for he uses the word "we" - and so includes himself, though he was not a member of the Corinthian congregation.
- Ephesians 4:4-6: Here this unity comes out in all its strength: "*there is <sup>34</sup> **one body and one Spirit**, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.*" First and foremost, there is a spiritual bond between all the churches. They have all heard the one Gospel. Through the activity of the one Holy Spirit, one faith was worked in all their hearts. The unity of the Spirit was there and therefore Paul urged the Ephesians in verse 3 to hold on to it: "*endeavouring to **keep the unity of the Spirit** in the bond of peace.*" The gift of unity contains within itself the mandate to *maintain* the unity.

### 3.3.1.2 THE CHURCH IS CATHOLIC

The word 'catholic' means universal, and so describes the notion that the Church of Christ may be found anywhere on earth throughout the course of the earth's existence. This is the promise of Scripture:

- Genesis 22:18: God said to Abraham: "*In your seed **all the nations of the earth shall be blessed....***" The Gospel will advantage people of every tribe and tongue and nation.
- Psalm 87:14: By the election of God, persons from Babylon, Philistia, Tyre and Ethiopia all have their spiritual roots in Jerusalem, the city of God.
- Revelation 7:9: In the vision Jesus showed him, John saw "*a great multitude which no one could number, **of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues**, standing before the throne and before the Lamb....*"

We confess this catholicity of the Church in Article 27 of the *Belgic Confession* with these words,

*"We believe and profess **one catholic or universal Church....** Moreover, this holy Church is **not confined or limited to one particular place or to certain persons, but is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world.**"*

### 3.3.1.3 THE CHURCH IS APOSTOLIC

The Lord has revealed that His one Church, in whatever locality it may be gathered on the face of the earth, believes the same doctrine. This doctrine has come to us from God by means of the *apostles*.

- Ephesians 2:20 describes the Church as "*having been built on the **foundation of the apostles and prophets....***"
- Revelation 21:14 describes the New Jerusalem, which is the Church in her perfection: "*Now the wall of the city had **twelve foundations**, and on them were the names of the **twelve apostles** of the Lamb.*" <sup>35</sup>

It is because God has revealed one gospel that Paul could instruct the saints at Colossae to see to it that his letter to the Colossians "*is read also in the church of the **Laodiceans, and that you likewise read the epistle from Laodicea***" (Colossians 4:16). The one truth is valid for all the churches. This also explains why James could write one letter "*to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad*" (James 1:1). The

"twelve tribes" is Old Testament language to describe the New Testament Israel, the Church. There is one truth, one message valid for the whole Church of Christ, and this one truth forms the basis of the bond between all the churches.

### 3.3.1.4 THE CHURCH IS HOLY

All the churches of Christ share in the same sanctifying work of Christ's Holy Spirit; they are all holy. The fact that one Holy Spirit works the same sanctification in all the churches draws out the unity that exists between these churches.

- 1 Corinthians 1:2: Paul can address the Corinthian church as *"those who are **sanctified** in Christ Jesus, called to be saints...."*
- 1 Peter 1:1: Peter can address *"the pilgrims of the Dispersion"* in a similar way. Though these "pilgrims" are spread throughout five districts (*"Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia"*) they are all *"elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in **sanctification** of the Spirit...."*
- James 1:27: James addresses numerous churches with his one letter (he writes *"to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad"*), and instructs all *"**to keep oneself unspotted from the world.**"* Holiness cannot characterise just one local church, but must characterise all since the numerous local churches are united by the one work of the one Holy Spirit.

### 3.3.1.5 CONCLUSION

God has told us in His Word that the churches are separate, autonomous. In His Word God has also told us that His Church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. The churches we read of in Acts, all separate churches but all equally the Lord's churches, made it their business to express and demonstrate an active interest in each other. In so doing, these autonomous churches gave expression to the spiritual bond that united them. This thought comes back in what we confess in Article 27 of the *Belgic Confession*, that

*"this holy church ... is joined and united with heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith."* <sup>36</sup>

### 3.3.2 Exercising Communion of Saints as Churches

The notion that there is no room for churches to exist independently from each other can also be drawn out from the angle of the communion of saints.

- In Proverbs 11:14 and 15:22 Solomon advises, *"Where there is no counsel, the people fall; But **in the multitude of counsellors** there is safety.... Without counsel, plans go awry, But in the multitude of counsellors they are established."* In other words, rather than tackle problems on your own, one ought to seek advice from others in order to make a wiser and more informed decision. In this broken world, finite and sinful people act arrogantly if they assume they know all things best themselves. The principle is true for churches too. So a local church does well to seek input from other churches in facing the challenges on its path.
- Philippians 2:3, 4 instructs persons to reach out to others. *"Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, **but also for the interests of others.**"* In the brokenness of this world, it is equally necessary that each church looks to the interests of other churches, and offers assistance in the struggles of this life.
- 1 Corinthians 14:36 records that in Corinth women were being permitted to speak in Church. Paul wanted to show the church of Corinth that this was incorrect. To do so he appeals to practices elsewhere: *"Did the word of God come originally from you? Or was it you only that it reached?"* That is: the gospel began in Jerusalem, and in that church the women did not speak in church. So one church is held up as an example for another church as to how God wished to be worshipped.

Here, then, is the material of the *Belgic Confession*, Article 28, applied to the level of inter-church relations:

*"We believe, since this holy assembly and congregation is the assembly of the redeemed and there is no salvation outside of it, that no one ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself, no matter what his status or standing may be. But all and everyone are obliged to join it and unite with it, maintaining the unity of the Church. They must submit themselves to its instruction and discipline, bend their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ, and **serve the edification of the brothers and sisters, according to the talents which God has given them as members of the same body.**"* <sup>37</sup>

The Lord has saved a people for Himself, and in view of Satan's constant attacks on the redeemed, plus the weaknesses that continue to hamper the redeemed, God's people cannot afford to stand independently of each other as so many individuals. Christians need each other. Churches need each other as well.

We need, therefore, to guard against the danger of independentism, the thought that we can do it alone. This is not how Christ would have it. All the churches have received the same Gospel and all have received the grace needed to be able to help each other. This is true for us as churches within the one country, but by extension this also applies to us as churches on an international level.

The bond that exists between the churches is the fact that all are saved by one Christ. Each church is *His* church, and therefore each church *has* a bond with the church of the next locality. Admittedly, in the Bible we do not read of churches forming a bond or a federation. But that need not surprise us, for a bond is an organisational expression of an existing unity, and it takes time for such an organisational expression to come into being. Nevertheless, it is a very scriptural thought that all Christ's churches *be* bonded together. Though many miles or different cultures may separate the churches, no such factors take away from the fact that there exists a bond, a unity. Such a bond is *expressed* through the formation of, and the interaction of churches within, a federation of churches such as the Free Reformed Churches of Australia. This bond is also expressed by establishing sister relations with federations of churches elsewhere in the world.

### 3.4 To Join a Bond of Churches is Voluntary

From the above, it follows that forming and joining a federation of churches is an act of obedience to the Lord. The Lord gives no option; His churches are obliged to federate together. On the other hand, no one can *compel* a church to join a federation of churches. Seen from that angle, forming or joining a bond is totally a voluntary matter.

I grant that this may well sound like a contradiction. To show that it is not a contradiction, I refer to an example from Scripture on an entirely different topic. Paul writes to the Corinthians about collecting money for the saints in Jerusalem. He says, 'Wow concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given **orders** to the churches in Galatia, so you **must do** also...' (1 Corinthians 16:1-3). Paul's reasoning is this: since the saints in Corinth and the saints in Jerusalem are equally the fruits of the work of one Holy Spirit, giving financial assistance to each other is at bottom not voluntary; rather, it is <sup>38</sup> mandatory ("must do"). At the same time, though, Paul says, "*I speak not **by commandment**, but **I** am testing the sincerity of your love by the diligence of others. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich. And in this I give advice...*" (2 Corinthians 8:8-10). So: Paul does not 'lay down the law' on the Corinthians in the matter of giving for others; he gives his "advice". But, he says, this is an advice the Corinthians "must" accept. That is: though Paul could not compel them or make them give, yet before God it remained their duty to give.

Likewise, no one can compel a church to join a bond of churches. This is a decision each church must make for itself. However, the criteria on which a church is to base its



decision can only be the revealed Word of God. And that Word draws out that there is a Scriptural *imperative* to *voluntarily* federate with other churches of Jesus Christ.

Any church which federates with other churches acknowledges thereby that it accepts the other churches as churches *of Christ*. That recognition of each other as churches of Christ obligates each to stand by the other churches no matter what happens, and to give whatever assistance may be required, be it financial help, spiritual help, or help by way of admonition.

How churches go about helping each other has been written down in the Church Order. Each church that joins the federation promises to maintain and abide by the Church Order. This promise is expressed in the final article of the Church Order like this:

**FRCA: Article 81 - Observance and revision of the Church Order (CanRC: Article 76)**

*These articles, which regard the lawful order of the church, have been **adopted with common accord**. If the interest of the churches demands such, they may and ought to be changed, augmented or diminished. However no consistory or classis shall be permitted to do so, but **they shall endeavour diligently to observe the provisions of this Church Order** as long as they have not been changed by synod.*

This is no empty promise, for a Christian is bound to keep his word (Psalm 15:4). So the Church at Kelmscott can expect the Church at, say, Rockingham to come with an admonition when it goes astray, or expect help from other churches should it run into financial difficulty. As brothers in the Lord it is our privilege always to be ready to come to each other's aid. This is true with neighbouring churches in a locality; it is equally true of churches throughout a country and even internationally. <sup>39</sup>

## Chapter 2

### ***Historical Overview of Church Government***


Different systems of church government have arisen over the centuries of church history, and still exist in various churches today. These can be categorised as follows:

- 1) Papal
- 2) Lutheran (Erastian)
- 3) Reformed / Presbyterian
- 4) Congregational / Independentistic
- 5) Collegial

In what follows, we deal in some detail with the first three of these five. The remaining two receive brief mention.

### **1. Papal Church Government**

#### **1.1 Pressures on the Eldership in the Early Churches**

We have learned from Scripture that the Lord cares for His Church by using people as His tools. Firstly, He uses all of us in the office of all believers, to which we have all been anointed by the Holy Spirit. As prophets, priests and kings, we are all mandated and equipped to confess God's Name, live in thankful service to Him, and fight against the attacks of Satan (Lord's Day 12). Secondly, God calls and enables some of His people to serve in the special offices, namely the offices of elder and deacon (see  Chapter 1, Paragraph 1.2).

The New Testament tells us how the one church in Jerusalem developed into numerous churches (see Chapter 1, Paragraph 3.1). We read of churches being established in Lystra, Iconium, Antioch, and Thessalonica, to mention but a few. The establishment of so many new churches placed great demands on the office-bearers, particularly on the elders. The following can be mentioned:

##### **1.1.1 Society was Basically Heathen**

When the apostles preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ in places such as Philippi, Ephesus, Corinth or Rome, the Lord blessed their work by converting numerous hearers to the Christian faith. These converts, however, were in need of much instruction. The converts of Jewish background were familiar with the Old Testament (or maybe not!), and now had to come to see Jesus as the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy. The Gentiles among the converts knew (next to) nothing about the Bible at all. Saturated as they were with the heathen habits, values and views of their past, they had to learn to think, speak and act in a Christian fashion. The elders had the responsibility to teach both the Jewish and the Gentile converts.

What made this task the more difficult was that the elders had to give their instruction in a society that had no Christian background. In our society today, the influence of a Christian heritage is still very present. Concepts as Sunday observance, the husband's headship in the family, marital faithfulness, etc, have a place in our cultural heritage. This heritage did not exist in the days of the early church. So the elders had to teach the people very much from the ground up.

##### **1.1.2 Church Life was a New Concept**

As soon as there were a number of converts in a particular place, these converts needed to form one congregation. God, after all, made them into a communion of saints. But if they were a communion of saints, they also had to be a communion of saints, one body

functioning together for mutual benefit. This was a new concept, and undoubtedly required much instruction on the part of the elders as well as much self-denial on the part of the new Christians. Here was need for leadership on the part of the elders.

### **1.1.3 The Threat of Heresies**

God's blessing of numerous converts to the Christian faith invariably resulted in these converts importing baggage from their unbelieving past into the churches. As an example: Paul and Barnabas, upon their return from a <sup>42</sup> missionary journey, settled in Antioch and taught the church there (Acts 14:26-28). However, in Acts 15:1 we read *"And certain men (these were Christians!) came down from Judea and taught the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved'"* Here we have Christians who clung to the teaching of their youth, namely, that one needs to be circumcised in order to be saved. Similarly, we read in 1 Corinthians 5 of a church tolerating the sinful practice of a brother living with his stepmother - a leftover of the promiscuity that characterised the lives of the Corinthian Christians prior to their conversion. The letters of John attack the heresy of Gnosticism, a teaching that tries to harmonise the Christian faith with Greek philosophy. We can understand that the elders (particularly after the apostles died) were required to give leadership in the face of these heresies. This put very much pressure on the elders.

### **1.1.4 Copies of the Bible were Rare**

There were very few copies of the Bible available to the new converts or to the elders. The Bible at that time consisted of only the Old Testament, plus some letters of Paul circulating amongst the churches. Since copies had to be handwritten, copies were scarce. So the onus fell the more on the elders to teach the people and to defend the truth.

All in all, these factors made for a challenging workload for the elders, requiring of them to exercise an enormous amount of leadership. When the elders were in need of help in the early days, the apostles were the obvious source to turn to; even from their prison cells the apostles wrote (inspired) letters of instruction and encouragement to the churches, thereby giving assistance to the elders. However, in time the apostles all died, leaving the elders with the responsibility to lead the churches.

## **1.2 Developments in the Eldership**

These pressures on the elders in the early churches led to the following three developments:

### **1.2.1 Clergy versus Laity**

In view of the pressures under which the elders had to function in the days of the early New Testament church, it is not surprising that it was the more gifted and the more knowledgeable men who became 'the leaders amongst the leaders'; the one elder was elevated above the other elder. The bulk of the workload landed on the shoulders of those who had the knowledge. Furthermore, due to a lack of knowledge on the part of individual believers at that time, the office of all believers did not function at <sup>43</sup> its optimum. Hence, over time there developed a division between the office-bearers (the clergy) and the common people (the laity), a division between the more learned (particularly the ministers) and those who were not so knowledgeable.

### **1.2.2 Elevation of Ministers**

The apostles appointed elders in every church (cf. Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). In I Timothy 5:17 a distinction is made between *"elders who rule"* and *"those who labour in the word and doctrine"* (see Chapter 1, Paragraph 2.2). We know the "elders who rule" as 'elders', while "those who labour in the word and doctrine" are known to us as 'ministers'.

On account of the pressures described above, public focus over time came to rest primarily on the teaching elder (the minister) so that he was commonly perceived as having a place above his colleagues, the ruling elders. Factors that contributed to this

elevation include:

- (a) the minister tends to be the public face and voice of a congregation;
- (b) in the face of heresies it is usually the minister who has the books and the knowledge required to defend Scripture;
- (c) in times of persecution the minister is often the first person to be arrested, causing people to respect and honour him for his suffering for Christ's sake.

Eventually the term 'elder' vanished in the churches, and the minister alone received the title of Bishop; the minister was regarded as 'THE elder'. This led to what is called 'Dominocracy' ('domino' = minister, 'cracy' = to rule).

### **1.2.3 Hierarchical Church Government**

Over the years, the extent of the bishop's authority broadened. Not only was the bishop 'the' ruler of the church in his own town, but he also became the ruler over the leaders (later known as priests) of the churches in the smaller, neighbouring towns. In due time a country was divided up into several dioceses which all fell under the jurisdiction of one bishop. So it became unlawful for bishops to be appointed in the smaller towns; the smaller towns had to be satisfied with a priest, who in turn had to report to his superior in the big town, the bishop.

The bishop of Rome eventually became the strongest of all bishops. By 400 A.D. his position on the top of the ecclesiastical ladder was commonly acknowledged. That the bishop of Rome ended up on top of the ecclesiastical ladder is explained by the following factors:

- a) Rome was for years the capital city of the empire, and so
  - people were accustomed to receiving instructions from Rome, and 44
  - those of Rome were accustomed to giving instructions
- b) When the Roman Empire fell to Alaric in 410, the bishop of Rome was much involved in preventing wide-spread destruction. So he had the respect required to fill something of the vacuum left by the collapse of the emperor's authority.

To justify the place of Rome's bishop on top of the ecclesiastical ladder, appeal was (wrongly) made to the words of the Lord to Peter in Matthew 16, where the Lord told Peter that *"you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church"* (vs. 18). On this passage see further Chapter 1, Paragraph 2.1.

The result of the development was that the church ended up with an authority structure of priests, prelates, cardinals, bishops and Pope, where the Pope ruled the entire western world, down to the priests at the bottom of the ladder who ruled over the village church. The church, after a period of about 400 years, had adopted for itself the authority structure of the secular political and economic system of the time, namely, a graded organisation of authority. This is the form of church government that prevailed until the time of the Great Reformation in the sixteenth century.

Although we can appreciate the enormous pressures under which the apostles and elders had to labour in the days of the early Christian Church, we yet need to bear in mind that this hierarchical system of church government was not the way to alleviate these pressures. Scripture had not been the guide in seeking the answers needed. Although the Pope appealed (though wrongly so) to Christ's words of Matthew 16:18 in defence of the authority he claimed, he failed to reconcile this with what God has revealed elsewhere in His Word concerning the authority of the office-bearers in the *local* churches.

### **1.3 Characteristics of Papal Church Government**

The following characteristics need to be mentioned:

- (a) Papal church government is Monarchical: 'mono' = one; 'arche' = rule. The Pope is the sole ruler.
- (b) Papal church government embraces the notion of one large 'universal' church made up of smaller member churches. Because the papal view of the church is first of all 'catholic' or 'universal' (instead of seeing each local church as complete in itself), the authority structure naturally became hierarchical.
- (c) The authority of the Bible is replaced by the authority of one man: the Pope. The first Vatican Council of 1871 declared the Pope's word (spoken officially) to be infallible. <sup>45</sup>
- (d) The office of all believers is not upheld. In the Roman Catholic Church one does not need to know the Bible; to be saved one need only to believe that the system of doctrine embraced by the church is correct.

## **2. Lutheran Church Government**

### **2.1 Rejection of Papal Authority**

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the church at Wittenberg. In one of these statements Luther denied that the Pope was the Head of the Church. Thereby he threw overboard the Papal system of church government.

As a result of Luther's rejection of the papal system of church government, the Pope in Rome excommunicated Luther from the church. Luther expressed his response to the Pope's decision by publicly burning the excommunication document on December 10th, 1520. In so doing he underlined his rejection of the Pope and Papal church government.

### **2.2 Replacement by a New Authority Structure**

Luther's refusal to submit to the Pope as the head of the church was scripturally correct. Christ alone is Head and this is what Luther tried to reflect in the system of church government he saw to be the scriptural alternative to the papal system. Luther took seriously the office of all believers. He had learned from the Bible that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit made all believers partakers in the anointing of Christ. He understood that each believer lives in a bond of faith with Christ, and so has been anointed to the threefold task of prophet, priest and king. So each individual believer must be involved in speaking the gospel, in serving others within the communion of saints, and in fighting against Satan's attacks on himself and his fellow saints. Luther sought to incorporate the reality of the office of all believers into the system of government he wanted for the church.

However, the system of church government Luther had in mind did not find its way into the church due to the economic circumstances in Germany in 1525. Thousands of serfs (these were the poor who owned no land) revolted against the rich landowners on whose land they lived and worked. The serfs rejected the authority of those over them, but could not in turn develop fitting authority structures to replace the ones thrown aside. The resulting chaos demanded leadership from the very persons against whom the serfs had revolted in the first place: the ruling class.

This authority of the ruling class in secular society found its way into Lutheran churches as well. Since the failed revolt of 1525 had shown that <sup>46</sup> government could not be entrusted into the hands of the plain people, Lutheran churches ended up with a system of church government that included the secular government. That is, the secular government received the right to control affairs in the church, appointing ministers, elders, and deacons in communities and receiving the right to exercise church discipline. In some areas, the church even became a government department.

A man by the name of Erastus took this government-centred concept and fine-tuned it. Hence Lutheran church government is also known as Erastian church government or Erastianism.

The authority of the Pope, then, was replaced with the authority of the king. This king was not only the head of state but also the head of the Church. In the Church of England today, the reigning monarch is still officially the head of the church. The churches in Holland were also influenced by Erastianism, particularly after the 1816 government decision to impose a new Church Order on the State church. This contributed, in part, to the Secession of 1834.

### 2.3 Characteristics of Lutheran Church Government

The following characteristics need to be mentioned:

- (a) Lutheran church government is monarchical: 'mono' = one; 'arche' = rule. Not the Pope but the King is the sole ruler.
- (b) Lutheran church government embraces the notion of a national church, formed along national boundaries. The local church has no authority.
- (c) The office of all believers has no place.

## 3. Reformed / Presbyterian Church Government

### 3.1 Martin Bucer

As the Reformed faith gained acceptance in Europe, its influence also became evident in the sphere of church government. Much of the groundwork must be attributed to a man by the name of Martin Bucer. Like Luther, his starting point too was the notion of the office of all believers. All believers, he learned from Scripture, are righteous in Christ and live in a bond of faith with Christ, partaking in Christ's threefold office of prophet, priest and king. These believers, though, are not so many individuals; they are united by one faith in one Christ, and therefore are one body together - a Church. The Head of every Church is Christ. Christ as Head rules over His Church specifically through the office of the elder.

Through the preaching of the Word the Holy Spirit works faith in the <sup>47</sup> hearts of man, and Christ assigned the task of preaching to the elders. It is by the two keys - the preaching and church discipline - that the elders open and close the kingdom of heaven. The power of these two keys is *given* to the congregation (Matthew 18:17), but *exercised* by the elders. Christ appointed "*some ... pastors and teachers for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ*" (Ephesians 4:1 If). There, according to Bucer, lies the heart of Reformed Church Polity. Church Polity does not serve the best interests of just one or a few men (as is the case in papal church government), but serves the pastoral purpose of ensuring that the congregation grows in Christ. Reformed Church Polity exists so that the congregation may receive Christ's gifts of faith, righteousness and holiness. The elders have the authority to work with the twokeys of the kingdom of heaven for the sake of the edification of the congregation.

### 3.2 John Calvin

John Calvin built his understanding of church government on the foundation laid by Bucer. Calvin too emphasised the office of all believers, and that local believers form a Church that Christ wants governed by office-bearers. The local, visible Church is all-important to the work of the Holy Spirit, for He works faith through the preaching and the preaching is delivered from each local pulpit. In the local Church, then, the elders are to carry out the office that Jesus Christ has lain on their shoulders, namely, exercising the keys of the kingdom.

It is said that Calvin checkmated the Pope with the pawn of the elder. What God requires of the elder is not riches, intellect, education, social standing, or fluent speech. The only quality God has stipulated *is faithfulness to Him*. God is pleased to use the "pawn of the elder", the 'little man', in order to cultivate growth in His congregation. Only the man who knows the power of God is able to encourage people in their service of God. This is



the type of man the Lord desires as leader in His Church. In 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and Titus 1:5-9 Paul lists the qualifications God looks for in men suited for service in the office. There we do not read that they need to be wise by worldly standards, nor that they need to be skilled speakers or debaters (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:18-29). Rather, "... *a bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God..., hospitable, a lover of what is good, sober-minded, just, holy, self-controlled, **holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict***" (Titus 1:5-9). God desires simply *faithful* <sup>48</sup> men to serve as office-bearers in His church. By the faithful labours of such 'little men', the Faith of the Bible could grow in Europe - and the power of the Pope be broken.

### 3.3 Elder Centred

Reformed church government is known by the word Presbyterial, 'presbyter' being the Greek word for elder. In other words, Reformed church government is *elder-centred* church government. 1 Timothy 5:17 speaks of two kinds of elders (known to us as the 'minister' and the 'elder'), but the one does not have more authority than the other has. (Characteristic of Reformed church polity is not the minister but the elder). Therefore let the elders speak up at Consistory meetings and Synods, let not the ministers make the decisions! At the same time, let the young men in the congregation prepare themselves for the office. Anybody, irrespective of the gifts God has given, is able to prepare for the office, for God does not ask for fluent speakers, good readers, and university degrees; He asks for men who are faithful to Him, who love Him, His Church and His work.

Ironically, the concept of church government that Calvin promoted did not get off the ground in Geneva where Calvin lived, but it was taken to France, the Netherlands, and Scotland. In these places a presbyterial form of church government received a prominent place in the church. Within the category of Reformed / Presbyterial church government we have the Church Order of Dort (which is part of the history of our churches), as well as the Presbyterian form of Church Government. Though the two are not the same, both nevertheless do fit into the category of Reformed church government.

### 3.4 Characteristics of Reformed Church Government

The following characteristics need to be mentioned:

- (a) Reformed Church government acknowledges that Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church, and He rules His Church by the office-bearers, the *elders*.
- (b) Reformed Church government emphasises first of all the *local* church, i.e. the gathering of the saved in the community where the Holy Spirit works faith through the preaching (see Article 27, *Belgic Confession*).
- (c) Reformed Church government recognises that all believers are mature Christians in that all have received the Holy Spirit and so all are equipped to carry out the office of all believers in the context of the congregation of which they are members. <sup>49</sup>

## 4. Congregationalism / Independentism

### 4.1 Development

After the Reformation in the sixteenth century, Reformed Church Polity took hold in Scotland, including its basic characteristic emphases on the office of all believers and on the church as local gathering. In the course of time (1640-1660), however, there arose a group who did not appreciate the need for a bond of churches. They argued that the New Testament Scriptures neither prescribe a bond of churches nor tell us of congregations bound together by a 'super-structure' as a classis or a synod. Instead, they preferred to see each local church as independent from other churches in the neighbourhood. Each local church, they maintained, is responsible only to the Lord.

It is interesting to note that these Independents did not insist on adherence to any confessions. The arguments mentioned earlier for developing a bond of churches

(assisting each other in the preservation of the truth; see Chapter 1. Paragraph 3.3) were not appreciated by these people.

Furthermore, it is of interest to note that persecution in Scotland drove pertinent thinkers to the Continental mainland, especially to the Netherlands. Robert Browne and John Robinson, both of whom fled to the Netherlands, were influential in promoting congregationalist thinking. This form of church government had considerable influence in the colonies of North America.

## **4.2 Characteristics of Congregational Church Government**

- (a) Congregational church government virtually absolutises the office of all believers.
- (b) Congregational church government stresses the local gathering to the exclusion of the fact that the Lord gathers a universal church.

## **5. Collegialism**

### **5.1 Development**

Collegial church government has its roots in the rise of humanism in the time of the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. Christ's existence as sovereign Lord of the universe is denied, and so there is in heaven no Head of the church on earth. The church is not a heavenly work performed on earth; the church is rather a society of like-minded people, a religious club made up of spiritually interested folk.

In this understanding, it is evident that office-bearers have no authority from heaven; whatever authority they have is given to them by the people <sup>50</sup> of the church. Office-bearers, then, are no more than the representatives of the people.

### **5.2 Characteristic of Collegial Church Government**

- a) Collegial church government recognises no authority from heaven, and so finds its authority base in the people themselves. As such, collegial church government is simply democracy. <sup>51</sup>



## Chapter 3

### ***Development of Church Polity in the Netherlands***

The concept of church government gleaned by Bucer and Calvin from the pages of Holy Scripture found fertile soil in the reformed churches of Scotland, France and the Netherlands. Historical developments in France in the years after the Great Reformation virtually snuffed out the Reformed Churches in that country. Reformed church polity on the European continent, therefore, came to its own in the developments in the Netherlands. It is to this country, then, that we ought to turn to see continental reformed church polity in practice. Here is the seedbed for the Church Order of Dort.

#### **1. Background History**

In 1561, Guido deBres completed his *Belgic Confession*. In Articles 30-32 he made confession of what he learned from God's Word about the basic principles of church government. Says deBres: *"We believe that this true Church must be governed according to the Spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in His Word. There should be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments; there should also be elders and deacons who, together with the pastors, form the council of the Church. By these means they preserve the true religion"* (Article 30). DeBres went on to confess what God revealed in His Word about how office-bearers receive their office. *"We believe that ministers of God's Word, <sup>53</sup> elders, and deacons ought to be chosen to their offices by lawful election of the Church, with prayer and in good order, as stipulated by the Word of God"* (Article 31). Again: *"We believe that, although it is useful and good for those who govern the Church to establish a certain order to maintain the body of the Church, they must at all times watch that they do not deviate from what Christ, our only Master, has commanded"* (Article 32).

As we read and consider this material, we need to bear in mind that such church government as deBres envisaged was directly contrary to the expressed wishes of the authorities of the day. By official decree it was not the congregation but the government who determined who would serve as priest in a town; reformed ministers were not permitted to preach or teach, public worship was not permitted, elders could not bring home visits. So serious was the government in enforcing this rule that deBres himself, as preacher of the Gospel, was compelled to do his work secretly; he laboured in his congregation under a fictitious name, never appearing in public as a preacher of the gospel. Yet in that environment, deBres saw need to confess what God revealed on the point of church government - and to teach it to his congregations also.

It is a point that needs emphasising. Is church government an unimportant matter? DeBres obviously did not think so. In his Confession, deBres did not hesitate to confess God's wish for all men in relation to the governing authorities. Writes deBres, *"Moreover, everyone - no matter of what quality, condition, or rank - ought to be subject to the civil officers, pay taxes, hold them in honour and respect, and obey them in all things which do not disagree with the Word of God"* (Article 36). But on the matter of church government, deBres himself saw need to disobey the authorities.

He knew of the risks involved. After he had penned his Confession, he wrote an introductory address to accompany the copy of the Confession he sent to King Philip II. In that address he said that he and those with him would *"offer their backs to stripes, their tongues to knives, their mouths to gags, and their bodies to fire,"* rather than deny the truth expressed in this confession<sup>6</sup> - including Articles 30-32. This example from church history underlines that twenty-first century heirs to deBres' confession do well also to ensure that the *"Church ... be governed according to the Spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in His Word"* - irrespective of the cost.

This point is driven home to us the more when we consider the effects of the persecution

that broke out in greater intensity in following years. Due to the king's efforts to destroy the reformed faith in the Netherlands, hundreds of thousands of people were forced to flee. They went to France, to <sup>54</sup> Germany, and to England, and formed refugee congregations in foreign cities as Wezel (Germany), Emden (Germany) and London (England).

One would expect that in such circumstances those who persevered in the reformed faith would be happy to cling to such 'essentials' as the doctrine of justification by faith alone, and leave the matter of church government for a better day. But this was not the case! Here we see the power of faith at work. If Christ is King, they confessed, the government of Christ's church must agree with His revelation in holy Writ. That is why the brethren, despite the risks presented by persecution, made it their business to meet together in order to develop Scripturally justifiable church government that could be put in place when the Lord granted freedom from persecution. It is a point most worth noting: the fathers did not consider ecclesiastical assemblies, i.e. classes or synods, to be a 'pain in the neck' or a necessary evil. Even in time of persecution they considered such assemblies to be essential to the life of the church of Jesus Christ, so essential that they risked their lives to develop reformed church polity. The fathers knew it: the churches needed each other so very, very much.

## 2. The Convent of Wezel, 1568

In the midst of the persecution, a group of reformed brethren from the Netherlands met together in Wezel, Germany. (In Wezel there was freedom of religion, though spies of the Dutch authorities no doubt were everywhere). This particular meeting was called 'The Convent of Wezel'. (The word 'convent' means to convene, to meet). It was not a classis or a synod, for it was not made up of delegates from the churches. Rather, this meeting was the private initiative of interested persons who set as their agenda the preparation of an official synod. They understood that in order to get a synod organised there first had to be a federation of churches. So they set out together to lay down some principles as to how a federation of churches ought to function. In attendance were refugees from the Netherlands who had found shelter in the cities of Wezel (Germany), Emden (Germany), and London. Though driven from their homeland, they were motivated by love for God and His church to lay the groundwork for Scripturally based church government in the Netherlands.

To establish reformed church government these brethren saw no need to 're-invent the wheel'. Calvin had already dealt with the matter in Geneva and wrote a Church Order entitled *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*. The brothers in Wezel used these *Ordinances* as a blueprint for their work. However, rather than just accept these *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* on the merit of Calvin's authorship <sup>55</sup> (Reformed as he was in his thinking), the brothers saw it as their responsibility before God to examine whether Calvin's work could be improved in any way. So they developed Calvin's work further. This action in itself is interesting in relation to Reformed Church Polity. Important as Calvin's contribution (and Bucer's too) is to reformed church government, 'Reformed' is not so much 'Calvinistic' as 'Scriptural', and therefore always needs to consider the question, "what does God want of us?"

The brothers in Wezel, therefore, made improvements to Calvin's *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*. In as much as we stand here at the cradle of Dutch church polity, we may consider Wezel's changes to be essential principles of continental reformed church government.

### 2.1 Principle 1: No Lordship over Others

Present at the Convent of Wezel was a gentleman belonging to the refugee church in London, by name of Hermannus Moded. Moded had been sent by the church in London to Geneva to seek advice in a matter of difficulty in that congregation. The matter of difficulty related to the minister; Rev Godfried vanWingen of the London church was an inflexibly dominant character. The brothers present at the Convent of Wezel read Jesus'

words in Matthew 23:8: *"But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren."* (The word 'teacher' in the above quote denotes a leader or master.) The implication was surely that in a church of Jesus Christ there is no room for domineering; a minister is not to lord over another minister, nor a minister over a consistory, nor a consistory over another consistory, nor an elder over another elder, etc. Rather, all office-bearers have a place directly under Christ, and so the one office-bearer needs to respect the other. Those present at the Convent of Wezel recognised this to be a Scriptural principle basic to healthy church life, and so penned as Article One for their Church Order: *"No church shall in any way lord it over other churches, no office-bearer over other office-bearers."* Reformed church polity serves to protect congregations and consistories from domineering individuals.

Over the years, this stipulation has been moved from the beginning of the Church Order to the end. This was not done because the article was considered to be of minor importance. Rather, it was moved to a place at the end because this is where it fits best in view of the overall structure of the Church Order. (In the Church Order of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia it is Article 80.) It remains a fact that no lording over others is very much a fundamental principle characterising reformed church polity. <sup>56</sup>

## 2.2 Principle 2: The Need for Ecclesiastical Assemblies

A second principle that Wezel underlined was that the churches need to meet regularly. In Chapter 1, Paragraph 3.3 we have already examined the doctrinal basis for churches federating together and interacting with each other within a federation of churches. There is, however, also a practical justification for federating together and interacting in a bond. It is a point of fact that regular interaction between the churches by means of assemblies serves to prevent both hierarchy and independentism. Rev vanWingen's congregation in London was rather isolated from the other churches, and such isolation can give a minister opportunity to lord it over his consistory. If churches in a federation seldom or never meet with each other, there is also a very real tendency for each to go its own way in matters such as liturgy, policies in relation to church discipline, beliefs, etc. Seeing that Churches of one federation embrace one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, it follows that this one God should be served in one way. The relevant article adopted by the Convent of Wezel reads as follows: *"since ... it shall be most beneficial to achieve and maintain uniform agreement in doctrine as well as in regulating ceremonies and discipline, we consider that, as much as possible, frequent meetings of neighbouring churches ought to be organised. So that each arising item can be discussed at such meetings, we consider that all efforts must be made to divide the various Dutch provinces into fixed classes. In this way each church will know with whom she must interact and consult about the more important matters which, by her judgment, affect the common interest."*<sup>7</sup>

It is intriguing that the fathers at Wezel expressed desirability for the churches to meet together "frequently". In fact, the articles of the Church Order they adopted specify that churches in a local area ought to meet as often as once every three months; such frequent meetings would promote "uniform agreement in doctrine as well as in regulating ceremonies and discipline," and so counter hierarchy and independentism. We need to note that this goal was expressed in an environment of persecution, and in a time when distances were generally covered by foot. Contrast that to the context of church life today: we enjoy freedom of religion and have the conveniences of road and air travel available to us. Here is incentive for churches to make it their business to meet together regularly. We in the Free Reformed Churches of Australia were in time past too small to institute classes, and as a result saw each other only once every two years at synod. The fruit is evident: there is a spirit of independentism among the churches, <sup>57</sup> and the differences between the churches of the federation are real. That is why the decision of the latest Synod of the FRCA to form classes is to be welcomed enthusiastically. More face to face contacts with churches of the classis about the needs and developments of the local congregations can only be beneficial.

We need to notice too that the fathers did not leave it up to the individual churches to decide with whom each might meet and talk and so cross-fertilise. "Fixed classes", said the fathers, ought to be formed, so that "each church will know with whom she must interact and consult." The churches had one Lord, one faith, one hope, and so each church must feel comfortable to speak with the neighbouring church - even if there were differences in emphases. In this way, too, uniformity "in doctrine as well as in regulating ceremonies and discipline" would be achieved and maintained.

This principle of Reformed Church Polity receives an echo in the Church Order itself. Concerning classes the churches have agreed to the following:

**FRCA: Article 41 - Classis (CanRC: Article 44)**

*Neighbouring churches shall come together in a classis. . . . Classes shall be held at least once every three months. . . .*

### 3. From Wezel to Emden

Marnix of St Aldegonde, a man of royal blood with a respected standing in government circles, laboured to free the Netherlands from the Spaniards. This man was Reformed in his thinking, and Scriptural in his love for the Lord and the brethren. He longed for the day that the Netherlands would, by the grace of God, be free of Spanish oppression, and understood that the churches had to be ready for that event.

By his judgment, it was imperative that there be adequate preachers of the gospel available to make the most of the window of opportunity that would arise in the day of freedom. But to train capable men required the combined effort of the churches. Similarly, Marnix was convinced that since there is one Lord and one faith, the people of the land needed to be united in their belief and consequently the churches should also be unified in doctrine, church discipline, liturgy and ceremonies. In order to achieve this, Marnix saw that it was of paramount importance that the churches meet and discuss together - a Synod was required. Yet no Synod could occur as long as the churches were not federated together in some way. Marnix, therefore, did what he could to encourage the growth of a federation of churches. <sup>58</sup>

At this time already, though, two lines of thinking existed with regard to church polity. On the one hand there was a group of liberally minded people who favoured Erastian (government-centred) church polity. This group (they became the eventual supporters of Arminian theology) saw no need for churches to form federations. Rather, if guidance was required by a church, it should seek help from the secular government. On the other hand there was also a desire for Reformed (elder-centred) church polity. Marnix was convinced that the Reformed line was the correct direction for the churches to take. To that end he encouraged the convening of a synod in Emden.

### 4. The Synod of Emden, 1571

The first General Synod of all the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands was held in the German town of Emden, in 1571. This synod was held outside of Holland because persecution was still a very real thing. However, despite the dangers of meeting together, the fathers did so in obedience to the Lord and in recognition of their need for each other. The churches sent delegates to Emden to meet together in order to assist each other as churches and to defend themselves against heresy. There they officially formed a federation of churches.

One would expect that at this first official meeting of the churches, the churches would busy themselves immediately with matters pertaining to church polity. It is striking that instead their first item of business was that each delegate (and in them each church) made a point of expressing agreement with the *Belgic Confession*. Notice: to date the *Belgic Confession* had been accepted by various churches on their own accord, but not by the churches altogether - since the churches had not yet met together. The fathers recognised the need for a confession, not just for churches individually, but also for the

bond of churches. After all, what essentially binds churches together? It is the *one faith* which God has worked in the hearts of His people, faith in the one Gospel of salvation through the one Saviour Jesus Christ. This unity of faith required expression before a Church Order could be finalised. And a Church Order in turn could not be remote from the Confession of the Churches, but had to be *built upon* that Confession.

After the churches together expressed their one common faith as formulated in the *Belgic Confession*, the fathers moved on to develop a model for Church life. The Synod of Emden built on the work done in Wezel, as well as the experiences and decisions of the French churches. The French churches, we should know, had not suffered much persecution during the <sup>59</sup> 1560s, and so had opportunity at a number of synods to develop a church order. This concept was the best Church Order the Synod of Emden could find, and so it was used as a basis and model for Emden's Church Order. As the Convent of Wezel had done some years earlier, the Synod of Emden too made it her business to modify this model. By so doing, the Synod of Emden spelt out further principles of Reformed Church Government. For example, an article about no lording over others (not found in the French Church Order) received pride of place in Emden's Order. A second article notated the need for agreement with the common confession. Further, Emden changed the repeated use of the word 'church' in the French Church Order to the plural 'churches' - thus providing a Scriptural corrective to the widespread idea that the local churches were but chapters of the one big. real church.

The Synod of Emden also adopted another article, which reads, *"These articles, which regard the lawful order of the church, have been adopted with common accord. If the interest of the churches demands such, they may and ought to be changed, augmented or diminished. However no consistory or classis shall be permitted to do so, but they shall endeavour diligently to observe the provisions of this Church Order as long as they have not been changed by synod."*<sup>8</sup> This article too points up how the fathers treasured Reformed thinking. Churches promise to accept decisions of Synod not because some higher body made them, but rather because the churches themselves in Synod made the decisions "with common accord", ie, together.

## 5. The Synod of Dort, 1618-1619

In the years after the Synod of Emden, the Lord granted relief in the Netherlands from persecution. As a result, church life could freely develop, and it did too. After the Synod of Emden the churches met together in Synod various times on Dutch soil. Many of these synods contributed in some way to the development of reformed church government. Of importance for the development of the Church Order are the provincial Synod of Dort in 1574, the national synod of Dort in 1578, the synod of Middelburg in 1581, and the synod of The Hague of 1586. These Synods, each in their own way, built farther on the work done by Wezel and Emden. Essentially, though, the Church Order stayed much the same over the years as that adopted by the Synod of Emden.

In 1618 the churches met together again in the city of Dort. After this Synod of Dort had dealt with the heresies of Arminianism, a number of sessions <sup>60</sup> were spent polishing up the Church Order that had developed so far. The version adopted by the churches in this Synod is known as the Church Order of Dort, and is the basis for Reformed Church Orders around the world today. Appendix 1 supplies an English translation of the original Church Order of Dort. The Free Reformed Churches of Australia adopted this edition from Dort, and over the span of years made alterations to it to suit the needs of Australian churches. Appendix 2 contains the Church Order of the FRCA, as adopted in 1994. The Canadian Reformed Churches also adopted the Church Order of Dort, and made amendments to suit the circumstances (see Appendix 3). In principle, though, these Church Orders are the equivalent of the Church Order of Dort - and hence are rooted in the work done in Wezel and in Emden. <sup>61</sup>

## **Part II: The Roots of the Church Order in the Bible**

## The Church Order

The Church Order commences with an article about its Purpose and Division. It reads like this:

**FRCA: Article 1 - Purpose and Division (CanRC: Article 1)**

*For the maintenance of good order in the church of Christ it is necessary to have:*

*I offices and supervision of doctrine;*

*II assemblies;*

*III worship, sacraments and ceremonies, and*

*IV discipline*

The following pages contain a thematic discussion of the articles of the Church Order, with one chapter being devoted to each of the four divisions mentioned above.

In the pages that follow, the reader will also find numerous footnotes. An explanation is in place. Until the recent Synod (July, 2000) the number of churches in the bond of Free Reformed Churches in Australia has been too small to allow for classes. To systematize the way church life had developed over the years without the existence of classes, the 1994 Synod adapted some of the articles of the Church Order. These adaptations were printed in italics in the text of the Church Order as published in 1995. A preamble to the printed text of the Church Order informed the reader that "Articles in italic print are in force until classes have been formed." Though classes have now been formed, I have chosen to include the italicized portions of the Church Order in this publication since this material provides an illustration of the fact that the Church Order is not cast in <sup>65</sup> stone, but can instead be adapted to suit the needs of the churches. An explanation and evaluation of this adaptation is included in Chapter 5, Paragraph 9. <sup>66</sup>



## Chapter 4

### Offices and Supervision of Doctrine Articles 2-27

#### 1. The Offices

The churches have agreed in Article 2 that there must be three offices in the church of Jesus Christ.

##### **FRCA: Article 2 - The offices (CanRC: Article 2)**

*The offices are those of the minister of the Word, of the elder, and of the deacon.*

This article closely echoes what the churches have confessed in the *Belgic Confession*: "We believe that this true Church must be governed according to the *Spiritual order* which our Lord has taught us in His Word. There should be **ministers** or pastors to preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments; there should also be **elders** and **deacons** who, together with the pastors, form the council of the Church" (Article 30) and "We believe that ministers of God's Word, **elders**, and **deacons** ought to be chosen to their offices by lawful election of the Church..." (Article 31). The Confession, and the Church Order with them, echoes what the Lord has revealed in His Word. The following material draws this out.

#### 1.1 Elders

Ephesians 4:11: "And [Christ] himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some **pastors and teachers**." <sup>67</sup>

The offices of apostles, preachers, and evangelists were temporary offices used by the Lord in the founding years of the New Testament Church. In the span of one generation these offices ceased. The office which continued, and by which the Lord is pleased to rule His Church today, is described here with the phrase "pastors and teachers" (see Chapter 1, Paragraph 2.2).

The phrase "pastors and teachers" describes the office of elder. That is evident, for example, from Paul's words to the elders of the Church at Ephesus. "From Miletus [Paul] sent to Ephesus and called for the **elders** of the church" (Acts 20:17). He encouraged these elders to their work with these words: "Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, **to shepherd** the church of God which He purchased with His own blood" (vs. 28). The word translated here as "to shepherd" is the same word as is translated in Ephesians 4 by "pastors". The point is that elders are pastors (= shepherds), pastors are elders.

This is the office in mind in other passages of the New Testament where reference is made to the elders. For example:

- Acts 14:23: Concerning Paul and Barnabas who were returning from a missionary journey it is recorded, "So when they had appointed elders in every church. ..."
- Acts 15:2-4: "Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and **elders**, about this question. . . . And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the **elders**. ..."
- Acts 21:17, 18: Concerning the situation in the church at Jerusalem we read, "And when we had come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. On the following day Paul went in with us to James, **and all the elders were present**. "

The elders appointed or consulted in the above texts are the pastors and teachers in the



flocks of Jesus Christ.

## 1.2 Ministers

The task of elders to shepherd God's church can be divided into two areas of responsibility, namely teaching and ruling. Although all elders teach and rule, for some elders their main responsibility is to rule (these <sup>68</sup> are the persons we call 'elders') while for others their main responsibility is to teach (these are the persons we call 'ministers'). This distinction is derived from 1 Timothy 5:17 where one reads, "*Let the **elders who rule** well be counted worthy of double honour, **especially those who labour in the word and doctrine.***" These two areas of responsibility can also be found in Hebrews 13:7: "*Remember those **who rule** over you, **who have spoken the word of God** to you. ...*" **It** should be clear, then, that the Minister of the Word is also an elder of the church.

## 1.3 Deacons

Deacons receive a mention in a couple of places in the New Testament.

- Philippians 1:1: "... *To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops (- overseers, elders) and **deacons.***"
- 1 Timothy 3:8-13: Paul lists the qualifications necessary for service in the office of deacon. He begins the section with these words: "*Likewise **deacons** must be. ...*"
  - Acts 6:1-7 may be understood to report (he 'founding' of the office of deacon. See below, with Article 21.

## 2. The Calling to Office

### 2.1 Who calls to office?

How does a person become an office-bearer? Who calls a person to office? The principle of Scripture is this: *It is God who calls.* God did so in the past, and He continues to do so today. God, for example, determined who would be priest before Him. He said to Moses, "*Now take Aaron your brother, and his sons with him, from among the children of Israel, that he may minister to Me as priest, Aaron and Aaron's sons ...*" (Exodus 28:1). Equally, God determined who should be the priest's assistants: "*And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 'Bring the tribe of Levi near, and present them before Aaron the priest, that they may serve him'*" (Numbers 3:5f).

God also called the prophets to office. Concerning Jeremiah one reads: "*Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying: 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; Before you were born I sanctified you; **And I ordained you a prophet to the nations.***' Then said I: 'Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I cannot speak, for I am a youth.' But the LORD said to me: 'Do not say, "I am a youth", for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and whatever I command you, you shall speak'" (Jeremiah 1:4-7). Admittedly, Jeremiah's case was very special, but it serves well to illustrate <sup>69</sup> that Jeremiah himself did not choose to become a prophet; rather, *God called* him to office. Moses (Exodus 3:10), Gideon (Judges 6:14), Samson (Judges 13:5), Samuel (1 Samuel 3:10), Saul (1 Samuel 10:2), David (1 Samuel 16:121"), and Isaiah (Isaiah 6:8f) all serve as other examples of men who were very obviously called by God to a particular office amongst God's people.

That God calls to office is drawn out forcefully in Hebrews 5:4. Concerning the office of high priest, one reads, "*And no man takes this honour to himself, **but he who is called by God, just as Aaron was.***" Verse 5 adds that for Christ it was no different. "*So also Christ did not glorify himself to become high priest, but it was **[God] who said to Him: 'You are My Son, today I have begotten You.'***" God made Christ an office-bearer. The same is true of the elders of Ephesus. To them Paul said, "*Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which **the Holy Spirit has made you** overseers, to shepherd the church of God. . .*" (Acts 20:28).

Office-bearers, then, receive their office from the Head of the Church. That is why no man is permitted to elbow his way into the office, nor is any to push his friend into the office. The principle that it is God who gives the office is reflected in Article 3:

**FRCA: Article 3 - The calling to office (CanRC: Article 3)**

*No one shall take any office upon himself without having been lawfully **called** thereto. The **calling** to office shall take place by....*

## **2.2 How is a person called to office?**

### **2.2.1 In Old Testament Times God Called Directly**

In the Old Testament God called many to office by a direct approach. God specified that Aaron had to be the high priest. The next high priest in line was the oldest son of the high priest currently in office. God Himself determined who the oldest son of Aaron was. Hence it was *God* Himself Who called Eliezer (Aaron's oldest son) to office. The same may be said of the kings of Judah. Of the prophets too it is evident that God called them. The quote mentioned above in relation to Jeremiah serves as an example. The Lord Jesus also very directly called the disciples to their office. The apostle Paul serves as another example of direct calling.

### **2.2.2 In New Testament Times God Calls Indirectly**

In the age of the Holy Spirit's outpouring, God's approach is not as direct as it was in the Old Testament. Though it is still God who calls, He does <sup>70</sup> so more indirectly, placing responsibility for this task upon the congregation, be it through the leadership of existing office-bearers.

#### **2.2.2.1 THROUGH THE CONGREGATION'S INVOLVEMENT**

Acts 1:15-26 serves to illustrate the congregation's involvement in calling brothers to office. The Lord Jesus had appointed 12 disciples. But a vacancy existed in the group of twelve, since Judas had committed suicide. How was a replacement to be found? One does not read that Peter or the others said anything to the effect that they wanted Matthias to replace Judas. Rather, Peter approached the congregation and sought their assistance in filling the vacancy. In verse 23 we read, "*And **they proposed** two: Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias.*" It is unclear who is meant in this passage by 'they', but the context suggests that it was the congregation under the leadership of Peter and the other ten disciples. "*And they prayed and said, 'You, O Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which of these two You have chosen to take part in this ministry and apostleship....' And **they cast their** lots, and the lot fell on Matthias. And he was numbered with the eleven apostles"* (verses 24-26). The congregation was involved, possibly in proposing the candidates and certainly in praying. Then "they" cast lots, and the term "they" in this instance certainly includes the involvement of the congregation. Nevertheless, it was God who called to office, for "*the lot is cast into the lap, but **its every decision is from the LORD***" (Proverbs 16:33).

A second example of God calling a person to office through the involvement of the congregation can be found in Acts 6. One reads in verse 1 that the widows were being neglected even while the number of disciples was increasing. Consequently, the twelve apostles called together the whole congregation and gave this charge: "*brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation ...*" (verse 3). "*And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And **they chose Stephen**, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor; Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, **whom they set before the apostles**; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them"* (verses 5, 6). Though the initiative lay with the existing office-bearers (the apostles), it is evident that the congregation played a central role in calling these brothers to their office. That God Himself with His blessing was ultimately behind their calling is evident from the "*wisdom and the Spirit*" by which Stephen, for example, spoke (Acts 6:10).

In Acts 14:23 we read of Paul and Barnabas appointing elders: *"So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, <sup>71</sup> they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed."* The word "appointed" means literally "elect by raising hands". Although our translation does not seem to suggest the congregation's involvement in the appointment of the elders, the reference to designating a person by raising one's hand does suggest the congregation's direct involvement.

As a result of material as the above, the churches have agreed that the Lord would have brothers be called to office in a particular manner.

**FRCA: Article 3 - The calling to office (CanRC: Article 3)**

**A. All office-bearers**

*...The calling to office shall take place by the consistory with the deacons, with the cooperation of the congregation, after prayer, and in accordance with the local regulations adopted for that purpose. . . .*

The reference to ""local regulations" refers to minor items as what to do with blank ballots, what percentage of congregation members constitutes a quorum, what length of time a brother should serve or be free from being nominated again, what length of time ought to transpire between the date of the election and the date of the ordination, etc. Each local church is free to make "local regulations" on points as these.

**2.2.2.2 THROUGH THE CONGREGATION'S PRAYERS**

The passages quoted above from Acts 1, Acts 6 and Acts 14 all make mention of prayer as a critical step in the calling procedure. This need for prayer was considered so important that Guido deBres included the element in the *Belgic Confession*. He wrote in Article 31:

*"We believe that ministers of God's Word, elders and deacons ought to be chosen to their offices by lawful election of the Church, with **prayer***

*and in good order. ..."* Here recognition is given to the fact that it is ultimately God who calls to office, and the congregation (under the consistory's leadership) forms the tool by which God indicates the man of His choosing. The churches have agreed, therefore, (as is evident from Article 3 quoted above) that prayer must precede the calling to office.

**2.2.2.3 FURTHER DETAILS**

The churches have also agreed on some further guidelines for the calling of office-bearers. Just as in Acts 1, the consistory requests the congregation to submit names of brothers considered suitable to serve in the offices of elder or deacon. <sup>72</sup>

**FRCA: Article 3 - The calling to office (CanRC: Article 3)**

**B. Elders and deacons**

*The consistory with the deacons shall give the congregation the opportunity to draw the attention of the consistory to brothers deemed suitable for the respective offices....*

Although there was only one vacancy to be filled in Acts 1, two names were nominated: Barnabas and Matthias. In Acts 6 seven men were to be nominated for the office of deacon; seven were chosen and set before the apostles. From these two references it would seem Scripturally correct to nominate either as many brothers as there are vacancies or twice the number. Consequently, the churches have agreed to act as follows:

**FRCA: Article 3 - The calling to office**

**B. Elders and deacons**

*... The consistory with the deacons shall present to the congregation **at the***

**most twice as many** candidates as there are vacancies to be filled. From this number the congregation shall choose as many office-bearers as are needed. Those elected shall be appointed by the consistory with the deacons. **CanRC: Article 3 - The Calling to Office**

... The consistory with the deacons shall present to the congregation **either as many** candidates as there are vacancies to be filled. **or at the most twice as many**, from which number the congregation shall choose as many as are needed.

The exact number of nominees, then, may vary, so that where four vacancies exist the consistory may nominate any number from a minimum of four brothers to a maximum of eight. From this number, the congregation may choose.

It merits repeating, though, that when all is said and done, it is not the congregation who calls to office. It remains God who calls, be it through the congregation. When a person becomes an office-bearer (that is, when he gives his affirmative response to the questions put to him at his ordination), he must say in so many words that he is convinced *"that God Himself, through His congregation, has called [him] to [his] office."*<sup>9</sup> This is the first question asked of a brother at his ordination. The conviction that it is God who calls is what makes the office so serious. Equally, this conviction makes the office glorious and bearable. If God calls to office, He also gives the strength to serve in that office, and this service is indeed a most beautiful task. 73

## 2.3 Who is eligible to be called to office?

### 2.3.1 Eligibility for the offices of elder and deacon

The church is the Lord's. So it is God Himself Who determines who is eligible to be called to office in His church. The following comes to light:

- In 1 Timothy 3 the apostle Paul writes to Timothy concerning the qualifications of elders and deacons. Concerning the elder, Paul is moved by God to stipulate that the candidate office-bearer

*"must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?); not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil" (vss 2ff)*

- Likewise, in his letter to Titus. Paul says of the elder that he must be

*"blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination. For a bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but hospitable, a lover of what is good, sober-minded, just, holy, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict" (1:6ff).*

- Concerning the men who had to "serve tables" in the congregation of Jerusalem, the apostles stipulated that they had to be

*"men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business" (Acts 6:3).*

- In I Timothy 3 Paul writes that

*"deacons must be reverent, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy for money, holding the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience. But let*

*these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons, being found blameless. Likewise their wives must be reverent, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things. Let deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well. For those who have served well as deacons obtain <sup>74</sup> for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus" (vss 8ff).*

The churches have echoed these Scriptural criteria in the Church Order with terms as "suitable" and "fit". The churches have agreed:

**FRCA: Article 3 - The calling to office**

**B. Elders and deacons**

*... The consistory with the deacons shall give the congregation the opportunity to draw the attention of the consistory to brothers deemed **suitable** for the respective offices....*

**CanRC: Article 3 - The calling to Office**

*. . . brothers deemed **fit** for the respective offices.*

When, therefore, the consistory requests the congregation to nominate brothers "deemed suitable" to serve in the offices of elder or deacon, the members need to work with Bible passages such as those quoted above. It stands to reason that nominations need to be substantiated, not just with a statement that a brother meets the qualities listed in the above passages (for that is but an opinion), but with an explanation as to *how* the brother meets these qualities. If a brother is known not to meet the above qualifications, no consistory has the right to nominate that brother (no matter how suited he may otherwise be), and no member has the right to vote for him. simply because God Himself has declared this brother unsuitable for office in His Church.

It is also deliberate that the Church Order specifies that the congregation has opportunity to draw the attention of the consistory to *brothers*. This is because the Lord has been pleased to close the office in His Church to the sisters of the congregation - even though in His eyes they are as precious as any brother, and we may find them as capable as the men too. This is the Lord's word in a passage as 1 Timothy 2:12: "**Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence.**" Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 14:34 Paul is moved by the Lord's Spirit to write, "**Let your women keep *silent in the churches*, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says.**"

The message of these passages in relation to the topic at hand is pointed up the more clearly when it is recalled that God almighty - His actions among men are not determined by culture or by what is socially acceptable, since He is Master also over culture - chose to call only males to the office of priest in the Old Testament. Jesus too called only males to the office <sup>75</sup> of disciple/apostle. Taken altogether, the Lord instructs us unambiguously that He has excluded the sisters of the congregation from the offices in His church. Hence the churches have agreed to the following:

**FRCA: Article 3 - The calling to office**

**A. All office-bearers**

*. . . Prior to the ordination or installation the names of the appointed **brothers** shall be publicly announced....*

**CanRC: Article 3 - The Calling to Office . . . Only those **male** members shall be eligible for office who...**

### 2.3.2 Eligibility for the Ministry

A minister, like elders and deacons, must meet the qualities listed in passages as 1



Timothy 3. However, the Scriptures indicate that a minister needs more qualifications still. In 1 Timothy 3. Paul mentions that an elder must be *"able to teach."* The term translates the Greek word 'didactic', and means exactly that. But in 2 Timothy 2:2, where Paul instructs Timothy to train young men for the office of minister of the Word. Paul describes the required faithful men in terms that are somewhat stronger. These young men. says Paul (in our translation), need to *"be able to teach others also."* Though it does not come through in the translation, Paul uses here a term that means "fit, appropriate, competent, qualified, able". These future ministers, then, need to be qualified, made competent, trained to handle the Word of God so that they are specifically equipped to teach others.

Paul added that these future ministers had to be *"faithful men"*. That is, they were to be trustworthy, dependable persons, in whose hands the gospel of Jesus Christ was safe. Given that the office of minister is a highly influential office (for a minister preaches from the pulpit every Sunday, teaches Catechism to the youth, leads consistory meetings, visits the members' homes, etc), it is certainly important that these future ministers be *"faithful"*. This is even more important since, as Paul also notes (cf. 2 Timothy 2:25; 4:3,4), there are those who oppose the gospel.

The churches have reflected these data from Scripture in their agreement on the question of eligibility for the ministry.

**FRCA: Article 5 - Eligibility for the ministry (CanRC: Article 4)**

**A. Eligibility**

*Only those shall be called to the office of minister of the Word who*

- (1) have been declared eligible for call by the churches; or*
- (2) are already serving in that capacity in one of the churches; or* <sup>76</sup>
- (3) have been declared eligible or are serving in one of the churches with which The Free Reformed Churches of Australia maintain a sister relationship.*

How can one church within a federation of churches be confident that a minister of a sister church is eligible for call and service in its church? The churches have addressed the matter and agreed to the following:

**FRCA: Article 5 - Eligibility for the ministry (CanRC: Article 4)**

**B. Declared eligible**

*Only those shall be declared eligible for call within the churches who*

- (1) have passed a preparatory examination by the classis in which they live, which examination shall not take place unless those presenting themselves for it submit the necessary- documents to prove that they are members in good standing of one of the churches and have successfully completed a course of study as required by the churches;* <sup>10</sup> *or*
- (2) have satisfied the requirements of Article 8; or*
- (3) have satisfied the requirements of Article 9.*

**2.3.2.1 PREPARATORY EXAMINATION**

The Article speaks of a 'preparatory examination.' One cannot undergo such an examination unless two conditions are satisfied.

Firstly, the candidate must prove, by way of an attestation from his consistory, to be an upright and God-fearing man. With this agreement in their Church Order, the churches echo Paul's instruction to Timothy that those who would be ministers of the Word must be *"faithful"* men (2 Timothy 2:2).

Secondly, the candidate needs to have graduated with the appropriate academic

qualifications from a theological college of one of our sister churches. With this requirement, the churches take seriously the instruction of Paul in the same text, that future ministers must be "able to teach," be trained, qualified, made competent. If a person can prove that he has met these two conditions, he can then undergo a preparatory examination by the classis. This examination requires a person to demonstrate his abilities in Old and New Testament exegesis, the preaching of a sermon and a sound knowledge of reformed doctrine. On successful completion of a preparatory examination the brother is declared eligible for call. <sup>77</sup>

Beside the 'common' route mentioned under (1) above, the churches have allowed (in the article quoted above) for two other ways by which a person may become eligible for call to the ministry of the Word.

### **2.3.2.2 EXCEPTIONAL GIFTS**

In Article 8 the churches recognise the fact that the Lord, sovereign as He is, can in His good pleasure provide ministers for His churches in non-ordinary ways. In ways of His own choosing, the Lord normally moves the person whom He one day will call to the ministry to enrol at the Theological College. In the course of time, then, this young man is "qualified", trained to teach the Word to others. However, in His care for His churches, the Lord may grant exceptional gifts to a brother so that he is "qualified to teach" the Word to others without having gone through the formal course of studies associated with the training for the ministry. For such persons the door to the ministry is opened in the well known "Article 8":

#### **FRCA: Article 8 - Exceptional gifts (CanRC: Article 8)**

*Persons who have not pursued the regular course of theological study shall not be admitted to the ministry unless there is convincing evidence of their exceptional gifts of godliness, humility, modesty, good intellect, and discretion, as well as the gift of public speech. When any such person presents himself for the ministry, classis shall (with synod's prior approval) examine him, and upon a favourable outcome allow him, as candidate, to speak an edifying word in the churches of the classis for a set period of time. Thereafter the classis shall further deal with him as it shall deem edifying, observing the ecclesiastical regulations adopted for this purpose.* <sup>11</sup>

### **2.3.2.3 MINISTERS FROM CHURCHES OUTSIDE THE FEDERATION**

The Lord may also bring into the churches a man who has been minister in a bond of churches not recognised by the marks of Article 29, *Belgic Confession*. A minister from such a bond cannot straightaway be called to the ministry in the churches he joins. After all, God has stipulated that a minister must be known to be "faithful" (2 Timothy 2:2). Given that false teachers can easily appear (cf. Acts 20:29-31), it is important that such a person first undergo the test of time. Accordingly, the churches have agreed that, when he has been proven to be faithful, the door can be opened for him to become eligible for call to the ministry. <sup>78</sup>

#### **FRCA: Article 9 - Admission of ministers who have recently joined the church (CanRC: Article 7)**

*A minister of the Word who has recently joined one of the churches and originates from a church with which the churches do not maintain a sister relationship shall only be admitted to the ministry with great caution. He shall not be declared eligible for call within the churches unless he has been well tested for a reasonable period of time and carefully examined by the classis in whose area he lives. This classis examination shall be conducted with the cooperation of the deputies of synod.* <sup>12</sup>



## 2.4 Preparation for Ordination

The churches have agreed that the brothers called to office will not automatically be ordained. People can err and call to office persons who in fact are unsuitable by God's standards for office in God's church. Accordingly, opportunity is granted for such information to come to light.

### 2.4.1 Elders and Deacons

#### **FRCA: Article 3 - The calling to office (CanRC: Article 3)**

##### **A. All office-bearers**

*. . . Prior to the ordination or installation the names of the appointed brothers shall be publicly announced to the congregation for its approval on at least two consecutive Sundays. If no lawful objection is brought forward the ordination or installation shall take place with the use of the adopted Form.*

Since the calling to office takes place by the consistory with the deacons, any objections against the ordination of an appointed office-bearer must be lodged with the same body. The consistory with the deacons will need to evaluate the objections received (if any), and determine whether the brother can still be ordained or needs to be relieved of his appointment - since he does not meet God's requirements for the office (see above, Paragraph 2.3).

### 2.4.2 Ministers of the Word

Because of the higher profile the minister has in the congregation (and in the federation of churches), still greater care is taken to ensure that the minister-elect is indeed suitable for the office in the congregation to which he was called. Hence the churches have agreed to strict procedures that need to be followed for those who "have not served in the ministry before" and "those who are serving in the ministry" respectively.

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#### **2.4.2.1 THOSE WHO HAVE NOT SERVED IN THE MINISTRY BEFORE**

Those who have not served in the ministry before need to be examined for a second time (they have already been once examined with a view to being made eligible for call; this exercise was called the preparatory examination). The outcome of this second examination (called the "peremptory examination") is by no means a foregone conclusion - as if being declared eligible for call automatically ensures that one will also enter the ministry. Given the influence one has from the pulpit and in the work of the ministry at large, this final exam is necessary, and must be taken seriously.

#### **FRCA: Article 6 - Ordination and installation of ministers of the Word (CanRC: Article 5)**

##### **A. Regarding those who have not served in the ministry before, the following shall be observed:**

1. *They shall be ordained only after classis has approved the call. Classis shall approve the call:*
  - a. *upon satisfactory testimony concerning the soundness of doctrine and conduct of the candidate, attested by the consistory of the church to which he belongs; and*
  - b. *following a peremptory examination of the candidate with satisfactory results. This classis examination shall take place with the cooperation and concurring advice of deputies of synod. (see footnote 13 below)*
2. *For the ordination they shall also show to the consistory good testimonials concerning their doctrine and conduct from the church(es) to which they have belonged since their preparatory examination.*

Footnote: <sup>13</sup>

Note the emphasis here on the candidate's responsibility to demonstrate to both classis and consistory that he is sound in doctrine and conduct. Here is the application of the principle of 2 Timothy 2:2, that the minister-elect must be "*faithful*".

As to the peremptory examination, the candidate is expected to show that he can prepare and deliver a sermon. Further, he must display competence in Old and New Testament exegesis, knowledge of the reformed confessions, doctrine of the church, church history, church polity, diaconiology (the term refers to the practical aspects of carrying out the office of the ministry: preaching, visiting the sick, teaching catechism), and ethics. The evidence must abound that the minister-elect is sound in doctrine and competent to teach. <sup>80</sup>

#### **2.4.2.2 THOSE WHO HAVE SERVED IN THE MINISTRY BEFORE**

A vacant congregation is not bound to call as minister only persons who have not yet served as a minister. A congregation can also extend a call to a man who is already serving in the office of minister in another church. In the event that a call is accepted, the churches have agreed to the following procedure:

**FRCA: Article 6 - Ordination and installation of ministers of the Word (CanRC: Article 5)**

**B.** *Regarding those who are serving in the ministry the following shall be observed:*

*They shall be installed after classis has approved the call.*

*(1) For this approval as well as for the installation the minister shall show good testimonials concerning his doctrine and conduct, together with a declaration from the consistory with the deacons and from classis that he has been honourably discharged from his service in that church and classis, or from the church only in case he remains within the same classis.* <sup>14</sup>

*(2) For the approval of a call of those who are serving in one of the churches with which The Free Reformed Churches of Australia maintain a sister relationship a colloquium shall be required which will deal especially with the doctrine and polity of The Free Reformed Churches of Australia.*

Notice again the application of the principle of 2 Timothy 2:2 regarding faithfulness. Further, a competency examination is not required for ministers already serving in the office because, essentially, his consistory and congregation are regularly examining him as he carries out the duties of his office.

For those who are already serving in the ministry in one of the sister churches, a colloquium (i.e. a discussion) is held concerning doctrine and church polity. This is because there can be differences between bonds of churches, spread as churches are over the face of the world, in diverse cultures and differing traditions. The fact that there are some differences between the Church Orders adopted by the Free Reformed Churches of Australia and the Canadian Reformed Churches respectively serves as a case in point!

In Article 6.B.1 quoted above, one reads that a minister who has accepted a call to another church requires a "*declaration from the consistory with the deacons **and from classis** that he has been honourably discharged <sup>81</sup> from his service in that church and classis. ...*" A classis is made up of a number of local churches (see Chapter 5, on Assemblies). Although a minister receives a call from a local church, he also in the nature of things has a role to play in the federation of churches. For this reason the federation, by means of classis, gets involved in both the discharge of a serving minister and in the approval of a call to another congregation. The federation of churches, after all, wants to be sure that ministers serving throughout the federation are scripturally

sound.

## 2.5 The Place the Call is Exercised

Where are those called to office to carry out their task? The apostles of years ago received a place of authority in all the early Christian churches, be it in Jerusalem, Corinth or Thessalonica. Office-bearers after them, though, do not have such an extensive authority. Rather, elders and deacons have authority only in the local congregation through whom Christ has called to office. This is scriptural:

- Titus 1:5: Paul instructs Titus to *"appoint elders in every city."* Titus was not to appoint elders for the whole island of Crete, but instead in each city of the island. The inference is that each city has its own elders. The elders of the church in yonder city, then, are not to carry out their office in the church of this city.
- Acts 14:23: *"So when they had appointed elders in every church..."* Again. Paul and Barnabas did not appoint regional office-bearers but *local* office-bearers. Each church had its own elders.
- Philippians 1:1: Paul addresses his letter *"to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons."* These particular office-bearers were identified with the church in Philippi, and not with all the churches of Macedonia.
- Revelation 2,3: *"To the angel of the church of Ephesus write . . . And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write . . . And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write. ..."* The term 'angel' means literally 'messenger'. Each church had its own angel or messenger. This is understood to be the teaching elder, the minister who opens the Word. It is striking that John is not instructed to write a letter to one angel in charge of several churches but individual letters to the angel of seven different churches.

An office-bearer's work, then, is locally directed. The churches have agreed to the following practical application of this principle as it pertains to the ministers of the Word:

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### **FRCA: Article 10 - Officiating in another church (CanRC: Article 15)**

*No one shall preach the Word or administer the sacraments in another church **without the permission of the consistory of that church.***

The principle is true also for the elder. He is ordained in *one* congregation, and hence his authority extends no further than that one congregation. Therefore Article 20, in describing the task of elders, speaks of *the* congregation, in the *singular*: *"The elders shall together with the ministers of the Word govern **the congregation** with pastoral care and discipline."* The deacons likewise, in performing the ministry of mercy, do not collect gifts from several congregations, nor do they have any authority over the distribution of gifts collected in other congregations. *"They shall collect and manage the gifts of **the congregation**..."* (Article 21).

The above data exclude too the concept of being an office-bearer without attachment to any congregation. Hence the following agreement in relation to ministers:

### **FRCA: Article 4 - Bound to a church (CanRC: Article 6)**

*No one shall serve in the ministry unless he is bound to a certain church.*

## 2.6 Equality of the Called

Do the Scriptures speak of a hierarchy amongst those whom Christ has called to office? There is no evidence that that is the case. On the contrary, when some amongst Jesus' twelve disciples sought a position of favour over another, Jesus reprimanded them. After the two sons of Zebedee made their attempt to secure a higher standing for themselves than the other ten, Jesus spoke these words to the twelve: *"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet*

*it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave -just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many "* (Matthew 20:25-28). In the same line, Jesus said to them on another occasion, *"But you, do not be called 'Rabbi ' :for one is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren.... And do not be called teachers; for one is your Teacher, the Christ. But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be abased, and he who humbles himself will be exalted"* (Matthew 23:8-12).

This principle holds true for the office-bearers the Lord gives to His churches. Ministers, elders and deacons receive from the Lord equal authority, <sup>83</sup> with none being lord over any other. This concept is captured in the Church Order like this:

**FRCA: Article 22 - Equality of respective duties (CanRC: Articles 17 and 25)**

*In the local congregation equality shall be maintained among the ministers, among the elders, and among the deacons, regarding their respective duties, and in other matters, as much as possible.*

Ministers are understandably seen as the public face of the consistory. Ministers also chair the consistory meetings, including meetings of the consistory with the congregation (Article 36). Yet this does not make the minister the captain of the ecclesiastical ship. This is implicitly recognised in the description of the task of elders. The elders govern the congregation together with the minister: they share equal responsibility in this. *"The elders shall **together** with the ministers of the Word **govern** the congregation with pastoral care and discipline. . . . They shall watch that their **fellow office-bearers** are faithful in carrying out their duties"* (FRCA, Article 20).

## 2.7 Duration of the Call

In the church of Jesus Christ, it is Christ alone who calls to office. This reality in turn means that it is also Christ alone who can release from office. It is understood that no one is called by Christ to serve forever, for in this life all men must die. and by death their service in the office is terminated (cf. Hebrews 7:23).

The Lord, though, sovereign as He is, can use means less obvious than death to make clear that an office-bearer should no longer carry out his office. Yet, as the Lord used the congregation (through the consistory) to call to office, so also the congregation (in the consistory) must be involved when the time arises for a brother to depart from his office.

### 2.7.1 Minister

The principle that Christ alone can release from the office is reflected in the agreement of the churches:

**FRCA: Article 15 - Bound for life (CanRC: Article 12)**

*A minister of the Word, once lawfully called, is bound to the service of the church for life and therefore not allowed to enter upon another vocation unless it be for exceptional and substantial reasons. The decision of his consistory to relieve him of his office in order to enter <sup>84</sup> upon another vocation shall receive the approval of classis, with the concurring advice of deputies of synod.<sup>15</sup>*

A minister does well, then, when he accepts a call (to a given congregation), to be aware that he accepts it until the Lord releases him from that call. And Yes, the sovereign Head of the church is free to release a minister at any time of His choosing - be it from the church where the minister is currently serving, or even from the office altogether. The churches have made agreements concerning the following possible scenarios:

#### 2.7.7.7 A CALL FROM ANOTHER CHURCH

A minister can only move to a different congregation if that congregation calls him, and

if he has received the required consent from his current consistory to move. In the Church Order the churches have formulated the matter like this:

**FRCA: Article 7-From one church to another (CanRC: Article 9)**

*A minister once lawfully called shall not leave the church to which he is bound to take up the ministry elsewhere without the consent of his consistory with the deacons and the approval of classis. Likewise, no church shall receive him unless he has presented a proper certificate of release from the church and the classis where he served, or from the church only if he remains within the same classis.*<sup>16</sup>

In this instance the Head of the church calls His servant from the office He had given in one congregation to serve in the office in another congregation. The servant, then, is released from his office in the first congregation and installed into the office of Minister of the Word in his new congregation.

### **2.7.1.2 RETIREMENT**

The Head of the church can take away from one of His office-bearers the gift of health and/or strength so that he is no longer able to carry out the office effectively. It is fitting that people recognise what the Head of the church does in their midst by taking away the health and/or strength of His office-bearer, and respond accordingly. Hence the following agreement:

**FRCA: Article 13 - Retirement of ministers (CanRC: Article 13)**

*If a minister of the Word, by reason of age, sickness or otherwise, is rendered incapable of performing the duties of his office he shall retain the honour and title of minister of the Word. He shall also retain<sup>85</sup> his official bond with the church which he served last, and this church shall provide honourably for his support. The same obligation exists towards a minister's widow and orphans.*

### **2.7.1.3 DISMISSAL**

Christ gathers His church in a broken world. In fact, the ministers He calls to office are men very much touched by the fall into sin. The members of the congregation also are very much touched by this fall. The renewing work of the Holy Spirit in no way undoes the effects of the fall altogether. The result is that the 'chemistry' between a minister and his congregation may be (or become) negative. It is possible, for example, that members of the congregation stumble over the minister's character so that his person gets between the pulpit *and the* pew. Then the *minister* together with his consistory does well to assess soberly whether it may be more beneficial for the church of Jesus Christ that the bond between the minister and the congregation be dissolved. In this regard the churches have agreed to the following:

**FRCA: Article 14 - Dismissal**

*The consistory with the deacons shall not dismiss a minister from his bond with the congregation without approval of classis and the concurring advice of the deputies of synod.*<sup>17</sup>

**CanRC: Article 11 - Dismissal**

*If a minister of the Word is judged unfit and incapable of serving the congregation fruitfully and to its edification, without there being any reason for Church discipline, the consistory with the deacons shall not dismiss him from his service within the congregation without the approbation of classis and the concurring advice of the deputies of regional synod, and not without proper arrangements regarding the support of the minister and his family for a reasonable period of time. If no call is forthcoming in three years, he shall be declared released from his ministerial status by the classis in which he served last.*

If a dismissed minister does not receive a call within a reasonable period after his dismissal, it is fitting that it be judged that Christ has removed this minister from his office altogether. After all, the Bible knows no such thing as an office-bearer without a congregation. <sup>86</sup>

#### **2.7.1.4 A CALL TO AN EXTRAORDINARY TASK**

The Lord can call a minister out of the active ministry in a given congregation to serve in special tasks elsewhere. As examples, one can think of the special task of being missionary on the mission field or instructor at the Theological College. In such an event, the churches have agreed to the following arrangement:

**FRCA: Article 12 - Call to an extraordinary task**

**(CanRC: compare Article 6)**

*If a minister accepts a call or an appointment to an extraordinary task, the nature of the relationship between him and the church to which he is bound must be arranged with the consent of the classis. Some ministers may be appointed for the **training of students** for the ministry, others may be called for **mission work**.<sup>18</sup>*

In both these instances the person concerned remains a minister, but does not carry out the normal duties of a minister in his congregation. The Lord who called to the task of instructor or missionary relieves the minister from the obligations in the congregation to which He had earlier called (that minister, in order that he may serve elsewhere in God's kingdom).

The tasks of the instructor at the College and the Missionary will receive particular attention below.

#### **2.7.1.5 TEMPORARY RELEASE**

The Head of the church can permanently take away from one of His office-bearers the gift of health and/or strength so that he is no longer able to carry out the office effectively. The churches have responded to this possibility by making an agreement in relation to retirement (Article 13). However, it is also possible that the Head of the church leads the life of His office-bearer in such a way that for an indefinite period he is not able to carry out the duties of his office. The Canadian Reformed Churches have agreed to the following stipulation in this event:

**CanRC: Article 14- Temporary Release (FRCA: no parallel agreement)**

*If a minister, because of illness or for other substantial reasons, requests a temporary release from his service to the congregation, he can receive the same only with the approval of the consistory with the deacons and shall at all times be and remain subject to the call of the congregation. <sup>87</sup>*

The Free Reformed Churches of Australia have made no agreement together as to how to act in the event that a minister needs a temporary release from the responsibilities of his work. That does not mean that the Australian churches do not consider it possible that the Lord can lead the needs of His servants in this manner; it simply means that if the Lord confronts a minister and his consistory with such a need there is no agreed manner of acting. Each church can handle the matter in its own manner, as it considers best in the circumstances.

#### **2.7.1.6 DISCIPLINE**

A final instance considered in the Church Order where the call of a minister is terminated is mentioned in its section on Church Discipline:

**FRCA: Article 76- Suspension and deposition of office-bearers (CanRC: Article 71)**



*If a minister, elder or deacon has committed a public or otherwise gross sin, or refuses to heed the admonitions by the consistory, he shall be ... deposed....*

In this instance he is minister no longer.

### 2.7.2 Elders and Deacons

The churches have agreed that elders and deacons, different than ministers, shall serve in intervals of relatively short duration:

**FRCA: Article 23 - Term of office (CanRC: Article 24)**

*The elders and deacons shall serve two or more years according to local regulations, and a proportionate number shall retire each year. The places of the retiring office-bearers shall be taken by others unless the consistory with the deacons judges that the circumstances and the well-being of the church render it advisable to call them into office again. In that case the rule of Article 3 shall be observed.*

Throughout church history 'term-eldership' versus 'life-time-eldership' has been a point of discussion. Those in favour of a life-time service in the office reason that if it is the Lord who calls a man to serve in the office, then who is man to say that a man is to serve for only a set number of years? Those in favour of term-eldership offer practical reasons for their position. It is argued that it is healthy for a congregation to receive 'new blood' in the office on a regular basis; to have the same persons in office year after year can produce 'stale' brothers. Further, the realities of life are <sup>88</sup> such that both the raising of a family and service in the office are demanding and time-consuming tasks. Fathers need to be available for their responsibilities towards their families too.

The Bible itself is vague on the matter of whether elders and deacons ought to serve for a fixed term or for life. Certainly we do not receive the impression that in Old Testament Israel or in the New Testament church the office-bearer retired from his office after a fixed period. Nevertheless, the argument that man may not take the office from those whom the Lord has called is not as strong as it appears. For here is a false dilemma. In the Old Testament the Lord called a man to office *directly*. In the New Testament God calls to office *by means of men* (see above. Paragraph 2.2). Implicit in that reality is the fact that today the Lord can also relieve from office by means of men. As it turns out, term eldership, as compared to life eldership, is anti-hierarchical. With a regular changeover of office-bearers, there is less danger that a few brothers end up lording over the congregation. And avoiding the concentration of power in the hands of a few select brothers is distinctly a principle of reformed church polity (see Chapter 3, Paragraph 2.1). The prospects of having to be re-nominated and re-elected to office can also serve as a catalyst to brothers to do their best; in this way brothers remain accountable. There is, therefore, wisdom in stipulating a fixed term of office.

At the same time, it should be noted that the contrast between term eldership and life eldership is not so radical as first seems. The fact of the matter is that elders who serve a term tend to be called again to office after a period of rest. In a system of term eldership, then, not all brothers from the congregation are called to office on a rotation basis; rather, brothers are largely called from a recognised 'pool' of 'ex-elders'. In a system of life eldership, the brothers once called to office remain officially elders even while they receive a period of 'inactivity' from the demands of the office. There is, then, no need to pontificate about the one method being Scriptural and the other not.

### 2.8 Material Support for the Office-bearer

If a man is called to full-time service in his office in Christ's church, how is he to receive his daily keep? On this point, the Lord gave particular instructions in His Word. In the Old Testament the people of Israel had to support the priests by giving part of the sacrifice to the priest. We read, for example, the following instruction in Leviticus 7: "And the priest shall burn the fat on the altar, but the breast shall be Aaron's and his



sons" (vs. 31). Again: "He among the sons of Aaron, who offers the blood of the peace offering and the fat, shall have the right thigh for his part" (vs. 33; see also 10:14f). The Lord also told the people that they were not to "forsake <sup>89</sup> the Levite who is within your gates, for he has no part nor inheritance with you" (Deuteronomy 14:27). The principle recurs in the New Testament, where Jesus says to the seventy that they were not to go from house to house, but rather "remain in the same house, eating and drinking such things as they give, **for the labourer is worthy of his wages**" (Luke 10:7). Paul reminds the Corinthians that "the Lord has commanded that those **who preach the gospel should live from the gospel**" (1 Corinthians 9:14). And the Galatians are told, "Let him who is taught the word **share** in all good things with him who teaches" (6:6).

The churches, on the basis of scriptural directives as these, saw it to be both the privilege and the responsibility of the congregation to support the brother who gives his time to her edification. Therefore, concerning ministers of the Word, the churches have agreed as follows:

**FRCA: Article 11 - Proper Support (CanRC: Article 10)**

*The consistory, with the deacons, on behalf of the congregation which it represents in this matter, shall provide for the proper support of its minister(s).*

A minister is not paid wages. The money he receives should not be a reflection of the responsibilities of his job or the quality of his work. That is the principle by which people receive their respective wages in society. If a minister is 'in it' for the money, then he is in office for the wrong reason. It is a congregation's privilege to receive a minister who may devote himself full-time to the responsibilities of the office. Let the congregation, which benefits spiritually from the preaching and other work of its minister, in turn support him financially so that he and his family receive what they need to live.

In view of the fact that a minister is a minister for life, a congregation remains responsible for his support after retirement too, as well as responsible for the support of his dependants. Hence this agreement by the churches:

**FRCA: Article 13 - Retirement of ministers (CanRC: Article 13)**

*. . . the church which he served last. . . shall provide honourably for his support. The same obligation exists towards a minister's widow and orphans.*

Again, since instructors at the Theological College remain ministers, they too need continued support.

**FRCA: Article 17 - Training for the ministry**

*. . . the churches together are obliged to provide support for the professors of theology and for their widows and orphans.* <sup>90</sup>

There is no reason why this principle of supporting those who give of their time to labour in the offices of the church cannot be applied to elders and deacons also. In a minor way we do this already when elders or deacons need to travel far afield in order to visit a family of the congregation, or if delegates need to be sent to a Synod; their time and expenses are paid for by the congregation. It could also be that a consistory sees a need for employing an elder to full-time pastoral work. In principle there is no argument against that. That this has not been allowed for in the Church Order is because historically elders and deacons have carried out their offices in their free time. It is our privilege to support not only the work of the ministers but also the work of the other office-bearers, and therefore in principle Article 11 could also be extended to the work of elders and deacons.

### 3. The Work of the Office-bearers

#### 3.1 Elders - Ruling and Teaching

The book of Acts supplies some details about the eldership in the early church. However, this book does not tell us anything about how this office came into being. It is safe to assume that this office had existed in Old Testament Israel from most early days (see Exodus 3:16; 4:29; 12:21; 18:12; etc). In the course of Israel's history, the elders supplied much leadership to the people (see Numbers 16:25; Joshua 7:6; 24:1; 2 Samuel 3:17; 5:3; 19:11; 1 Kings 8:1,3; Ezekiel 14:1; 20:1,3; etc). In Jesus' days too the elders had considerable influence (see Matthew 21:23; 26:3; 27:1). In the New Testament church, then, elders appear on the scene without introduction; it is understood that there must be elders. In the book of Acts the following references to elders in the church occur:

- Acts 11:27-30: *"And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar. Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea. This they also did, and sent it to **the elders** by the hands of Barnabas and Saul."* This first reference to elders in action in the church of the New Testament is striking. Acts 4:34-37 relates that the proceeds of the sale of land and houses were *"laid at the apostles' feet."* This time money for the congregation is presented to the elders. These two passages describe a development in church leadership. The apostles of Acts 4, after they had completed their task of <sup>91</sup> instituting Christ's church in Jerusalem, had to move on to preach the Word to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Although the Lord has not revealed how the elders of Acts 11 received their office, it is clear that they took the place of the apostles in the leadership of the Jerusalem church. The elders came to represent as it were the public face, or the address, of the church at Jerusalem. So it was to them that Saul and Barnabas handed over the gifts from the brothers in Antioch.
- Acts 14:23: *"So when they had appointed **elders in every church**, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed."* The context is instructive. Paul and Barnabas had preached the gospel first in Antioch, then in Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. At the end of the route the apostles returned to the visited towns to strengthen and encourage the believers. Paul and Barnabas, however, could not continue indefinitely to visit and encourage the converts in these towns: they had other work to do. In that context we read that the apostles appointed elders from the local membership. These elders, we need to conclude, were to take over from the apostles the leadership and care of the local church.
- Acts 15 relates how a difficult question relating to circumcision was resolved. A delegation from Antioch was sent *"to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question"* (vs. 2). The delegation was in turn received *"by the church and the apostles and the elders"* (vs. 4). After hearing the question and discussing the matter, *"it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men ..."* (vs. 22f). Notice that the elders receive mention with the apostles as acknowledged leaders.
- Acts 20:17: *"From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for **the elders of the church**."* That Paul summoned not the entire congregation but only the elders shows that these brothers were the acknowledged leaders of the church at Ephesus.
- Acts 21:18: *"On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and **all the elders were present**."* That the elders were present when Paul went to discuss matters with James in Jerusalem points up that these brothers were seen as the leaders of the congregation.

In the above texts Scripture calls the leaders of the churches "elders". Although the word "elder" denotes a person of older age, it is not so much the age as the responsibility in

giving leadership that is stressed by the term. Importance was attached to these men not on account of their age, but on account of their office. <sup>92</sup>

### 3.1.1 Defining the Elders' Work

The specific task given to the elder can best be drawn out by considering the terms used in Scripture to describe the elder. The following need a mention:

#### 3.1.1.1 OVERSEER

In Acts 20:28 one reads of the term 'overseer' (Greek: episkopos) in connection with the office of elder. Says Paul to the "elders" (Acts 20:17f) of the church at Ephesus, *"Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers**. ..."* What then is an overseer to do? One finds the answer in Acts 15:36, *"Then after some days. Paul said to Barnabas, 'Let us now go back and **visit** our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, **and see how they are doing**.'"* Although our translation uses the word 'visit', the Greek original has here the word 'oversee'. Paul says as it were. "Let us go and oversee our brethren." The apostle's intent, then, is to go and keep his eyes open to learn how the brethren are doing. This clarifies the meaning of the Scriptural term "oversee". To oversee is to keep an eye on how things are going.

One also finds the word in Matthew 25:36. Jesus tells the parable of the Separation between the sheep and the goats. Christ, the Shepherd, will say to the sheep gathered at His right hand. *"I was naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you visited me. ..."* Here again, the Greek word is 'oversee'. in the context of Jesus' parable the purpose of the visit is not simply to see or look at someone. Rather, the visit is an expression of care and genuine interest. So, in their task as overseers, the elders are to visit the members of the congregation out of genuine interest in the members' well-being, to find out what they are up against in life, and seek to stand beside them, to encourage, and if necessary, to admonish.

#### 3.1.1.2 SHEPHERD

This title appears repeatedly in John 10 as a description of Jesus. The Lord says in verse 11, *"I am the good shepherd"* (Greek: poimen). The Lord goes on to describe what He as shepherd does for His sheep: ***"The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep."*** In contrast to this, the Lord describes what the hireling does: *"... he who is a hireling and not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep"* (vs. 12). The shepherd cares for his sheep, and so he does what he can to <sup>93</sup> defend and protect them, even going so far as laying down his life for the sheep. Hebrews 13:20 also describes the Lord Jesus as ***"... that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant."*** Jesus, the Good Shepherd, shed His blood so that His sheep might live. In 1 Peter 2:25 likewise, one reads of Jesus the Shepherd: *"For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the **Shepherd and Overseer of your souls**."*

The task of shepherding is not the task of our Lord Jesus Christ exclusively. In Scripture one reads how the role of shepherd is also assigned to the office of elder. In Acts 20:28 Paul says to the elders of the church at Ephesus, *"Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the **flock**, among which the Holy Spirit has made **you** overseers, to **shepherd** the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. "* Here the word 'shepherd' appears as a verb. It is the elders' task to shepherd the flock for which Christ has laid down His life. It is in the Lord Jesus, the Good Shepherd as He is described in John 10. that the elder finds his role model.

The Old Testament too uses the term 'shepherd' in relation to the Lord, and in so doing expounds further the elder's task of shepherding according to the model of the Good Shepherd. The psalmist confesses in Psalm 23 that *"The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want."* Why shall he not want? Because the Lord, shepherd that He is

*"makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over" (Psalm 23:2-5).*

Over against the way the Good Shepherd carries out His office, there is the way of the hireling of John 10 who, in the interest of his own well-being, leaves the sheep to fend for themselves in the face of danger. His conduct is exemplified by the admonition that Ezekiel had to give the shepherds of Israel for the irresponsible manner in which they shepherded the flock of Israel:

*"Thus says the Lord God to the shepherds: "Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the flock. The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, <sup>94</sup> nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost; but with force and cruelty you have ruled them. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd; and they became food for all the beasts of the field when they were scattered. My sheep wandered through all the mountains, and on every high hill; yes, My flock was scattered over the whole face of the earth, and no one was seeking or searching for them"*

(Ezekiel 34:2-6).

Here is the example of what the elders are not to do.

The elders of Ephesus were to shepherd their flock, following in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd. Paul did not command them to be shepherds in order to build up their own reputation or to make the congregation do what they wanted them to do. The flock was not there for the benefit of the elders, but the elders were appointed for the benefit of the flock. The elders are even to lay down their life for the flock, for that is what the Good Shepherd did. In order to preserve the life of their sheep the elders are to *"feed them in good pasture ... (to) seek what was lost and bring back what was driven away, bind up the broken and strengthen what was sick"* (Ezekiel 34:14-16). Paul, listing in Ephesians 4:11 the various offices that Christ gave to the church, uses for 'elder' the word "pastor" (= shepherd): *"And he himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some **pastors** and teachers."* Pastor is an apt description for the elder, for it captures well the elder's task of shepherding, feeding the sheep.

### **3.1.1.3 STEWARD**

In Titus 1:5-9 Paul enumerates the qualifications of elders. Paul writes to Timothy, *"For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you."* In this quote (vs. 5) Paul uses the word 'elder' (Greek: presbyter), but in verse 7 he uses for 'elder' the word 'overseer' (or 'bishop'; Greek: episkopos). Then he says concerning the bishops or elders that he *"must be blameless, as a **steward** of God..."* (Greek: oikonomos). Luke 12:42 draws for us a picture of what a steward is and does. In His parable concerning the faithful servant and the evil servant Jesus asks, *"Who then is that faithful and wise **steward**, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them their food in due season?"* Here the task of the steward is captured: this is the person who is responsible for managing a household, a servant appointed to care for the other servants (even providing their food), and who is accountable to his master. <sup>95</sup>

Paul likens the elder to a steward: a person 'over the household' and yet under God and so accountable to Him. For what purpose does God make the elder a steward over His congregation? Not for the elder's own benefit, but rather so that he may give the congregation *"food in due season."* The elder, then, serves the congregation with the possessions God has entrusted to him for the benefit of the congregation.

#### 3.1.1.4 LEADER

In Hebrews 13:7,17 and 24 the apostle gives the following instruction to the Hebrews, *"Remember those who **rule** over you, who have spoken the word of God to you. whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct.... Obey those who **rule** over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account... Greet all those who rule over you, and all the saints."* The word translated here as 'rule' (Greek: hegoumonos) is properly the word Mead", and the term is used here in relation to the elders. Characteristic of a leader is that he gives a proper example to those whom he leads: he guides. Again, the elder does not lead for his own benefit, but for the benefit of the congregation (*"for they watch out for your souls"*). Given this task of the leaders, the Hebrew saints are instructed to submit to the elders: it is in their best interest to follow the leadership of their elders.

#### 3.1.1.5 IN SUM: ELDERS MUST USE THE WORD OF GOD

Elders must oversee, shepherd, be stewards over and lead their congregation for the sole purpose of directing the congregation to God. For that reason God has also given the elders the one resource they need to perform these tasks, and that resource is of course the Word of God. If the elder must shepherd the sheep, feeding them in good pasture, he must feed them in the Word of life. But before an elder can begin to shepherd, or even to lead, oversee or manage His Master's flock, he himself must be spiritually healthy. To use the words of Titus 1:9, an elder must *"[hold] **fast the faithful word** as he has been taught, that he may be able, **by sound doctrine**, both to exhort and convict those who contradict."* For an elder to be an elder in the scriptural sense of the word, it is imperative that he himself stands by that Word and be "able to teach" that Word (1 Timothy 3:2).

#### 3.1.2 Detailing the Elders' Work

##### 3.1.2.1 TEACHING ELDERS - FOCUS ON PREACHING

On the basis of 1 Timothy 5:17 we may speak of two kinds of elders: the teaching elder (the office of minister) and the ruling elder (the office <sup>96</sup> of elder). All elders, be they teaching or ruling elders, are overseers, shepherds, stewards and leaders. But teaching elders and ruling elders carry out these tasks with their own particular focus.

The minister's task very much focuses on teaching and preaching. To use the words of 1 Timothy 5:17, he *"labours in the word and doctrine."* How does the minister oversee, shepherd, and lead his congregation, managing over the congregation so that it gets *"food in due season"*? He does so specifically by the *preaching*. Timothy, for example, was a minister of the Word. So Paul was moved by the Holy Spirit to instruct Timothy like this: *"I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ...: **Preach the word!**"* (2 Timothy 4:1,2). If Timothy is to be the shepherd of God's people as God wants him to be. then he must preach; preaching is critical to the task of the minister. The office of Minister of the Word had also been entrusted to Titus. So Paul writes to him also, *"But as for you, speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine..., likewise exhort..."* (Titus 2:1,6).

Preaching is of prime importance in shepherding God's flock because it is by the preaching of the gospel that the Lord works faith in the hearts of His people. As Paul wrote in Romans 10:17, *"So then **faith** comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."* Through faith in Jesus Christ one is reconciled to God, and the Spirit works this reconciling faith through the preaching (see Lord's Day 25). So Paul can even call preaching the *"ministry of reconciliation"* (2 Corinthians 5:18). A minister, on the pulpit and when he visits, is a steward of the revelation of God by which he leads and feeds the flock, teaching, encouraging and admonishing.

In addition to preaching, a minister fulfils his tasks of being overseer, shepherd, steward and leader for his flock by the means of prayer. Acts 6:4 serves to illustrate what priority prayer is to receive in the work of the minister. A problem had arisen in the church at



Jerusalem, a complaint by the Hellenists against the Hebrews, which warranted the apostles appointing seven men to attend to the matter. These seven men were needed so that the apostles could give themselves "*continually to **prayer** and to the ministry of the word.*" It is interesting to note how this text first speaks of prayer and then of preaching.

In response to the above material, the churches have agreed what the task of the minister of God's Word must be.

**FRCA: Article 16 - Task of ministers (CanRC: Article 16)**

*The task of ministers is to faithfully lead in prayer, preach the Word and administer the sacraments. They shall watch over their fellow office-bearers and over the congregation. Together with the elders <sup>97</sup> they shall exercise church discipline and see to it that everything is done decently and in good order.*

A more detailed task description is found in the Form that must be used at the ordination or installation of ministers (Article 3). This form is found in the *Book of Praise*, pg 619-623.

A minister's task receives a changed emphasis when he receives a special mandate, such as specified in Article 12: "*Some ministers may be appointed for the training of students for the ministry, others may be called for mission work.*" However, a missionary remains a minister, and performs on the mission field the same duties as a minister. On the mission field too, lost sinners are saved through hearing the gospel of reconciliation through Christ. For that reason a missionary's principle task is also the preaching of the Word. Hence, in describing the (task of missionaries, the churches agreed:

**FRCA: Article 19 - Task of missionaries (CanRC: Article 18)**

*When ministers of the Word are sent out as missionaries, they shall in the specific region assigned to them proclaim the Word of God. administer the sacraments to those who have come to the profession of their faith, teaching them to observe all that Christ has commanded His church, and ordain elders and deacons when this appears feasible, according to the rules given in the Word of God.*

A broader description of the missionary's task is set forth in the "Form for the Ordination of Missionaries". *Book of Praise*, pg 624-628.

### **3.1.2.2 RULING ELDERS - FOCUS ON GOVERNING**

The terms overseer, shepherd, steward, and leader also apply to the office of the ruling elder. However, in their description of the task of the ruling elder the churches have given a different emphasis than they gave to the task of the teaching elder. The churches have agreed to the following:

**FRCA: Article 20 - Task of elders (CanRC: Article 22)**

*The elders shall together with the ministers of the Word govern the congregation with pastoral care and discipline. For the upbuilding of the congregation they shall make homevisits as often as is profitable but at least once a year. They shall watch that their fellow office-bearers are faithful in carrying out their duties and ensure that in the congregation everything is done decently and in good order.*

Here the task of *governing* is emphasised. After all, 1 Timothy 5:17 speaks of the elders "*who rule.*" The focus is pastoral care and discipline. <sup>98</sup>

As overseers, the elders make it their business to visit the members, for they cannot build up, nourish, instruct, encourage or admonish the members appropriately with the Word unless they know what the members' particular needs might be (see 3.1.1.1).

Hence the churches have agreed that it is the task of the elders to make homevisits *"as often as is profitable"*. A more detailed task description for the elders can be found in the "Form for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons" (*Book of Praise*, pg 628-634). So that elders (and deacons) have written on their minds what task God lays upon them when they enter the office, the churches have agreed to use this form when elders and/or deacons are ordained (see Article 3).

### **3.1.2.3 MINISTERS AND ELDERS MUST DISPEL FALSE DOCTRINES**

It has pleased God to save a people for Himself through the saving work of Jesus Christ on the cross. This gospel comes to the world through the ministry of the church (1 Timothy 3:15; 4:6). That is why the apostle Paul instructs Timothy to *"guard what was committed to your trust"* (1 Timothy 6:20).

But this gospel is desperately hated by the evil one. He therefore does what he can to distort the gospel. The apostle Paul already wrote of *"false apostles, deceitful workers"* who *"transform themselves into apostles of Christ"* (2 Corinthians 11:13). He adds that these deceitful workers imitate Satan, who *"transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness"* (2 Corinthians 11:15).

Paul warns the Ephesian elders of the challenges they will meet as they carry out their office. These challenges, says Paul, include the need to deal with heresies. Paul told the elders to *"... take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which he purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch..."* (Acts 20:28-31).

Paul was qualified to instruct the elders of Ephesus, for he himself had performed the tasks of an elder. He taught and proclaimed, publicly and via home visits (cf. vs. 20), the gospel of reconciliation for the purpose of working repentance and faith in his listeners. It was a dangerous task for Paul, but no chains or tribulations were going to stand in the way of him fulfilling <sup>99</sup> the office to which God had called him. Following in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd, Paul was prepared to carry out his office at the expense of his own life. Even false teachers and heretics would not silence the apostle. He dared even to confront Peter publicly about his errors (cf. Galatians 2:11) and publicly also to expose the heresy of the Judaizers (Galatians 3). Here was an example the elders of Ephesus had to follow.

If God's people, then, are to be fed in the good pastures of the Word, ministers and elders alike must be on guard for false doctrines which aim to undermine God's Word and so mislead His people. To ensure that the sheep of God's flock are not led away by false teaching, the churches have agreed that the elders must make it their business to expose false teaching and equip the membership against it.

#### **FRCA; Article 26 - False doctrine (CanRC; Article 27)**

*To ward off false doctrines and errors the ministers and elders shall use the means of instruction, of refutation, of warning and of admonition, in the ministry of the Word as well as in Christian teaching and family visiting.*

### **3.1.3 Preserving the Elders' Doctrinal Integrity**

Due to the influential nature of the office, it is imperative that the men who are ordained to office are faithful men. Elders cannot rightly be overseers, shepherds, stewards and leaders if they themselves live doctrinally or morally in error. Yet it is certainly possible for office-bearers to embrace error in some way. Paul writes that Satan *"transforms himself into an angel of light"* and then adds. *"Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness"* (2 Corinthians 11:15). Paul's warning to the elders at Ephesus in Acts 20:28-31 (see above)



concerning impending attacks on Christ's church are equally valid for all office-bearers today. In order to be able to guard the Hock against attacks through 'wolves' from without and heretics from within, office-bearers must themselves be sound in faith. In accordance with Titus 1:9 and 2:1 an office-bearer must be "... **holding fast the faithful word** as he has been taught, that he may be able, by **sound doctrine**, both to exhort and convict those who contradict", and he is to "...speak the things which are **proper for sound doctrine: ... sound in faith....**"

Human vulnerability to Satan's attacks plus the need for sound leadership in the church of God prompted the fathers of years gone by to seek ways to protect office-bearers from becoming carriers of false doctrine. At the Synod of Dort a Subscription Form was adopted for use by office-bearers <sup>100</sup> in the churches. In translation, this form is used in both the Canadian Reformed Churches as well as the Free Reformed Churches of Australia. Below is the Subscription Form used in the FRCA specifically for ministers.

### **SUBSCRIPTION FORM FOR MINISTERS OF THE WORD**

- (1) *We, ministers of the Word in the Free Reformed Churches of Australia, signatories to this Subscription Form, sincerely, solemnly, and with a good conscience before the Lord, declare by our signature that we wholeheartedly believe and are fully convinced that all articles and points of doctrine contained in the three Forms of Unity, namely the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort, are in full agreement with the Word of God.*
- (2) *We promise therefore that we will diligently teach and faithfully defend the aforesaid doctrine, without either directly or indirectly contradicting the same in our public preaching or writing. We also promise not only to earnestly reject all errors which conflict with the aforesaid doctrine, but that we shall at all times be willing to refute and contradict them, doing our utmost in reproving, combating, and helping to resist such errors.*
- (3) *Should at any time in the future reservations regarding the said doctrine arise in our minds we faithfully promise not to propose, teach, or defend them, neither in our preaching nor in our writing, publicly nor privately, but to first disclose these reservations to the ecclesiastical assemblies in the ecclesiastical way so that they may examine them.*
- (4) *Furthermore, we promise that we will always be prepared to submit ourselves willingly to the judgement of the ecclesiastical assemblies. Should we refuse to submit ourselves to the judgement of the ecclesiastical assemblies or should we persist in our reservations we agree by that very fact to be suspended from our office.*
- (5) *Moreover, should the consistory, the classis church, or synod at any time upon sufficient grounds and in order to preserve the uniformity and purity of the true doctrine deem it necessary to require of us a further explanation of our opinion regarding any part of the said doctrine, we promise always to be willing and ready to comply with such a request, upon the understanding that by the very fact of our refusal we will be suspended from our office. However, we reserve for ourselves the right of appeal should we believe ourselves aggrieved by the judgement of the consistory or classis church.*

*Until such a decision is made upon such an appeal we will submit to the determination and judgement of the consistory and/or classis church.* <sup>101</sup>

For the sake of the Lord's honour and the preservation of His church there is no room in Christ's church for any office-bearer who teaches any doctrine not in full accord with the Word revealed in Scripture. Any office-bearer refusing to sign the Subscription Form, or who by word or deed gives the lie to his signature, will be suspended from the office to which he has been called. The church is the Lord's and therefore it is His Word alone, the only Truth, which must prevail, and so be defended.

To ensure that office-bearers indeed sign the Form pertaining to their office, the churches have agreed to the following in the Church Order:

**FRCA: Article 24 - Subscription to the Confession by ministers and teaching staff (CanRC: Article 26 combines what for Australia is Articles 24 and 25)**

*All ministers of the Word and all teaching staff at the theological seminary shall subscribe to the Three Forms of Unity of The Free Reformed Churches of Australia by signing the Form(s) adopted for that purpose. Anyone refusing to subscribe in that manner shall not be ordained or installed in office. Anyone who, being in office, refuses to do so shall because of that very fact be immediately suspended from office by the consistory, and classis shall not receive him. If he obstinately persists in his refusal he shall be deposed from office.*

A similar article has been adopted concerning elders and deacons:

**Article 25 - Subscription to the Confession by elders and deacons**

*Elders and deacons shall also subscribe to these Three Forms of Unity by signing the Form adopted for that purpose. Anyone being in office who refuses to do so shall because of that very fact be immediately suspended from office by the consistory. If he obstinately persists in his refusal he shall be deposed from office.*

### 3.1.4 Training the Elders

The office of elder, be it in a teaching or in a ruling capacity, is a position of great influence. Just as a flock of sheep is in danger of being scattered when led by a false shepherd, so a congregation is in danger of being deceived and misled when led by a false teacher. Owing to the influence an elder has as overseer, shepherd, steward and leader, it is imperative that the elder abides by the faithful word of God. That was also Paul's instruction to Titus. A bishop must be someone "...**holding fast the faithful word** as he has been taught, that he may be able, by **sound doctrine**, both to exhort and convict those who contradict" (Titus 1:9). <sup>102</sup>

The elder who wishes to teach must himself be taught. Timothy, a young assistant who had accompanied Paul quite extensively on his missionary journeys, had been charged by Paul to take charge of affairs in the church at Ephesus. Paul knew that fierce wolves would seek to infiltrate the flock (Acts 20:29). So elders had to be equipped to recognise error and fight it. So Paul's instruction to the local minister was this: "...the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, **commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also**" (2 Timothy 2:2). Timothy was to find for himself in Ephesus faithful men who met the qualifications of office-bearers as listed in I Timothy 3, and then teach them all that he had learnt from Paul. These men would in turn pass on this teaching to other faithful men who would serve after them.

#### 3.1.4.1 TRAINING FOR THE MINISTRY

This instruction to train a new generation of teaching elders (= ministers) receives recognition in the Church Order.

**FRCA: Article 17 - Training for the ministry (CanRC: Article 19)**

*The churches shall support or, if possible, maintain an institution for the training for the ministry. The task of the professors of theology is to expound the Holy Scriptures and to defend the sound doctrine against heresies and errors, so that the churches may be provided with ministers of the Word who are able to fulfil the duties of their office as these have been described above" (in Article 16).*

The Free Reformed Churches of Australia are not in a position to maintain an institution

of their own for the training for the ministry. So the churches happily support the training institute of their sister churches in Canada, the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches.

Since the Theological College is a part of church life, the churches have agreed to supply the College with suitable teaching staff. This is implicit in Article 12, where recognition is given to the fact that a minister can be appointed to an extraordinary task as "the training of students for the ministry." Further, as with ministers (see Articles 11 and 13), the churches acknowledge need to support the faculty of the seminary:

**FRCA: Article 17 - Training for the Ministry (CanRC: no parallel agreement)**

*... The churches together are obliged to provide properly for the professors of theology and for their widows and orphans.* <sup>103</sup>

Since the churches need ministers, the theological colleges need more than just professors of theology; they need students too! Therefore:

**FRCA: Article 18 - Students of theology (CanRC: Article 20)**

*The churches shall strive to ensure that there are students of theology, extending financial aid where necessary.*

The churches - that is to say, the members of the congregations - are to be on the lookout for men who show signs of having the talents required to become ministers of the Word, and then to encourage them to pursue this path - even, if necessary, offering them financial support.

The Canadian Reformed Churches have further agreed that students of the College should, upon certain conditions being met, receive the opportunity to proclaim the gospel.

**CanRC: Article 21 -An Edifying Word (FRCA: no parallel agreement)**

*Besides those who have been permitted, according to Article 8, to speak an edifying word, also others may be given such consent in accordance with general ecclesiastical regulations, for their own training and in order that they may become known to the congregations.*

### **3.1.4.2 TRAINING FOR THE ELDERSHIP**

The churches have included in the Church Order no requirement for formal training of potential ruling elders for their office. This is not because training is not necessary. Rather, it is understood that Paul's instruction in 2 Timothy 2:2 is satisfied with respect to potential ruling elders in a different manner than for teaching elders. The preaching of the gospel and the normal appetite of the spiritually healthy brother (encouraged, one assumes, by an equally spiritually healthy spouse) prompt study and reflection on the Word of God and the issues that live in the churches. It should also be noted that the qualifications for eldership listed in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 do not include a degree of formal study.

## **3.2 Deacons**

### **3.2.1 Defining the Deacons' Work**

In 1 Corinthians 12 the apostle Paul describes the congregation at Corinth as a body: "Now you are the body of Christ" and all the Corinthian believers are "members individually" (1 Corinthians 12:27). In order to impress upon the Corinthians how important each individual believer is <sup>104</sup> for the proper functioning of the congregation as a whole, Paul compares the spiritual body of Christ to the physical human body. The human body too is the sum total of all its members, each member having its unique contribution to the well being of the whole body. He puts it like this: "The body is not

one member but many. If the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body', is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the smelling be? But now **God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased.** And if they were all one member, where would the body be? But now indeed there are many members, yet one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you'; nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you'. No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. And those members of the body which we think to be less honourable, on these we bestow greater honour; and our unpresentable parts have greater modesty, but our presentable parts have no need. But God composed the body, having given greater honour to that part which lacks it, that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honoured, all the members rejoice with it" (1 Corinthians 12:14-26). The body of Christ functions no differently than the human body in that all the members individually make up one whole, and all the members need each other. So Paul concludes. **"Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually"** (vs. 27).

This reality described here by the apostle was evident in the way the believers in Acts 2 interacted with each other. For the Christian converts *"continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.... Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved"* (Acts 2:42-47). These people realised that as a group they were united into one body through their shared faith in Christ, and they expressed this unity in deeds that sought each other's benefit.

The same can be found in Acts 4:32, concerning the body of believers in Jerusalem: *"Now the multitude of those **who believed** were of **one heart and one soul**; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but **they had all things in common.**"* 105

The same chapters of the book of Acts tell us of great numbers coming to faith. Acts 1:15 records 120 persons, while on the day of Pentecost about 3,000 souls were added (Acts 2:41). In Acts 4:4 one reads that the number of men alone totalled 5,000, to which *"believers were added increasingly ... **multitudes** of both men and women."* Hence by the time one gets to Acts 6 one could estimate that there may well have been a sizeable congregation of some 20,000 people.

Acts 6 tells us, though, that such church growth brought its own difficulties in relation to the effective functioning of the communion of saints. *"Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a murmuring against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution"* (Acts 6:1). Possibly the Greek speaking widows did not receive the food they needed. Or maybe they were not involved in the work of distributing food. Whatever the case might be, the fact is that the limitations of this broken life caused the body to malfunction. Something was not right in the church of Jesus Christ.

How were the apostles to address this problem? They recognised the importance of devoting themselves totally to the ministry of reconciliation, since this was *the* way by which they were to bring people to faith. So the apostles came up with this solution: *"Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, 'It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word'"* (Acts 6:2-4). If the apostles had to involve themselves in the actual functioning of the communion of saints, they would have to do so at the cost

of their real work. So they appointed and ordained seven men to the office of deacon. The seven men are not called 'deacons' in so many words, but their task description ("*serve tables*") captures the work characterising the deacon; he serves. The Greek word 'serve' is simply the verbal form of the noun deacon; these seven men had to *deacon the tables*. Hence the name 'deacon'.

From the above we need to conclude that the Lord would give to the deacons the task of ensuring that the communion of saints functions the way it should.

### 3.2.2 Detailing the Deacons' Work

Reference is made to the office of deacon per se in two other places of Scripture. In Philippians 1:1 one reads, "*To all the saints in Christ Jesus <sup>106</sup> who are in Philippi, with the bishops and **deacons***", and in 1 Timothy 3:8-13 Paul enumerates the qualifications of deacons. Although one cannot draw up a task description for the office of deacon on the basis of these texts, one can work with what one reads in Acts 6 and Scripture's emphasis on the church functioning as one body of which all are members individually. This requires organisation, and here lies the responsibility of the deacons. The churches have echoed this task of the deacons in their agreement together:

#### **FRCA: Article 21 - Task of deacons (CanRC: Article 23)**

*The deacons shall perform the ministry of mercy. They shall acquaint themselves with difficulties; visit, help and encourage where there is need; and urge church members to render assistance where necessary. They shall collect and manage the gifts of the congregation, and after mutual consultation distribute them where there need. The deacons shall give account of their policies and management to the consistory.*

The deacons' ministry is described here as the ministry of mercy: letting people taste the mercy of God. To that end deacons help and encourage the members of the congregation as is needed. However, in order to know the needs and give the appropriate support, the deacons need to go into the congregation and *visit* the members

One should, therefore, be no more surprised at seeing a deacon at the door as seeing an elder come to visit. Although the collection and distribution of money is popularly understood to form the heart of the deacon's task (for managing the collection bags is what we all see them do in church), distributing alms to the poor is only a small part of the ministry of mercy. A more important duty of the deacons is to make sure that the communion of saints functions well. Deacon visits to all members are to serve the twofold purpose of ascertaining 1) whether there are any needs at a given address which require assistance, and 2) whether there are gifts at that address which might be of assistance to others in need. For the sake of a healthy communion of saints, the members do well to receive the deacons heartily and respond to their queries openly. An expanded task description for the deacon can be found in the "Form for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons", *Book of Praise*, pg 630f.

Yet the proper functioning of the communion of saints ultimately depends not on the deacons but on spontaneity amongst the saints. Just as the foot cannot but willingly cooperate with the leg, so likewise I need not wait for instructions from a deacon to go and help a person in need. It is <sup>107</sup> when spontaneity does not cover a need that the deacons must get involved. That does not mean that the deacons have to do all the assisting themselves. If the deacons have become the 'Mr Fix-its' of the congregation, then the communion of saints is sick. The deacon's main task is not first of all to give assistance, but rather to ensure that the members are willingly assisting each other, and if not, stimulating them to do so.

### 3.3 Office-Bearers and the Government

The apostle Paul laid before the congregation in Rome the need for one and all to obey



the authorities of the land. He writes: *"Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honour to whom honour"* (Romans 13:1-7). The same apostle instructed Titus to make it his business to remind those in his charge to *"be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey..."* (Titus 3:1). Not only must the authorities be obeyed, but they also require our prayers: *"Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence"* (1 Timothy 2:1,2). It remains the task of office-bearers today to instruct the membership to be obedient to the secular authorities.

This aspect of their work has received a specific mention in the agreement of the churches. By mentioning this matter explicitly, the churches publicly testify that God's people are not rebels but law-abiding citizens.

**FRCA: Article 27 - Office-bearers and the government (CanRC: Article 28)**


*The office-bearers shall impress upon the congregation its obligation to be obedient and show respect to the government, because God has instituted it. They must set a good example in this regard <sup>108</sup> and by means of proper communication invoke the government to protect the ministry of the church.*

<sup>109</sup>

## Chapter 5

### Articles 28-50

The intent of this publication, the reader will recall, is to draw out what the Head of the Church has revealed about how He would have His Church governed. It is for that reason that we have, so far, repeatedly returned to the Scriptures for its instruction.

The second section of the Church Order (Articles 28-50) is devoted to ecclesiastical assemblies. The reader will observe that this section of this publication has far less references to Scripture than the section on Offices and Supervision of Doctrine (Articles 1-27). Yet it would be wrong to conclude that therefore the material of this part of the Church Order is not drawn from the Word of God. The section on Assemblies too is part of the "*Spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in His Word*" (Belgic Confession, Article 30). But whereas the earlier section of the Church Order was built on numerous direct passages of Holy Scripture, this section on Assemblies is drawn from Scripture more by inference than by reference to specific passages. That is to say: it is in this section of the Church Order that the material discussed in Chapter 1 of this publication comes to its own. That the Lord has given authority to the local church (Chapter 1.2), that the Lord would have local churches acknowledge each other and interact together (Chapter 1.3): these are the pillars on which this section of the Church Order is built. If one were to set aside the material of Chapter 1, this section of the Church Order could rightly be seen as nothing more than tradition. Conversely, if the  material of Chapter 1 echoes accurately the revelation of God on the matter, this section of the Church Order must invariably follow.

This is not to say that every article of this section is as unalterable as the law of the Medes and Persians. The frequency and number of ecclesiastical assemblies, for example, may certainly be altered as need requires. But God Himself has fixed the principles underlying this section. Now it is for the churches to work out how best to apply these principles in the specific circumstances in which they find themselves.

### 1. Development of Assemblies

The Free Reformed Churches of Australia have adopted for themselves the Church Order of Dort - be it in a form that reflects the specific circumstances of the churches today. Its first article in this section reads as follows:

**FRCA: Article 28 - The ecclesiastical assemblies**

*Three kinds of ecclesiastical assemblies shall be maintained: the consistory, the classis, and the synod.*<sup>19</sup>

**CanRC: Article 29 - The Ecclesiastical Assemblies**

*Four kinds of ecclesiastical assemblies shall be maintained: The consistory, the classis, the regional synod, and the general synod.*

At the time of the Synod of Dort, there were hundreds of churches in the federation of Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. So a structure of multiple assemblies (including consistory, classis, regional synod and general synod) was very possible. In other bonds of churches elsewhere in the world today, it is equally possible to have multiple assemblies. So the Canadian Reformed Churches, for example, have agreed to maintain "*four kinds of ecclesiastical assemblies.*"

The Australian situation, however, does not allow for four kinds of ecclesiastical assemblies. Consequently, the Australian churches have made adaptations to the Church Order. Such changes certainly can be made to the Church Order where the need requires it. This possibility is also acknowledged in the Church Order:



**FRCA: Article 81 - Observance and revision of the Church Order (CanRC: Article 76)**

*... If the interest of the churches demands such, [these articles] may and ought to be changed, augmented or diminished...*

For more than 30 years after the institution of the first Free Reformed Church in Australia in 1951, there were but three churches in the Australian <sup>112</sup> bond. The churches recognised that at this point in their history, the Free Reformed Churches would have to be content with two ecclesiastical assemblies in practice: the consistory and the synod. The hope was that, under the blessing of the Lord, the number of churches within the federation would grow to such numbers that one day classes could be included in church life. Hence references to classes were retained in the adopted Church Order, be it with built-in modifications to make the Church Order operable while the formation of classes was awaited. References to a Regional Synod were deleted altogether. This could, if the Lord would grant the need, be easily re-inserted.

As it is, the latest Synod of the FRCA (July, 2000) decided to divide the current ten churches of the bond into two classes. With this decision, the modifications built into the Church Order have been superseded. Nevertheless, for the sake of this publication, I have chosen to work with the Church Order as it was - and so the reader will find footnotes in this chapter too illustrating how the Australian churches have modified the Church Order to make it operable in their circumstances.

## **2. Legitimacy of the Assemblies**

We turn first to the question whether Scriptures desire ecclesiastical assemblies. As we saw in Chapter 1. it is evident that Yes, the Lord wills each church to have a consistory. In Scripture we read how, during the founding years of the New Testament church, the apostles Paul and Barnabas returned to the cities where they had earlier preached the Gospel in order to appoint *"elders in every church"* (Acts 14:23). Note the plural; each church received more than one elder. Similarly, in Acts 20:17 we read that Paul sent from Miletus for the elders of Ephesus and in verse 28 these elders collectively are reminded of their task of overseeing God's church. In 1 Timothy 4:14 Paul uses the term 'eldership', denoting the body of elders. From these data we conclude that the elders of a given church were not to exercise their office in isolation from each other; they were instead to work together, form a team, be a leadership-giving-body (see Acts 15:6). This leadership-giving-body is known in churches of continental origin as a 'consistory'. (In churches of English origin this body is commonly known as a 'session'.)

Classes and synods on the other hand are not specifically commanded by the Lord; one looks in vain in Scripture for references to such institutions. Nevertheless, it is evident from God's Word that the presence of these two kinds of assemblies amongst His churches is His will. In 1 Corinthians 16:1 <sup>113</sup> Paul speaks of the **"churches of Galatia."** These churches were separate from each other (each, for example, was governed by their own elders who were responsible for the local church: see Chapter 4, Paragraph 2.5). Yet these *"churches of Galatia"* knew each other and did things together; in this case, Paul instructed them to cooperate in collecting for the poor. In 1 Corinthians 16:19 Paul passes on greetings from the **"churches of Asia."** In 2 Corinthians 8:1 Paul informs the Corinthian brethren of what he witnessed concerning evidence of God's grace amongst the **"churches of Macedonia."** The repeated use of the plural implies that the churches of Galatia, Asia and Macedonia were seen as distinct entities (hence the plural), and at the same time associated together (hence the geographic reference). Since there is *"one, holy, catholic church,"* the churches of the Lord need to cooperate with each other, to stand beside and support each other. Just as individual church members exercise communion of saints within a congregation, individual churches can likewise exercise communion of saints by meeting together, for mutual benefit, with ever increasing numbers of neighbouring churches. These meetings are termed 'classes' (plural of classis) and 'synods'.

### 3. Nature of the Assemblies

#### 3.1 Consistory

That elders of a given church meet together from time to time to discuss together the care of the flock entrusted to them follows from the passages of Scripture just mentioned in Paragraph 2 above. The Church Order formulates it this way:

**FRCA: Article 36 - Consistory (CanRC: Article 38)**

*In all the churches there shall be a consistory composed of the ministers) of the Word and the elders. It shall meet regularly....*

It is at this level that the Lord has placed authority within His church. It is, for example, the elders of Ephesus together, and not a body of regional office-bearers, who receive instruction to "take heed ... to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers" (Acts 20:28). Any matter relevant to the good government of the Lord's church in a given place may be placed on the agenda of the Consistory (see Matthew 18:17).

It should be noted that the deacons receive no official place in the 'Consistory'. This is because authority in Christ's church rests with the elders. Yet the churches have agreed that particular functions of the Consistory <sup>114</sup> require the input of the deacons. See below, Paragraph 7.1.1. The meetings of elders and deacons together are variously known as 'church council' (vs 'consistory') or 'broad consistory' (vs 'narrow consistory') or 'elders only' (vs 'elders with deacons').

Deacons, as elders, also need to meet together from time to time to discuss the work assigned to them. This is recognised by the churches:

**FRCA: Article 40 - Meetings of deacons (CanRC: Article 42)**

*The deacons shall meet regularly to deal with the matters pertaining to their office. Their meetings shall begin and end with prayer.*

#### 3.2 Classis

Although each individual church is complete in Christ and therefore autonomous, the churches together have understood that the Lord wishes His churches to cooperate for mutual benefit. See Chapter 1, Paragraph 3. Consequently, the churches have agreed that churches in relative proximity should meet together from time to time.

**FRCA: Article 41 - Classis (CanRC: Article 44)**

*Neighbouring churches shall come together in a classis....*

The term 'classis' denotes this meeting of churches-in-relative-proximity. (A secondary use of the term 'classis' denotes the geographic area in which the churches-that-meet-in-classis are located.) The agendas of classes should be comprised of those matters of local concern that the local churches could not finalise on their own (see below).

The agreement is that "neighbouring churches shall come together in a classis. " As one cannot choose one's brothers and sisters, and one cannot choose who shall be members of 'my' congregation, so too one cannot choose who shall belong to 'my' classis. If the Lord has made churches one in faith, these churches express that unity by working together - and so encouraging uniformity of thinking and practice. In that regard, theologically determined classes (instead of geographically determined classes) ought to be avoided.

#### 3.3 Synod

From time to time, classes send delegates to a meeting of all the churches in the federation. This meeting-of-all-the-churches is termed a 'synod'. Synods deal only with matters that could not be finalised in the classical assemblies, plus issues common to all

the churches (cf Article 30; see below for more details). <sup>115</sup>

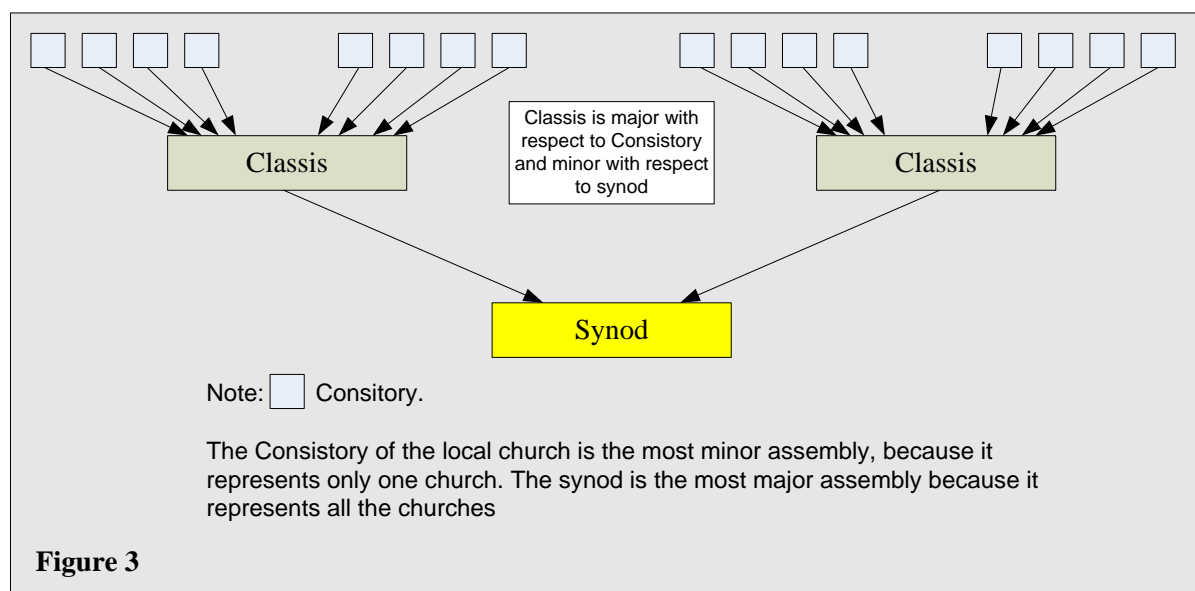
### 3.4 Regional Synod

Article 29 of the Canadian Church Order places between classis and (general) synod a fourth assembly known as the regional synod. Classes in relative proximity meet together annually to give each other whatever assistance is required, as well as to expedite matters that cannot be finished by classis. In this structure it is the regional synod that sends delegates to the general synod. As mentioned earlier, the small size of the bond of Free Reformed Churches of Australia has prompted this federation to delete references to a regional synod from its Church Order.

Classes and synods give expression to the unity God has placed in His church. They also serve to stand beside and support (the Consistory of) the local church. The reader is referred to Chapter 1, Paragraph 3. for an extensive discussion of these Scriptural principles behind the major assemblies.

## 4. Relationship Between the Assemblies

The three ecclesiastical assemblies of consistory, classis and synod are also referred to as minor and major assemblies. A consistory, representing only one church, is the most minor assembly. Any assembly that is broader in its representation than one church is called a *major* assembly relative to an assembly narrower in its representation (see Figure 3).



<sup>116</sup>

Major assemblies are not *higher* assemblies with more authority, but *broader* assemblies with *no* God-given authority. It was only to the most minor assembly, the consistory, that the Lord Jesus Christ assigned authority of their own. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in "every church" (Acts 14:23), Titus was told to "appoint elders in every city" (Titus 1:5), and Paul charged the elders of Ephesus to "take heed to ... all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has may you overseers" (Acts 20:28). The elders' authority extended no further than the church in which they were appointed to office; the elders in Antioch had no authority over the church at Derbe. If no elder has any authority in any church other than his own, no meeting of ciders from a number of churches has any authority over the churches represented at that meeting - whether it be classis or synod. Major assemblies, then, cannot be said to have authority. In the diagram 1 have endeavoured to convey this concept by placing the consistory at the top of the diagram.

Under Christ this is where the (highest and only) authority lies.

Reformed church polity recognises, however, that major assemblies do have something to say to the local churches. The churches formulate the matter like this in the Church Order:

**FRCA: Article 35 - Jurisdiction (CanRC: Article 37)**

*The classis has the same jurisdiction over the consistory as the synod has over the classis.*<sup>20</sup>

The term 'jurisdiction' may not be the best possible term for the intended concept, but I am not aware of a better term. The term is used to communicate what its Latin roots literally mean: to have 'the right of say'. A meeting of the churches in a classical resort has no inherent authority over the individual churches. For example, a classis cannot tell a vacant church within its resort which minister it must call. However, the churches have agreed to consider settled and binding whatever a major assembly has decided. In this sense, a major assembly may be said to have authority. However, since the term 'authority' conjures up in one's mind the notion of a 'higher' speaking down to a 'lower', it is wiser to avoid the term in the context of major assemblies. 'Jurisdiction' communicates the intended concept; major assemblies have a 'right of say'.

Why would the churches agree to accept as settled and binding what the major assemblies have decided? Scriptures have taught that seeking advice and listening to each other is necessary and important. Solomon was moved by the Holy Spirit to write: "Where there is no counsel, the people fall; but in the multitude of counsellors there is safety" (Proverbs 11:14) <sup>117</sup> and "Without counsel, plans go awry, but in the multitude of counsellors they are established" (Proverbs 15:22).

From passages of Scripture as these, one must conclude that it is foolish for a local congregation to be independent, set on going its own way and ignoring its neighbouring churches. In other words, as churches too, we need each other in decision-making processes, and so we do well to listen to what the other has to say. That is why the churches have agreed to give to major assemblies the *right to say* something (on particular matters) to 'its' congregations, and the churches have *agreed* to accept what the major assemblies say - unless, of course, a decision of a major assembly is contrary to Scripture.

Since the churches have agreed that the decisions of major assemblies shall be binding on them, the onus is on every church to go through the *Acts* of the major assembly in order to learn what decisions have been laid on their path, and then to act accordingly. At the same time, no church may blindly swallow each and every decision of a major assembly. The brothers present at the major assembly are sinful men, and so, despite their best efforts, their decisions could be contrary to what the Head of the Church has revealed in His Word. Churches need to weigh whether these decisions are indeed pleasing to the Lord. It is obvious that when a decision is not pleasing to the Lord, the principle of Acts 5:29 applies, "*We ought to obey God rather than men.*"

## 5. Delegation to Major Assemblies

The churches have agreed that each church shall send two delegates to a classis.

**FRCA: Article 41 Classis (CanRC: Article 44)**

*Neighbouring churches shall come together in a classis by delegating a minister and an elder, or if a church has no minister, two elders.*

Each classis in turn "*shall delegate two ministers and two elders to synod*" (FRCA, Article 45). This means that some churches in a classis might not have a delegate at a (regional or general) synod. One cannot call this an 'unfair representation' for delegates at a synod are not representatives of their consistories. The most able men, because of their wisdom, are delegated to attend synod in order to decide on matters for the benefit of

the churchy. At major assemblies delegates do not speak on behalf of their respective consistories, but they speak on their own right as members of that major assembly. Decisions made by a major assembly, then, are not binding to the churches because one's own representative was there to <sup>118</sup> help make the decision; rather, decisions are binding because the churches have agreed to accept the decisions made. And keeping one's promise characterises the child of God (cf Psalm 15:4).

It is striking that the churches have historically seen no need to stipulate (hat the same persons ought not to attend the major assemblies repeatedly. It remains in the judgment of the churches whether a given brother is the best person to send to this meeting of the churches - even if he was delegated to (a) previous Synod(s). At the same time, it should be noted that where requests for revision of a decision of one Synod appear on the agenda of the next, there is wisdom in refraining from making delegates to the previous Synod judges of their own decisions. The same is true when decisions of minor assemblies are appealed to the major assembly. The churches have given expression to this matter in an article that speaks also of credentials:

**FRCA: Article 32 - Credentials and Voting (CanRC: Article 32)**

*Delegates lo a major assembly shall bring with them their credentials, signed by the minor assembly. They shall have a vole in all matters except those in which either they themselves or their churches are directly involved.*

By means of these credentials the major assembly is officially informed of who it is that the minor assembly has delegated to that major assembly. That is why delegates to classis have their credentials signed by their consistory and delegates to synod have their credentials signed by their classis.

Any given church may delegate to classis "a minister and an elder" Article 41). It may happen, though, that a church has more than one minister. In recognition of the training the minister has received, and the Scriptural principle that there is wisdom in numbers, the churches have agreed to sit non-delegated ministers at classis in an advisory capacity:

**FRCA: Article 42 - Ministers who are not delegated to a classis (CanRC: Article 44)**

*If two or more ministers are serving the same church, those who have not been delegated shall have the right to attend classis in an advisory capacity.*

## 6. Frequency of Assemblies

### 6.1 Consistory

To tend the flock entrusted to the care of the elders, it is necessary that the elders meet together from time to time (see Paragraph 2 of this Chapter). <sup>119</sup> The churches have agreed to no set frequency, since the needs of the congregations differ. The Australian churches agree that the consistory "shall meet regularly" (Article 36), while the Canadian churches agree that the consistory "shall meet at least once a month" (Article 38). In practice, elders meet on average at least twice per month.

### 6.2 Classis

Given the reason why major assemblies are necessary, it follows that the churches ought to meet together relatively frequently. One cannot be of assistance to each other if one does not meet together. For that reason, the churches have agreed that:

**FRCA: Article 41 - Classis (CanRC: Article 44)**

*Classes shall he held at least once every three months....*

Nothing beats face to face discussions with the sister churches in order to prevent straying apart and promote development and uniformity of thought.

### 6.3 Synod

The heart of church life revolves around the local churches. The assistance needed in the local churches from the federation comes via classes. This in turn means that a meeting of all the churches in the federation need not occur with near the frequency that classes meet. The time interval between Synods, then, is agreed in the Church Order to be "once every three years"<sup>21</sup> (FRCA Article 45; CanRC Article 49).

### 6.4 Regional Synod

In order to keep matters closer to the local churches (as well as provide another court of appeal if necessary), the Canadian Reformed Churches have agreed that a number of classes should meet together from time to time to discuss matters relevant to the churches of that geographic area. The churches have agreed that *"each year some neighbouring classes shall send delegates to meet in a regional synod"* (Article 47). Because of the small size of the bond of Free Reformed Churches of Australia, these churches have deleted references to the Regional Synod from the Church Order they inherited from Dort.

## 7. Tasks of the Assemblies

### 7.1 Consistory

The task of the consistory has already been discussed in relation to Article 20, which reads: <sup>120</sup>

#### **FRCA: Article 20 - Task of elders (CanRC: Article 22)**

*The elders shall together with the ministers of the Word govern the congregation with pastoral care and discipline. For the upbuilding of the congregation they shall make homevisits as often as is profitable but at least once a year. They shall watch that their fellow office-bearers are faithful in carrying out their duties and ensure that in the congregation everything is done decently and in good order.*

This Article reflects the scriptural command given to the elders of Ephesus as we read it in Acts 20:28, *"Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood."* The instruction of the passage is given not to elders individually, but to all of them (in Ephesus) together. To carry out this task, the elders need to meet together to discuss the needs of the sheep of the flock in their care.

Since the God-given task of the elders is to tend the flock of God, it will not do for a consistory to get involved in politics, social concerns in the community, economic issues in the land or any other such unecclesiastical matters. This same principle applies equally to the matters to be dealt with by the other assemblies. Such matters fall outside the domain of activity God has set for the overseers of His church. So the churches have agreed that ecclesiastical meetings shall deal only with ecclesiastical matters.

#### **FRCA: Article 30 - Authority of the assemblies (CanRC: Article 30)**

*These assemblies shall only deal with ecclesiastical matters and in an ecclesiastical manner....*

Those latter words, that assemblies are to deal with matters *"in an ecclesiastical manner,"* reflect the fact that office-bearers speak Christ's Word. Their authority rises not from the force of muscle, but only from being able to show from Scripture that "this is what the Lord says." Imposing fines or jail sentences on erring members, then, is unacceptable conduct for office-bearers. (Unfortunately, history is not without its



examples of assemblies dealing in unecclesiastical ways.)

### 7.1.1 Consistory with the Deacons

In carrying out their task of governing the congregation entrusted to their care, the elders need from time to time to meet also with the deacons. Matters not directly pastoral in nature are discussed and decided upon in this meeting with the deacons. <sup>121</sup>

**FRCA: Article 36- Consistory (CanRC: no parallel agreement)**

*In all the churches there shall be a consistory composed of the ministers) of the Word and the elders.... **The consistory shall also meet regularly with the deacons to deal with those matters as described for that purpose by the Church Order, and further with all things which the consistory considers necessary for general management, including the material affairs of the church.***

At such meetings with the deacons, matters of finance, budgeting, mission work, synod matters and the like receive attention. The churches have also agreed that it is right and proper for the elders to involve the deacons in deciding certain matters essential to the health of the congregation. The following three items, as mentioned in the Church Order, pertain to the acquisition and release of office-bearers.

♦ **The calling to office:**

**FRCA: Article 3 - The calling to office (CanRC: Article 3)**

*The calling to office shall take place by the consistory **with the deacons**.... The consistory **with the deacons** shall give the congregation the opportunity to draw the attention of the consistory to brothers deemed suitable for the respective offices. The consistory **with the deacons** shall present to the congregation at the most twice as many candidates as there are vacancies to be filled.... Those elected shall be appointed by the consistory **with the deacons**.*

♦ **The release of a minister from a church:**

**FRCA: Article 7- From one church to another (CanRC: Article 9)**

*A minister once lawfully called shall not leave the church to which he is bound to take up the ministry elsewhere without the consent of his consistory **with the deacons** and the approval of classis.*

♦ **The dismissal of a minister:**

**FRCA: Article 14 - Dismissal (CanRC: Article 11)**

*The consistory **with the deacons** shall not dismiss a minister from his bond with the congregation without the approval of classis....*

It should be borne in mind that, even as elders and deacons meet together to decide particular matters, the two offices have received different mandates from the Head of the Church. Each office-bearer is to focus his attention on his own mandate, and not interfere in the work of the other office. This, however, does not exclude the need for good and close cooperation <sup>122</sup> between elders and deacons. Such cooperation is enhanced by meeting together from time to time.

### 7.1.2 Deacons added to the Consistory

Although the churches agree that a consistory is composed of the ministers) and the elders, the churches make allowance for the deacons to be included with the consistory if numbers so require it:

**FRCA: Article 37- Consistory and the deacons (CanRC: Article 39)**

*Where the number of elders and deacons is small **the deacons may be added***

**to the consistory by local arrangement.** *This shall invariably be done where there are less than three elders and less than three deacons. In these circumstances matters pertaining to supervision and discipline shall be handled with the advice of the deacons and matters pertaining to the office of deacons with the advice of the elders.*

Forming one body together so that neither office makes decisions on the strength of input from less than three brothers is Scripturally wise. One brother responsible for making all the decisions of a given office leaves the brother wide open to the temptation of acting as a monarch; two brothers responsible for making all the decisions leaves open the possibility for a stand off between the two brothers. Neither situation is healthy for the church of Jesus Christ. Hence the wisdom of having a minimum of three office-bearers in a given office, and, if that is not possible, to draw on the brother(s) of the other office.

It should be noted that in Article 30 of the *Belgic Confession* we confess that the ministers and elders, together with the deacons, form the consistory: *"We believe that this true Church must be governed according to the Spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in His Word. There should be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments; there should also be **elders and deacons who, together with the pastors, form the council of the Church.**"*

Such was the case when deBres wrote the *Belgic Confession* in 1561, and it was still so in 1568 when the Convent of Wezel<sup>22</sup> drew up a Church Order. Due to historical reasons, however, the deacons in subsequent years became increasingly involved in financial matters, so that a separation developed between the offices of minister and elder on the one hand and the office of deacon on the other. This development was reflected in the Church Order of Dort, 1618-1619. On the basis of Scripture one cannot say that the one is more correct than the other is. Our Church Order today<sup>123</sup> stipulates neither of the two extremes above, but has the deacons working together with the consistory in certain matters. It should also be added that standard practice in the churches has elders and deacons commonly cooperating together as required. Nevertheless, it should be clear that the Lord has given different mandates to elders and deacons respectively, and these different mandates must be kept in mind as the office-bearers do their work, also when they meet together.

## 7.2 Classis

The churches involve classis in matters they themselves were unable to finalise. If local churches have a problem, such as a difficult discipline case, they may seek advice from their neighbouring churches via classis. As slated earlier, it is a scriptural principle that there is wisdom in consulting together. Classis, then, does not set its own agenda, but the churches that meet together list the items each church may wish on the agenda. The churches have agreed to the following:

**FRCA: Article 30 - Authority of the assemblies (CanRC: Article 30)**

*... A major assembly shall deal only with matters which could not be finished in the minor assembly or which belong to its churches in common. A new matter may be put on its agenda only when the minor assembly has dealt with it.*

The churches have also agreed to assign certain tasks to classes. Within the communion of the churches it is needful to be the brothers' keeper. Hence:

### ♦ Church visitation:

**FRCA: Article 44-Church Visitors (CanRC: Article 46)**

*Each year classis shall authorise at least two of the more experienced and able ministers to visit the churches in that year. If necessary the **classis** may authorise a capable elder to carry out this task together with a minister. It shall*

*be the task of these visitors to inquire whether all things are regulated and done in full harmony with the Word of God, whether the office-bearers fulfil the duties of their office faithfully as they have promised, and whether the Church Order is being observed and maintained in every respect, in order that they may in good time fraternally admonish those who are found negligent in any thing, and that by their good counsel and advice all things may be directed towards the edification and preservation of Christ's church. They shall submit written reports of their visits to **classis**.*<sup>23</sup> **124**

Church visitation serves to assure the churches that when they meet together in their assemblies they are meeting as churches which are faithful in their service of the Lord. The fact that Satan attacks Christ's churches relentlessly, plus the fact that office-bearers are sinful, means that churches can stray from the truth of God. Paul's warning to the elders of Ephesus to "take heed to yourselves" (Acts 20:28) is translated by the churches into a duty for the churches together at classis to keep an eye on each other. This is officially done via church visitors. These church visitors are to inquire whether the office-bearers are faithful in carrying out their respective offices, ensuring faithful preaching, pure administration of the sacraments and the exercising of church discipline. If the church visited is found to be a faithful church of the Lord, the visitors report this to classis, testifying thereby to the other churches in classis that this is a worthy sister church with which they can work together. When church visitors find a church to be unfaithful in any matter, they must speak to the consistory, not on their own authority, but on the basis of Scripture, in brotherly admonition. On the basis of the consistory's response to the admonition the visitors report to classis.

♦ **The appointment of counsellors for vacant churches:**

**FRCA: Article 43 - Counsellors (CanRC: Article 45, Article 4)**

*Each vacant church shall request classis to appoint as counsellor the minister it desires as such, to the end that he may assist the consistory in maintaining good order and especially may lend his aid in the matter of the calling of a minister; he shall also sign the letter of call.*<sup>24</sup>

The value of a theological training is recognised in this article. When a church has no minister of the Word, the neighbouring churches through classis come to its assistance by appointing one of the neighbouring ministers to the role of counsellor. His task is to stay informed of matters pertaining to the vacant church, and ensure that good order is maintained in all matters, for example, that office-bearers are appointed according to the correct procedures. He is also to give advice as required.

It should be noted that the counsellor is not made an office-bearer of the vacant congregation. Office-bearers have authority in their own congregation alone. This is true of the counsellor as well. Nevertheless, the principles drawn out in Chapter 1, Paragraph 3 obligate the Consistory of the vacant church to make use of the counsellor.

♦ **Eligibility for the ministry and ordination or installation:**

The churches have agreed to involve each other via classis when a vacant church calls a man to be its minister.<sup>125</sup>

**FRCA: Article 5.B - Eligibility for the ministry (CanRC Article 4.B)**

*Only those shall be declared eligible for call within the churches who*  
*(1) have passed a preparatory examination by the classis in which they live ...*<sup>25</sup>

**FRCA: Article 6- Ordination and installation of ministers of the Word (CanRC: Article 5)**

*A. Regarding those who have not served in the ministry: before, the following shall be observed:*

*I. They shall be ordained only after classis has approved the call.*

*The classis shall approve the call ... b. following a peremptory examination of the candidate....*

*B. regarding those who have served in the ministry the following shall be observed:*

*They shall be installed after classis has approved the call....*

Again, the principles listed in Chapter I, Paragraph 3 form the motivation for this agreement between the churches. It is wise to consult with the brotherhood in a matter as weighty as receiving a Minister of the Word. Further, the minister's work in one congregation invariably affects the neighbouring congregations. So the neighbouring congregations should receive opportunity to comment on the man's faithfulness to Scripture.

♦ **Release of a minister:**

The churches within the bond are, by God's ordinance, to work together. So a minister's task affects not just his own congregation but also the neighbouring churches. For that reason the churches have agreed that no minister shall cease his work in a congregation of a given classical resort unless classis has provided a release:

**FRCA: Article 6 - Ordination and installation of ministers of the Word (CanRC: Article 5)**

**B.** *Regarding those who are serving in the ministry the following shall be observed:*

*They shall be installed after classis has approved the call.*

*1. For this approval as well as for the installation the minister shall show ...a declaration ... from **classis** that he has been honourably discharged from his service in that... **classis**...* <sup>126</sup>

This principle pertains also to being called to an extraordinary task (Article 12), dismissal from office (Article 14), and entering another vocation (Article 15).

♦ **Dealing with appeals from church members:**

Decisions made by ecclesiastical assemblies are binding. The Head of the Church has given authority to the Consistory, and so it is for the members of the congregation to accept the decisions made by the Consistory.

Nevertheless, it remains a fact that the brothers of a consistory are sinful men who can make mistakes. For the protection of the wronged member, then, the churches have recognised that within the bond of churches the Lord provides a way for a wrong to be corrected. Here, then, is another task for classis:

**FRCA: Article 31 -Appeals (CanRC Article 31)**

*If anyone complains that he has been wronged by the decision of a minor assembly he shall have the right of appeal to the major assembly; and whatever may be agreed upon by a majority vote shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved to be in conflict with the Word of God or with the Church Order.*<sup>26</sup>

Important here is the motive of the appellant. Every church member must adopt for himself the attitude that it is the Lord who, in His care for the congregation, has given specific brothers as office-bearers to the congregation. Therefore, when a consistory gives its judgment in a matter, the congregation members must start with the premise that the brothers aim to perform their office correctly. If it nevertheless appears that consistory erred over against a member, it must be with a spirit of reluctance that he appeals to classis. Likewise, if classis errs, it is with a spirit of reluctance that an appeal

is sent to synod. Appeals should not be regarded as a matter of course for one to pursue if one does not get his way.

### 7.3 Regional Synod

The Canadian Reformed Churches have agreed to the following about Regional Synod:

**CanRC: Article 47 - Regional Synod (FRCA: no parallel agreement)**

*Each year some neighbouring classes shall send delegates to meet in a regional synod. To this regional synod each classis shall delegate four ministers and four elders. If there are three classes, the number <sup>127</sup> shall be three ministers and three elders; if there are four or more classes, the number shall be two ministers and two elders.*

At the close of the regional as well as of the general synod the time and place of the next synod shall be determined and the convening Church for that meeting appointed.

*In case it appears necessary to convene a regional or general synod before the appointed time, the convening Church shall determine the time and place with the advice of the classis or regional synod respectively.*

*At the last regional synod before the general synod delegates shall be chosen to that general synod.*

The task of regional synod is captured in Article 30 (see below).

### 7.4 General Synod

The churches have agreed to the following about synods specifically:

**FRCA: Article 45 - Synod (CanRC: Article 49)**

*The synod shall be held once every three years. Each classis shall delegate two ministers and two elders to synod. At the close of synod the time and place for the next synod shall be determined and a church shall be appointed to convene it. A synod shall be convened before the appointed time if according to the judgment of at least two classes this appears necessary. Its time and place shall be decided by the church appointed as convening church for the next regular synod, subject to the approval of its classis.<sup>27</sup>*

The task of synod has already been stated in Article 30:

**FRCA: Article 30 - Authority of the assemblies (CanRC: Article 30)**

*These assemblies shall only deal with ecclesiastical matters and in an ecclesiastical manner. A major assembly shall deal only with matters which could not be finished in the minor assembly or which belong to its churches in common. A new matter may be put on its agenda only when the minor assembly has dealt with it.*

Unfinished matters from the minor assembly rightly on the agenda of regional synod would include matters as classes formation and appeals. Matters belonging to the agenda of the general synod include matters as Bible translations, training for the ministry or relationships with churches abroad. In the Free Reformed Churches of Australia, where no Regional Synod is possible, matters that otherwise would have a place on <sup>128</sup> the agenda of Regional Synod now receive a place on the agenda of General Synod.

That relationships with other churches is not a local matter but instead a matter for the bond of churches together is specifically acknowledged in the Church Order:

**FRCA: Article 46 - Relationship with other churches (CanRC: Article 50)**

*The relationship with other churches shall be regulated by synod. With churches*

*of Reformed confession sister relations shall be maintained as much as possible. On non-essential points of ecclesiastical practice other churches shall not be rejected.*

Non-essential points of ecclesiastical practice are, for example, the number of times a baby is sprinkled with water at baptism, whether to stand or sit for the Lord's Supper, whether people should kneel for prayer. The question of who a Consistory may permit to the Lord's table is not a "nonessential point of ecclesiastical practice" since it receives particular attention in Article 57 (see below).

As is the case with classis, so also a synod has no authority. Its agenda is put together by the churches (through the minor assemblies) and the churches agree to accept what Synod decides, unless its decisions are contrary to Scripture.

Synods are short lived. Once the established agenda is completed, a Synod no longer exists. Yet instances arise where the mind of the bond of churches is required or where decisions made by Synod need to be executed. Accordingly, the churches have agreed that Synod may appoint deputies to carry out specific tasks.

**FRCA: Article 48 -Deputies of major assemblies (CanRC: Article 48)**

*Each synod shall appoint deputies who are to assist the classes in all matters provided for in the Church Order. A classis may request these deputies to assist in cases of special difficulties. Each synod shall also appoint deputies to carry out its own decisions. Different deputies shall be appointed as much as possible for separate matters. All deputies shall keep proper record of their work and submit a written report.*

With regard to deputies assisting in "all matters provided for in the Church Order," these matters refer to the ordination and installation of ministers <sup>129</sup> (FRCA Article 14; CanRC Article 11). and the deposition of ministers (FRCA Article 76; CanRC Article 71). The Canadian churches also require the assistance of deputies of (regional) synod at the retirement of ministers (CanRC Article 13).

With regard to deputies carrying out synod's own decisions, the reference is to persons being made responsible for relations with other churches, Bible translation, training for the ministry, synod procedures and rules, archives and library of synod, etc. Since deputies function on behalf of the churches, they must report to the churches assembled in (next) Synod on the work they have done.

## **8. Other Matters Pertaining to Assemblies**

### **8.1 Prayer and Censure**

**FRCA: Article 29 - Proceedings (CanRC: Article 34)**

*The proceedings of all assemblies shall begin and end with prayer.*

One might question the necessity of including such an article in the Church Order. However, its inclusion is important for two reasons. One, it serves to impress that our help is in the Name of the Lord (Psalm 124:8). At every assembly the brothers are busy with the Lord's work. Before the brothers begin their work they need to ask the Lord for wisdom to make decisions that are pleasing to Him and of benefit to His churches. On completion of their work they do well to ask for the Lord's blessing on the decisions made.

Secondly, this agreement serves to undergird the stipulation of two other articles in the Church Order. The brothers that meet in the assemblies remain sinful brothers, and in recognition of this fact, the churches have given to the chairman of an assembly a mandate:



**FRCA: Article 34 - Chairman and clerk (CanRC: Article 35)**

*In all assemblies there shall be a chairman.... The chairman's task is to ... deny the floor to those who argue about minor things or who let themselves be carried away and cannot control their emotions, and discipline those who refuse to listen.*

Further,

**FRCA: Article 47 - Censure in classis and synod (CanRC: Article 44)**

*At the close of the major assemblies censure shall be exercised over those who in the meeting have done something worthy of reproof.* <sup>130</sup>

When there has been unbrotherly conduct and disharmony in a meeting, prayer is not possible unless there has been reconciliation. See Matthew 5:23,24. By agreeing to the need for prayer at the close of meetings of the churches, the churches ensure that peace and harmony prevails amongst the brothers individually and the churches collectively.

## 8.2 Tasks of the chairman and clerk I Record Keeping

**FRCA: Article 34 - Chairman and clerk (CanRC: Articles 35 and 36)**

*In all assemblies there shall be a chairman and a clerk. The chairman's task is to present and explain clearly the matters to be dealt with and ensure that every one observes due order in speaking.... His task shall cease when the assembly ends. The clerk shall keep an accurate record of all things worthy of being recorded.*

Local rules will outline the tasks of the chairman and the clerk in far more detail. Keeping accurate records of previous decisions and their grounds is important for a couple of reasons. One is simply the matter of consistency and continuity. Further, the churches have agreed not to reopen a settled matter without good reasons:

**FRCA: Article 33 - Proposals (CanRC: Article 33)**

*Matters once decided upon may not be proposed again unless they are substantiated by new grounds.*

Hence:

**FRCA: Article 49-Archives (CanRC: Article 43)**

*The assemblies shall ensure that proper care is taken of the archives.*

## 8.3 Constitution of a Consistory /Places without a Consistory

The churches have agreed that before a new congregation can be instituted, concurring advice of classis is required.

**FRCA: Article 38 - Constitution of a consistory (CanRC: Article 40)**

*If a consistory is to be constituted for the first time or anew, the advice of classis shall be sought.* <sup>28</sup>

The churches have agreed to seek advice from the neighbouring churches because the new congregation will become a member of the federation. Then the federation of churches (via classis) will want to be satisfied that the motives for institution are valid (or is it an attempt to break <sup>131</sup> away from a disliked minister or consistory - which is an unchristian attitude), that there are adequate office-bearers to tend to the needs of the sheep in this new flock, and that the new congregation can survive (though assistance can be offered here if necessary). In short, the churches need to be assured that this new church is a worthy member of the bond of churches. Until such times as a consistory can be constituted, the churches have agreed to the following arrangement:

**FRCA: Article 39 - Places without a consistory (CanRC: Article 41)**

*Places where as yet no consistory can be constituted shall be assigned by classis to the care of a neighbouring consistory.*<sup>29</sup>

The churches have included this stipulation in the Church Order to ensure that all sheep of the Lord receive the pastoral care they require. Yet even here the Scriptural principle of decentralisation implies that a new church should be instituted in the new locality as soon as feasible.

## 8.4 Mission Work

The gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ has been entrusted to the church ( 1 Timothy 3:15; 4:6). The church is charged by the Lord to bring this gospel to the ends of the earth (Matthew 28:19). Each church, then, has the privileged obligation to do all within its ability to cause the gospel to go out to those who do not know the Lord. However, not every church has within its own membership the means to support a missionary. It is fitting, then, that the churches of a given area cooperate together in mission work. This is what the churches have agreed to do.

### **FRCA: Article 50 - Mission (CanRC: Article 51)**

*The churches shall endeavour to fulfil their missionary task. In doing so they shall observe the provisions of this Church Order. When churches cooperate in mission work they shall as much as possible observe the division into classes.*

It could be argued that the matter of Mission would be better placed in Section I of the Church Order. The reason for its placement in Section 2 is because it speaks of the churches engaging in mission work cooperatively in classical areas.

## 9. Assemblies in the FRCA without Formal Classes

For some fifty years since the inception of the bond of Free Reformed Churches in Australia, these churches in practice knew only two of the traditional <sup>132</sup> ecclesiastical assemblies. These are the Consistory and the Synod. A level between this most minor and most major assembly was artificially filled by the formation of a so-called 'classis-church'. Many of the functions relegated in the Church Order of Dort to classis (= a meeting of a number of churches in a given area) are in the FRCA relegated to this 'classis-church'.

By a decision of Synod, a 'classis-church' was assigned to each church within the bond. Specifically, a given church's assigned 'classis-church' was simply the next church in alphabetical order, regardless of geographic proximity. Upon receipt of material for classis agenda, the consistory of the classis-church declared its consistory meeting to be a classis, and then proceeded to deal with the item(s) placed on its agenda by (members of) the church for which it was to function as classis. The church that needed classis involvement for the proper functioning of church life in its congregation was permitted to send two delegates to classis.

In the event that an appeal was needed against any decision of classis-church, the consistory of the *preceding* church in alphabetical order served as "second appeal church". (Here the opportunity provided by the Regional Synod is simulated.) So Article 31 of the italicised section of the Church Order (and "*articles in italic print are in force until classes have been formed*". see Acts 1994, Article 32 and Appendix D of these Acts) specifies the following:

### **FRCA: Article 31 -Appeals**

*As long as there are no classes, appeals under Article 31 CO shall be conducted as follows:*

- a. stage 1: to the appointed classis church*
- b. stage 2: to the appointed second appeal church*
- c. stage 3: to the synod.*

*Note: stage 2 will not function when an appeal is made within two months prior to a synod.*

Meanwhile, to get around the fact that the churches did not meet each other, Synod 1956 already specified that synods would be held every two years as long as classes were not formed (*Acts*, Article 7). Further, some matters that obviously pertain to the churches as a whole were in the meantime relegated to Synod's agenda. The most obvious example is the matter of church visitation.

Does this system work? The answer is both Yes and No. Yes, in the sense that there was a court to which a consistory/appellant could turn for <sup>133</sup> advice/adjudication in any given matter. In this regard, the concept of classis-church has assisted the FRCA to normalise church life to a large degree.

Yet experience has taught that there are distinct disadvantages to this system. First and foremost is the fact that the churches met together only once in two years. This was too infrequent to develop like-mindedness on issues important to church life. The result in turn was a gradual drifting apart, as well as the growth of an independentistic flavour among the churches. Further, one's classis-church could be geographically so far removed from a church seeking advice that it did not sufficiently understand the circumstance in which advice was sought. This has in the past led to some frustration and friction. Altogether, then, the sooner classes can be formed within a federation of churches, the better it shall be for church life.

Meanwhile, the practice in the Free Reformed Churches of Australia demonstrates that the principles of the Word of God can be filled out in various practical ways, depending on the local circumstances. In the kingdom of God there is place and need for creative imagination as one prayerfully seeks, within the parameters of God's revealed will, how best to promote the well-being of the churches of Jesus Christ.

<sup>134</sup>

## Chapter 6

### *Worship, Sacraments and Ceremonies*

#### **Articles 51-68**

The "Spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in His Word extends also to how things are done in public worship services. Holy God has given particular directives concerning these services, and so the churches have made agreements in relation to how things ought to be done regarding worship, sacraments and ceremonies.

#### **1. Worship**

Scripture teaches that the Holy Spirit works faith through the preaching. *"And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? ... So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God"* (Romans 10:14-17). This is echoed in the Lord's Day 25.65 of the *Heidelberg Catechism*:

*"Since then faith alone makes us share in Christ and all His benefits, where does this faith come from?"*

*From the Holy Spirit, who works it in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel, and strengthens it by the use of the sacraments."*

The preaching of the gospel is as critical for faith in God as food is for the health of the body. This given of Scripture has prompted the churches to make the following agreement in the Church Order for observance throughout the bond of churches: 135

#### **FRCA: Article 62 - Church services (CanRC: Article 52)**

*The consistory shall call the congregation together for church services twice on the Lord's Day.*

The church is the workshop of the Holy Spirit; here it is that the Spirit through the preaching is pleased to work faith in the hearts of the hearers. Note how this article goes further than simply stating that the consistory shall call the congregation together for church services. It also stipulates *the day* on which services should be held, and *the frequency* of the worship services.

#### **1.1 Church Services on the Lord's Day**

The churches have learned that the Lord would have the congregation come together for church services on the *Lord's Day*. For Old Testament Israel the Lord's Day was the Sabbath, the last day of the week (Exodus 20:8; Leviticus 26:2). In the New Testament the Day of the Lord has been moved from the last day of the week to the first day of the week. (From Article 63 it is clear that in Article 62 the term "Lord's Day" refers to the Sunday.) The transition of the Lord's Day from Sabbath to Sunday is based on developments that took place in the New Testament church after Jesus' death, as revealed to us in Scripture:

- John 20:1, 19: Here we read that the disciples assembled together on the day of Jesus' resurrection, which took place on the first day of the week. *"Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene went to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb.... Then, **the same day** at evening, **being the first day of the week**, when the doors were shut where **the disciples were assembled...."***
- John 20:26: *"And after eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, 'Peace to you!'"* John makes a point of telling us that "after eight days" the disciples were again

together. By Jewish reckoning, "after eight days" is again the Sunday - counting from Sunday to Sunday. By Old Testament regulation the disciples ought on this first day of the week to be at work: *"Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work..."* (Exodus 20:9, 10). Yet on this first day of the week they are not at work; they are instead assembled together. That the Lord was pleased with their absence from work and their assembling together on this first day of the week is confirmed by the fact that He met with His disciples on this day. <sup>136</sup>

- Acts 2:1 -4: *"When **the day of Pentecost** had fully come, **they were all with one accord in one place...**"* The term 'Pentecost' means 'fifty'; the day was fifty days after Jesus' resurrection from the dead (again, by Jewish reckoning, counting both the day of resurrection and the day of Pentecost). That makes Pentecost, like Easter, the first day of the week. This is the day of the week upon which the Lord was pleased to pour out His Holy Spirit. Further, we need to note that on this first day of the week the disciples were not at work but again assembled together - with the Lord's obvious approval.
- Acts 20:7: *"Now on the **first day of the week**, when **the disciples came together to break bread...**"* The pattern expressed in the weeks after Jesus' resurrection and confirmed on the day of Pentecost became the norm for the New Testament church. Nowhere do any of the apostles condemn or correct this pattern. On the contrary, the apostles approve it, and even command it, as the next quote shows.
- 1 Corinthians 16:1, 2: Paul made the following request of the saints at Corinth. *"Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also: On **the first day of the week** let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come."* The implication of this statement is that the Corinthian saints met together for worship not on the Sabbath but on the first day of the week. That is why Paul nominated this day for the saints to make their offerings for the collection for the saints.
- Revelation 1:10: John, exiled to the island of Patmos, records that he *"was in the Spirit **on the Lord's Day...**"* The 'Lord's Day' is a reference to the day of the week on which the Lord Jesus rose from the dead, i.e. the first day. If the Lord God wished His saints to give no special attention to this day, He would neither have called it "the Lord's Day" nor told us that John's vision came to him on this day of the week.

The above Scripture texts serve as adequate evidence for the churches to specify on which day of the week the Consistory must call the congregation together for church services, namely, *on the first day*.

## 1.2 Two Church Services Per Sunday

That people assembled together for worship on the first day of the week can quite easily be established on the basis of Scripture. What is not so clear from Scripture is the number of times people assembled on a Sunday.

It should be noted first of all that the day set aside for public worship is designated in Scripture as the *"Lord's Day"*. Though all days of the week <sup>137</sup> surely belong to the Lord, God claims this first day of the week in a special manner. This entire day is uniquely His, and so it is fitting that the people of God devote the entire day to Him.

An Old Testament example provides further instruction about how often the Consistory ought to call the people of God together. In Numbers 28:1-4 we read the following instruction from the Lord to Moses: *"Command the children of Israel, and say to them, 'My offering, My food for My offerings made by fire as a sweet aroma to Me, you shall be careful to offer to Me **at their appointed time**. 'And you shall say to them, 'This is the offering made by fire which you shall offer to the LORD: two male lambs in their first year without blemish, day by day, as a regular burnt offering. The one lamb you shall*

offer in the **morning**, the other lamb you shall offer in die evening.'" Although this instruction of the Lord related to the daily sacrifices rather than the weekly day of worship, inherent in it is a valuable principle that the churches over the centuries have taken to heart. By means of daily sacrifices offered both in the morning and in the evening, even *entire* day for each Israelite was bracketed by visible gospel preaching and prayer. The sacrifices were a visible proclamation of the gospel of substitution. Twice a day it was impressed upon the people that although it was they who deserved to die on account of their sins. God accepted the lambs the) sacrificed as atonement for their sins. God did so with a view to the death His Son. The Lamb would die in the future. If such a gospel should bracket the daily lives of the saints of the Old Testament, how much more should this be true for saints of the New Testament. To give expression to this reality, the churches have agreed that it is right and proper to call the congregations together for worship twice per Sunday. The whole day, from morning to evening, should be devoted to the Lord.

Besides, there needs to be opportunity for "*the whole counsel of God*" (Acts 20:27) to be proclaimed. The Holy Spirit has given the entire Word of God for the edification of God's people, and He is pleased to use the whole Word to work and strengthen faith. The evil one, meanwhile, goes out of his way to spread heresy. Paul warns the elders of Ephesus, "*For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock*" (Acts 20:29). In 2 Corinthians 11:13 Paul likewise warns against "*false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ.*" If at all possible, Satan will plant heresies amongst God's people, making the lie more appealing than the truth. In 2 Timothy 3:5-8 Paul urges Timothy to turn away from those "*having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away! ... Now as* <sup>138</sup> *Jannes and Jambres resisted Moses, so do these also resist the truth: men of corrupt minds, disapproved concerning the faith.*" The problem is that people like false teaching. "*For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, hut according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers: and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and he turned aside to fables*" (2 Timothy 4:3, 4). Timothy should not be surprised, for it is in the human heart to desire what is most pleasing to the self. Here, then, is further argument supporting the agreement of the churches to call the congregations together twice on the Lord's Day. In the face of the challenges of living in a world with devils filled, each threatening to undo the people of God, opportunity must be used to equip God's people for the battles of the coming week. Here is a further argument why "*the Consistory shall call the congregation together for church services twice on the Lord's Day.*"

But the man entrusted with the proclamation of the gospel (and the consistory overseeing his work also) is very much touched by the fall into sin. It is possible for a minister to preach his way through particular Bible books without touching on certain points of doctrine. Yes, it is possible that he is loathe to preach on a particular doctrinal matter and so avoids certain Scripture passages - with the result that the flock bought by Jesus' blood is not adequately armed against Satan's attacks. For that reason the churches agreed that in the church services the doctrine of the church be taught on a regular basis.

**FRCA: Article 63 - Catechism preaching (CanRC: Article 52)**

*The consistory shall ensure that as a rule once every Sunday the doctrine of God's Word as summarised in the Heidelberg Catechism is proclaimed, preferably in the afternoon service.*

Article 63 is evidence that the churches take seriously the need to ensure that Satan does not sabotage the work of the Holy Spirit through the preaching. Similar evidence arose earlier in the Church Order when agreement was made to ward off false doctrine (Article 26) and to demand signatures to the Subscription Form (Articles 24 and 25).



### 1.3 Singing in the Worship Services

Satan is cunning and will use whatever means available to divert people from the truth. Singing touches people's emotions and Satan will also play on these. In recognition of this reality, the churches have agreed what ought to be sung in a church service: <sup>139</sup>

**FRCA: Article 64 - Psalms and hymns (CanRC: Article 55)**

*In the church services only the psalms and hymns approved by synod shall be sung.*

The psalms mentioned in this article come from God Himself, in as much as they are the inspired songs of Scripture (be it put to rhyme by men). The hymns approved by synod also have distinct Scriptural origin, either in the sense that they are rhymed portions of Scripture itself or in the sense that they have been found to convey accurately the message of Scripture. Anything less than Scripturally faithful hymns would be inadequate in worship of holy God.

The churches cannot dictate what ought to be sung in the homes of the church members or the schools the children attend, simply because the churches may concern themselves only "*with ecclesiastical matters*" (FRCA Article 30; CanRC Article 30) and not with domestic or educational matters. Nevertheless, the arguments for prescribing the 150 psalms and a select number of hymns to be sung in church are equally valid for the homes and the schools. If the threefold triangle of church-home-school is to be a closely-knit triangle, the homes and schools do well to take careful note of the decisions of the churches - especially in an aspect of life where (as history has shown) heresy is sung much earlier than it is preached. Equally, elders do well to encourage parents and teachers to teach the children the songs of the church.

## 2. Sacraments

Preaching is the tool used by the Holy Spirit for working faith in people's hearts. By audible preaching the Spirit instils faith and by visible preaching (i.e. the administration of the sacraments) the Spirit strengthens faith (see Lord's Day 25). Satan seeks to choke the faith the Spirit works so that it perishes, and history proves how hard he has tried to twist, hollow out, or destroy the sacraments. For the sake of protecting God's church against Satan's attacks on the sacraments, and to ensure that faith is indeed strengthened by their use as God intended it, the churches have bound themselves to administer the sacraments only in certain conditions:

**FRCA: Article 51 -Administration of sacraments (CanRC: Article 56)**

*The sacraments shall be administered only in a church service by a minister of the Word with the use of the adopted Forms, and under the supervision of the elders.* <sup>140</sup>

The churches have agreed to four conditions under which the sacraments must be administered:

(a) *Only in a church service:*

The preaching of the gospel has been entrusted to the church, occurring under the supervision of the elders who are the official authority in the church. What is true of the audible preaching applies equally to the visible preaching; Word and sacraments cannot be separated. The sacraments, like the Word, are not (the private domain of the minister, the church member or a club, and so they cannot be administered outside the official gathering of God's people in worship. The sacraments belong to the church, the communion of saints, and so they must be administered where the saints are assembled and the elders are present.

(b) *By a minister of the Word;*

This stipulation emphasises the direct association between the sacraments and the

preaching. Audible preaching and visible preaching have essentially the same message. The man entrusted with the task of the audible preaching of the Gospel is also the man authorised to administer the sacraments - the visible preaching. The two may not be separated.

(c) *With the use of the adopted Forms:*

Scriptures teach that the heart of man is subtle and that Satan will do what he can to twist the truth of the gospel. What the Lord has revealed concerning baptism and holy supper is accurately captured in the "Form for the Baptism of Infants" and the "Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper", as adopted by the churches.<sup>30</sup> In order to protect the congregation from twisted doctrine, the churches have agreed that only these Forms shall be used in the administration of the sacraments. If a scriptural understanding of the gospel contained in the sacraments is not set before those who receive the sacraments, faith will not be strengthened as ought. And the preaching as a whole will deteriorate also.

(d) *Under the supervision of the elders:*

The elders have been charged to watch over the flock, ensuring that the flock receives the truth of God's Word. The visible preaching of the gospel in the sacraments, then, must come to the people not by the hand of one individual alone, but under the supervision of the elders.

## 2.1 Baptism

### 2.1.1 Infant Baptism

Baptism is the sign and seal of God's covenant. The content of this covenant is explained in detail in the adopted Forms referred to in Article 51.<sup>141</sup> That God includes children in His covenant is clear from the following Scripture texts:

- Genesis 17:7-14: God said to Abram, *"And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you."* God made His covenant not with the man Abram alone, but also with *his seed*. That God specifically included also the children in His covenant of grace is pointed up in the fact that every male child born to Abram's house was to receive in his flesh, already at the early age of eight days, the sign of God's covenant. Said God, *"This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me **and your descendants** after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised.... He who is **eight days old** among you shall be circumcised...."* If a child was not circumcised he was excluded from the covenant and its blessings. *"And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant."*
- Acts 2:39: Peter addressed all who had assembled together on the day of Pentecost with these words, *"For the promise is to you **and to your children**, and to all who are afar off as many as the Lord our God will call."* God does not change. As His Old Testament promises extended also to the children, any change of this pattern would have to be announced in so many words in the New Testament. There is no such text. Instead, Peter on the day of Pentecost speaks specifically of "the promise" (that's the one from the Old Testament, Genesis 17) being for the adults gathered before him *"and to your children."* All heirs of God's promises, including the children, are then to receive the sign and seal of these promises.
- 1 Corinthians 7:14: *"For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, **but now they are holy.**"* The children of believers, even if children have only one believing parent, are holy in God's eyes; they belong to Him. God claims the child for Himself right at the beginning of its life, and therefore the child needs to receive the sign of the covenant right at the beginning.

The essential content of circumcision and baptism is inherently identical.

Of this fact the church has made profession in Article 34 of the *Belgic*

*Confession*:

*"We believe and confess that Jesus Christ... has abolished circumcision, which involved blood, and has instituted in its place the sacrament <sup>142</sup> of baptism.... [The little children of believers] ought to be baptized and sealed with the sign of the covenant, as infants were circumcised in Israel on the basis of the same promises which are now made to our children. Indeed, Christ shed His blood to wash the children of believers just as much as He shed it for adults. Therefore they ought to receive the sign and sacrament of what Christ has done for them, as the Lord commanded in the law that a lamb was to be offered shortly after children were born. This was a sacrament of the passion and death of Jesus Christ. Because baptism has the same meaning for our children as circumcision had for the people of Israel, Paul calls baptism the circumcision of Christ."*

On the basis of such instruction from the Lord, the churches agreed to the following about infant baptism:

**FRCA: Article 52 - Baptism of infants (CanRC: Article 57)**

*The consistory shall ensure that the covenant of God is sealed by baptism to the children of believers as soon as feasible.*

The churches agree that the children of believers should be baptised "*as soon as feasible*." This is in obedience to what the Lord commanded in Genesis 17:12. God insisted on circumcision at the very early age of eight days. Because the content of circumcision and baptism is identical, this text has value in the new dispensation also.

Note how Article 52 is formulated. It does not say that the *parents* "*shall ensure that the covenant of God is sealed by baptism ... as soon as feasible*," but rather that "*the **consistory** shall ensure....*" The churches cannot make agreements determining how individual members will act; the Church Order can concern itself only with how the churches will act. That is why this article is about *consistory's* responsibility in relation to the administration of the sacrament of baptism.

The churches recognise the consistory's teaching role. The children God entrusts to believers are *His* children, members of His flock. That gives the shepherds of the flock a responsibility also to the children (see below). Yet God has entrusted these children not to the office-bearers as such, but to parents (see Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Ephesians 6:4). The office-bearers, therefore, need to see to it that parents understand the identity of the children God entrusts to them. The result of parents understanding the riches of God's covenant will surely be that they present their child for holy baptism, and do so as soon as feasible. Satan for his part would love to see the church ignorant of the identity of the children God gives, and so works hard (and <sup>143</sup> not without success) to get people to believe (for example) that baptism is not for infants but for adults only. The consistory has the task to teach what *God* has revealed in His Word about baptism, and God will bless this instruction by making the parents see their responsibility.

### **2.1.2 Teaching the Covenant Children**

The Scripture texts quoted above concerning the inclusion of the children in God's covenant receive further application in Article 53.

**FRCA: Article 53 - Baptismal promise and education**

*The consistory shall make sure that the parents honour their vows to instruct their children, to the utmost of their power, in the doctrine of the Scriptures as summarised in the confessions, and to have them instructed in the same by the instruction provided by the consistory.*

*In accordance with the same vow, the consistory shall see to it that the parents, to the best of their ability, and with the cooperation of the communion of saints, give their children education (as stipulated by the civil government) which is based on Scripture and Confession.*

**CanRC: Article 58 - Schools**

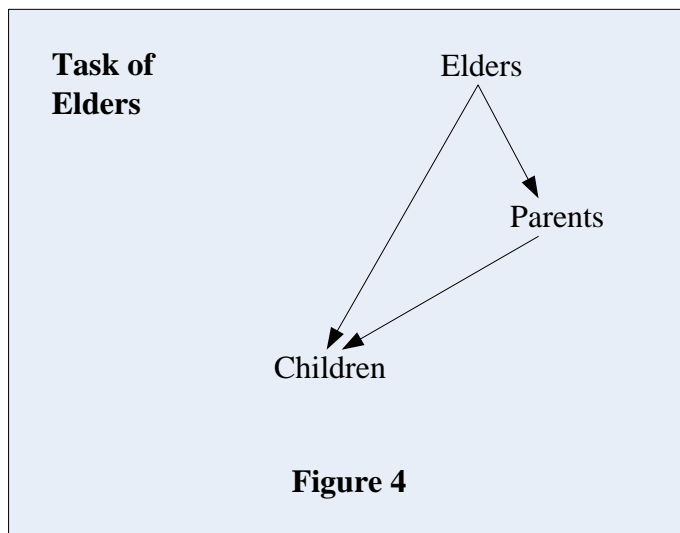
*The Consistory shall ensure that the parents, to the best of their ability, have their children attend a school where the instruction given is in harmony with the Word of God as the Church has summarised it in her Confessions.*

We commonly speak in terms of parents receiving children, and so emphasising the responsibility of the children to honour their God-given parents. It is also true, however, that children receive parents. That is to say: God is pleased to use particular parents to raise particular children of His. So the parents of a given child receive from the Lord the task to *teach* this child what his identity is, namely, he is a *covenant child*. This duty of the parents is drawn out in various passages of Scripture.

- In Genesis 18:19 we read of the task God gave to Abraham as the parent of covenant children. *"For I have known [Abraham], **in order that he may command his children and his household after him**, that they keep the way of the LORD, to do righteousness and justice, that the LORD may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him.*" Here is a charge to Abraham: because God's covenant is made with him *and his seed*, Abraham needs to make it his business to teach his offspring the way of the Lord. <sup>144</sup>
- The Israelites had experienced the plagues God sent to Egypt, had seen the Exodus from Egypt, had walked the path God had made for them in the waters of the Red Sea, and had gathered together before the Lord when He made His covenant with them at Horeb (Mt Sinai). Forty years later, many Israelites would still have had clear memories of these events. God through Moses gave the following instruction to Israel, *"Only take heed to yourself, and diligently keep yourself, lest you forget the things your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. And teach them to your children and your grandchildren, especially concerning the day you stood before the LORD your God in Horeb, when the LORD said to me, 'Gather the people to Me, and I will let them hear My words, that they may learn to fear Me all the days they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children.' Then you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain.... And the LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire.... So He declared to you His covenant..."* (Deuteronomy 4:9-13). Here is specific instruction from God to parents and grandparents to instruct the younger generation about the works of God. and especially about His covenant made at Horeb.
- God repeats this instruction in Deuteronomy 6:6, 7: *"And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall **teach them diligently** to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up."*
- Ephesians 6:4: *"And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord."*

The instruction of the children is the responsibility of the parents. Yet we need to understand that the elders have a task here also. Said Paul to the elders of Ephesus, *"Therefore take heed to yourselves and to **all the flock**, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood"* (Acts 20:28). A flock consists not only of mature sheep, but also of lambs. The elders must take heed to the *entire* flock. The elders need to see to it that the lambs of God's flock receive from their God-given parents the care they actually need. When parents present their children for baptism, they answer in the affirmative this question: *"... do you promise as father and mother to instruct your child in this doctrine, as soon as he (she) is able to understand, and to have him (her) instructed therein to the utmost*

of your power?"<sup>31</sup> It is the task of the elders to ensure that parents faithfully carry out the promise of this vow. <sup>145</sup>



The matter may be schematised as in Figure 4. Elders have a task in relation to both the parents and the children. However, the care for the children is given first of all to the parents. The elders' responsibility to the children is via the parents. The consistory must ensure that parents are obedient to the task to which they are called in passages of Scripture as cited above. If the parents are remiss in doing their job in relation to the children, then the elders' task in relation to the parents is to remind them to be faithful to their vows, and their task in relation to the children is to see to it that they receive the

instruction they need. To assist the parents in their task, the churches have agreed that the consistory shall conduct catechism classes and see to it that the parents have their children attend these classes and do the assigned work. Further, the elders need to include the children in their annual homevisits. All this the elders owe to the children because the children are part of the flock God entrusted to their care.

The second part of FRCA Article 53 deals with the consistory's responsibility towards the children's schooling. Here it is not stipulated that the consistory is responsible for organising and setting up Reformed schools. Rather, the consistory should impress upon the parents, and the whole communion of saints, the importance of God-centred schools. It is because the children are holy in God's eyes, set apart in a godless society, that they need education befitting their privileged identity.

However, setting up a God-centred school never frees the parents from their responsibility of teaching their children the doctrine of Scripture. Though Satan wishes for parents to think that teaching the children in the ways of the Lord is the teacher's job, the Lord clearly delegates this task to the parents. If the parents are not faithful in their responsibilities towards their children at home, then the work of the schools will fail. Satan does not spare the little ones in the flock. So it will not do for the elders to stand idly by if parents neglect to instruct their children, or send their children to a school that is godless. Similarly, the office-bearers do well to ensure that the instruction given at the schools indeed accords with the identity of the children as *God's* little ones.

### 2.1.3 Public Profession of Faith

By the grace of the Lord Who blesses faithful work of parents and elders, the lambs of His flock grow into mature sheep. It is a fruit of the <sup>146</sup> labours of parents and elders that the youth of the church grow spiritually to the point when they themselves respond to their baptism. This personal response of accepting in faith the promises and obligations of God's covenant is termed 'Public Profession of Faith'.

#### **FRCA: Article 54 - Public profession of faith (CanRC: no parallel agreement)**

*Those who desire to publicly profess their faith shall be examined by the consistory on their motivation and knowledge of the doctrine of God's Word. The public profession shall take place in a church service, with the use of the adopted Form.*



Article 54 reflects again that God has made the elders responsible for the entire flock (Acts 20:28). It is they who must examine the youth on their motivation for professing their faith, and their knowledge of the doctrine of Scripture. This examination is more than an academic exercise. The knowledge gleaned over the years through parental instruction, church instruction and school needs to be complimented by a lifestyle pleasing to the Lord and a love for the God who rescued from Satan's clutches. The consistory needs to be convinced that the motivation for professing the faith is genuine.

If the elders can discern a sincere, loving faith in response to the nurture and instruction by the parents and office-bearers, then the public profession takes place *in a church service* with the use of the *adopted Form*.<sup>32</sup> By baptism one is grafted into the Christian church, the body of true believers, and so it is fitting that one's response to baptism should also take place when the members of the body meet together. The content of one's public profession of faith must be the same as that of all the other members, and for that reason Article 54 stipulates the use of the adopted Form. This is the faith "*once for all delivered to the saints*" (Jude 3), and leads to the joy of John: "*I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth*" (3 John 4).

#### 2.1.4 Adult Baptism

Not all those whom God has chosen to life are born and raised in the church, and hence baptised as infants. God has His elect also outside the covenant circle, and for that reason "*sends heralds of this most joyful message to whom He will and when He wills*" (Canons of Dort, 1.3). As a result of such mission work (be it 'official' or 'unofficial'), people come to faith as adults. In accordance with Mark 16:16, these new believers must <sup>147</sup> also be baptised, "*He who believes and is baptised will be saved....*" The apostles followed this pattern too when their preaching met with faith in the hearers:

- Acts 8:38: "*And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptised him.*"
- Acts 9:18: "*...and [Saul] arose and was baptised.*"
- Acts 10:48: "*And [Peter] commanded [Cornelius] to be baptised in the name of the Lord.*"
- Acts 16:15: "*And when [Lydia] and her household were baptised....*"
- Acts 16:33: "*And immediately [the Philippian jailer] and all his family were baptised.*"
- Acts 18:8: "*And many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptised.*"

In recognition of this instruction of Mark 16 and the example of the early church, the churches have agreed to the following:

#### **FRCA: Article 55 - Baptism of adults (CanRC: Article 59)**

*Adults who have not been baptised shall be grafted into the Christian church by holy baptism upon their public profession of faith.*

Here it is recognised that adults are not to be baptised unless they *believe*. So public profession of the faith must precede baptism of adults. The "Form for the Baptism of Adults"<sup>33</sup> is essentially an amalgamation of the two forms adopted for infant baptism and public profession of faith.

## 2.2 The Lord's Supper

The churches have made agreements also in relation to the second sacrament that the Lord has given to His church. The *manner* in which the sacrament of the Lord's supper ought to be administered has already been dealt with. The Lord's supper, like baptism, "*shall be administered only in a church service by a minister of the Word with the use of the adopted Forms, and under the supervision of the elders*" (FRCA Article 51; CanRC Article 56). The *meaning* of this sacrament is alluded to in this same article when it refers to "*the adopted Forms*". The *Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper*<sup>34</sup> sets



forth at length what the churches understand the Lord to teach about this sacrament. There is no need to elaborate on the meaning of the sacrament now. However, there are other matters relating to the Lord's supper about which the churches considered agreements necessary. <sup>148</sup>

### 2.2.1 Frequency

#### **FRCA: Article 56 - Lord's Supper (CanRC: Article 60)**

*The Lord's Supper shall be celebrated at least once every three months.*

The brevity of this article has no bearing on its significance. In Article 56 the churches acknowledge two important realities. Firstly, by the respective eating and drinking of Christ's body and blood, the believers are spiritually nourished and encouraged. Secondly, since Satan is at work to see the faith of all believers shrivel and die, he does all he can to prevent such nourishment and encouragement obtained through this sacrament and so he tries to prevent its celebration. For the sake of the sheep of the fold, then, the churches have agreed that the Lord's supper *shall be celebrated at least once every three months*.

One could discuss at length the merits of celebrating the Lord's supper a given number of times per year. Scripture gives no command here. It is a fact that the people of God need strengthening of faith through the use of the sacraments (see Lord's Day 25). This implies rather frequent use of the sacrament of Lord's Supper. However, over against the trend to multiply celebrations of this sacrament, it is worthwhile to note what God stipulated concerning the celebration of the Old Testament sacrament of Passover (which had the same essential content as the New Testament sacrament of Lord's supper). Passover had to be celebrated at a fixed frequency of *once per year*: no more, no less. "*On the fourteenth day of the first month is the Passover of the LORD*" (Numbers 28:16). Familiarity breeds contempt! As a Christmas dinner eaten every day is no longer a feast, so too the wealth of the Lord's supper can be lost on us if we celebrate this sacrament too often. The churches have decided only on a minimum number of celebrations per year, namely, at *least* once every three months. For the rest, the matter is left to the discretion of the local consistory.

### 2.2.2 Attendance

The Lord's supper shall be celebrated at least once every three months. But who may sit at the table of the Lord? The Scriptures make clear that the Lord's table is not open to just anybody. Scripture lays the onus first on the individual to ensure that he is indeed able before God to sit at the Lord's table. Speaking of the Lord's supper in 1 Corinthians 11:28-30, the apostle Paul stresses *personal responsibility* for lawful participation in the sacrament. "*But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of <sup>149</sup> the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep.*"

The fact that the individual is responsible for his own participation in the sacrament does not exclude the fact that the elders also have a responsibility here. In the Old Testament the priests were responsible for the 'fencing of the tabernacle.' The people of God came to the tabernacle regularly with their sacrifices. However, not all could actually present sacrifices. Leviticus 13, for example, speaks of persons with leprosy. We are to understand that the leprosy spoken of in this chapter had nothing to do with the illness known today as Hansen's Disease. Instead, the point of leprosy was that death - that tragic result of the fall into sin - had manifestly found a place in the person. The sores and spots, then, symbolised the spiritual affliction with which all people were afflicted. So, "*when a man has on the skin of his body a swelling, a scab, or a bright spot, and it becomes on the skin of his body like a leprous sore, then he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests. The priest shall examine the sore...* " (Leviticus 13:2). As a result of his finding, the priest ultimately might have to instruct the Israelite with the spot that he was "*unclean, and he shall dwell alone; his dwelling shall*

*be outside the camp*" (Leviticus 13:46). That meant also that the unclean person could not enter the tabernacle of the Lord. Before a leper could again be admitted he first had to be examined by the priest and be pronounced clean (Leviticus 14:1).

The churches have understood from Scripture that Yes, the Lord would have the *consistory* to 'fence' the Lord's table. When a person continues in sin despite having received admonitions from others in private (and so continues to present himself at the table of the Lord), the consistory must take on the task of discipline and withhold the sinner from the communion of the Lord's table. In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul admonishes the church at Corinth for having failed to discipline the brother who lived in a sinful relationship with his stepmother. Paul's instruction is therefore to *"deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh..."* (1 Corinthians 5:5). Such delivering included that the brother had to be barred from the Lord's table. It is imperative that the consistory carry out its responsibility in this regard, for unlawful participation has serious consequences for the sinner and for the congregation. In Corinth there was weakness, sickness and death in the congregation (1 Corinthians 11:30). God has made the elders accountable for the souls of the congregation members. *"Obey <sup>150</sup> those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls as those who must give account"* (Hebrews 13:17). The office-bearers, then, have a responsibility to guard the Lord's table lest He pour out His wrath upon the congregation. Hence the following covenant among the churches:

**FRCA: Article 57 - Admission to the Lord's Supper (CanRC: Article 61)**

*The consistory shall admit to the Lord's Supper only those who have made public profession of the Reformed faith and lead a godly life. Members of sister churches shall be admitted on the basis of a good attestation concerning their doctrine and conduct.*

Although it is not explicitly slated that children are excluded from the Lord's table, this is implied in the condition of this article that one must have professed the Reformed faith and be leading a godly life. Children are not yet of an age that enables them to fully understand and responsibly answer to the promises and obligations received in God's covenant. Before they can make *"public confession of the Reformed faith"*, children need to mature to an age of discernment.

Those who once professed the Reformed faith at some time, however, are not automatically entitled to sit at the Lord's table. The churches have recognised that one also needs to be leading a godly life. The two criteria, profession of faith and a godly life, are equally valid for all persons, regardless of age, race, gender, church affiliation, domicile, etc. There may be no double standards with respect to who is admitted to the Lord's table. Therefore the churches have agreed that *"Members of sister churches shall be admitted on the basis of a good attestation concerning their **doctrine** and **conduct**."* An attestation (see below) is a testimony from one's consistory concerning a person's spiritual health. A church accepts the attestations it receives for members from sister churches because it accepts the work of the office-bearers in those churches.

Anyone who is not a member of the local church or of one of its sister churches cannot attend the table of the Lord unless he has been *"examined by the consistory on [his] motivation and knowledge of the doctrine of God's Word"* (FRCA Article 54), with all that that entails. Anything less than a thorough examination by the consistory involves the church in applying higher standards to members than to visitors. Such double standards are not fitting in the church of the Lord. <sup>151</sup>

### 3. Records and Attestations

#### 3.1 Church Records

Following on logically from what the churches have agreed regarding the sacraments, attention is now turned to the matter of church records. Membership data are important

to office-bearers if they are to carry out their task properly. Elders cannot shepherd the sheep of the flock if they do not know pertinent information about the sheep, let alone who their sheep are. Hence the following agreement:

**FRCA: Article 58 - Church records (CanRC: Article 64)**

*The consistory shall maintain Church records in which the names of the members and the dates of their birth, baptism, public profession of faith, marriage, and departure or death are properly recorded.*

### 3.2 Attestations

It is not correct to regard an attestation as an existing personal document valid for all time. An attestation is a testimony concerning one's spiritual health at the time of its writing. It functions as a witness to one's spiritual health when one wishes to join a sister church in another locality (FRCA Article 59; CanRC Article 62). It functions also when one wishes to participate in the supper of the Lord in a sister church (FRCA Article 57; CanRC Article 61). The Scriptural background for the practice of issuing attestations include the following:

- Romans 16:1, 2: Paul writes to the saints in Rome, *"I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in whatever business she has need of you; for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also."* This communication from Paul amounts to a testimony to the church at Rome about sister Phoebe.
- Acts 18:27: Similarly, we read of Apollos receiving an 'attestation' when he travelled from Ephesus to Achaia: *"And when he desired to cross to Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him; and when he arrived he greatly helped those who had believed through grace."*
- 1 Corinthians 16:3: Paul instructed the Corinthians to lay aside gifts for the needy in Jerusalem. He added, *"And when I come, whomever you approve by your letters I will send to bear your gift to Jerusalem."* 152

On the strength of such like passages, the churches have agreed to given written testimonies concerning members who seek to visit or join a sister church.

**FRCA: Article 59 - Attestations for communicant members (CanRC: Article 62 - Attestations)**

*Communicant members who move to another congregation shall be given, following appropriate announcements to the congregation, an attestation regarding their doctrine and conduct, signed on behalf of the consistory by two authorised office-bearers. This attestation shall also record their children who have not yet made public profession of faith. The consistory of the congregation concerned shall be notified in due time.*

In Article 28 of the *Belgic Confession*, we echo the teaching of our Lord like this: *"We believe, since this holy assembly and congregation is the assembly of the redeemed and there is no salvation outside of it, that no one ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself, no matter what his state or quality may be. But all and everyone are obliged to join it and unite with it..."* The point is that I may not be content to be on my own. I belong to Christ, and therefore am to join myself to a body of Christ as it visibly assembles in different places on this earth. If I then move elsewhere, I am to join the assembly of true believers in that new locality. To make that transition easier (both for myself who moves as well as for the consistory of the church I seek to join), the churches have agreed to two things:

- The Consistory which had oversight over the departing member will give a testimony

to the departing person outlining the spiritual health of the person concerned.

- The Consistory which will have oversight over the arriving member will receive and work with the testimony given by the 'old' consistory.

Underpinning this arrangement is the material discussed in Chapter 1 of this book, Paragraph 3. In the federation of churches, office-bearers in one church accept the work performed by office-bearers in a sister church. An attestation includes all the details the elders of the new congregation will need to know in order to carry out their task of shepherding the new members. In as much as no two members are identical, testimonies concerning two different members can scarcely be identical either - unless one would produce testimonies that relate little more than the lowest common denominator. This observation pleads against the use of standardised attestation forms, and in favour of individual treatment of each departing member.<sup>153</sup> Since parents remain responsible for their children's church membership until the time they make public profession of faith, the names of the children who have not as yet made public profession of faith are recorded on the parents' attestation.

This article also stipulates that members who move shall be given an attestation *"following appropriate announcements to the congregation."* The congregation should be given the opportunity to raise any concerns or objections, as well as to bid them farewell. The Australian churches have agreed too that the consistory which wrote the attestation is also to inform the consistory of the new congregation that an attestation has been given to a member. This is done out of pastoral care for the member, so that the chances of losing the member are minimised should he be remiss in joining the church of his new locality. Technically speaking, however, the consistory has *no responsibility for the departed after his departure, and a receiving consistory has no responsibility over the new member until such time as he requests membership.* By not handing in one's attestation a member effectively withdraws from the church.

**FRCA: Article 60 - Attestations for non-communicant members (CanRC: Article 62)**

*An attestation for a non-communicant member shall be sent directly to the consistory of the church concerned with the request to take the member under its supervision and discipline.*

For those who have not yet made profession of the faith, the requested attestation is not given to that member, but is instead sent directly to the church to which he has moved. This is because the member has not yet responded to the promises God gave in his baptism and so the responsibility for the member lies with the parents. Yet since the non-communicant youth is moving out of the parental home, the care for the member is directed immediately to the consistory of his new domicile.

**FRCA: Article 61 - Support after departure (CanRC: no parallel agreement)**

*When members depart to another congregation where they will be cared for in institutions, aged persons homes or nursing homes, they shall in respect of deacon support remain under the care of the church they are leaving. If this is not possible support will be arranged by consultation between the consistories and deacons concerned.*

This article arrests any temptation that may arise within, say, the deacons, to suggest to a member in need that he move to another congregation<sup>154</sup> - and so free the deacons from looking after him. It is a principle of God's Word that looking after a brother in need is not so much a duty as a privilege.

- Deuteronomy 16:11: "You shall rejoice before the Lord your God, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, the Levite who is within your gates, the stranger and the fatherless and the widow who are among you, at the place where the Lord your God chooses to make His name abide."

- 2 Corinthians 8:14: "... your abundance may supply their lack, that their abundance also may supply your lack - that there may be equality."

To pass off a needy member in order to free one's hands is simply not fitting for those who have received so very much in Jesus Christ.

## 4. Other Items

The remaining articles of this section of the Church Order cover a series of left over items upon which the churches have agreed to act in a particular manner.

### 4.1 Ecclesiastical Feast Days

The gospel contained in the events of Christ's birth, death, resurrection, ascension, and outpouring of His Holy Spirit is central to the faith of every believer, on which his temporal and eternal wellbeing depends. For that reason alone it is imperative that office-bearers ensure that the children of God entrusted to their care remember these high points of salvation history (1 Corinthians 15:3, 4; 2 Timothy 2:8).

In His Word the Lord has not stipulated precisely how He would have these high points of salvation history to be remembered. The Free Reformed Churches of Australia have agreed to commemorate these events by means of holding church services.

#### **FRCA: Article 65 - Ecclesiastical feast days**

*On Christmas Day, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Ascension Day and at Pentecost the consistory shall call the congregation together for church services. The sacred events which the congregation commemorates in particular on these days shall therein be proclaimed.*

#### **CanRC: Article 53 - Days of Commemoration**

*Each year the Churches shall, in the manner decided upon by the consistory, commemorate the birth, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ, as well as His outpouring of the Holy Spirit.* <sup>155</sup>

I emphasise that this decision of the churches is not based on any command from God. At the same time, it needs to be said with equal emphasis that the Lord does not forbid that His people come together on occasions other than the Lord's Day. A regular mid-week service, or a special prayer service in connection with a coronation or a Synod, is fully permissible. With regards to the feast days, the Australian churches reflect their historical heritage by agreeing to remember the highlights of our Saviour's work by calling the congregations together for worship services on the recognised calendar day of the highlight. The Canadian Reformed Churches, on the other hand, have left the timing (and manner) of the commemoration to the determination of the consistories. Because the Lord neither commands nor forbids either approach, it will not do to make an issue out of how the Lord's birth, death, resurrection and ascension, as well as the outpouring of the Spirit, should be remembered. Nevertheless, the very fact that the churches have agreed to commemorate the feast days in a particular manner compels the churches (even in the absence of Scriptural injunctions about these days) to do as they have agreed to do. After all, the people of God keep their promises (see Psalm 15:4).

### 4.2 Days of Prayer

The churches have reckoned with the fact that (they may find themselves directly or indirectly affected by natural, political, social or economic afflictions. Difficult circumstances may warrant the proclamation of a day to be especially devoted to prayer, in order to beseech God to take away the affliction. The churches, therefore, have agreed that synod is to appoint one church responsible for nominating days of prayer.<sup>35</sup> Such nominated days of prayer are then to be recognised by all the churches.



#### **ARTICLE 66 - Days of prayer (CanRC: Article 54)**

*In times of war, general calamities and other great afflictions the presence of which is felt throughout the churches a day of prayer may be proclaimed by the church appointed for that purpose by synod.*

It must be remembered that all prayer is to be God-centred and not man-centred. The focus of the prayers urged by this Article, then, must be on what God is revealing about Himself in the affliction. Our thoughts and prayers are not only to concentrate on relief, but there must also be confession of sin. If a plague comes upon the land, no one, including the church, can wash his hands of guilt. In His Word God makes a very clear link between obedience and blessing, between disobedience and curse. In <sup>156</sup> Leviticus 26 God tells Moses with what blessings He will reward Israel's obedience and with what curses He will punish their disobedience. Moses passes on God's Word to Israel saying, "Now it shall come to pass, **if you diligently obey** the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments which I command you today, that the LORD your God will set you high above all nations of the earth. And all these **blessings shall come upon you** and overtake you, **because you obey the voice of the LORD your God...** But it shall come to pass, **if you do not obey** the voice of the LORD your God, ... that all these **curses will come upon you** and overtake you: ... " (Deuteronomy 28). This Old Testament principle comes back again in the New Testament. In the book of Revelation, for example, one reads of the plagues God will send as punishment upon covenant breaking. Therefore, if the Lord afflicts the country of which we are a part, then let us seek God in prayer, not only asking him to remove the affliction He has sent, but also to confess sin and to repent, and to ask the Lord to work repentance in the land as a whole - and maybe even the church in particular.

### **4.3 Marriage**

The churches saw need to give special attention to marriage. God, after all, has given marriage a distinct place in His church gathering work. Through marriage the Lord is pleased to give children; more, in the line of the covenant God is pleased to use marriage as His prime means of gathering His church. However, God's gift of children in marriage is accompanied by a calling to parents to instruct these children in the ways of the Lord. The consistory's task of ensuring that the "*parents honour their vows to instruct their children, to the utmost of their power, in the doctrine of the Scriptures...*" (Article 53) does not begin after parents have made their vows at their child's baptism, but starts as early as a couple's courtship days. The elders are to see to it that no one be "*unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever?*" (2 Corinthians 6:14,15). How shall a father bring up to the Lord's glory the covenant children entrusted to him, if he first has chosen an unbeliever to become mother of his (potential) children?! Besides, the Scriptures speak of marriage as "*a great mystery*" reflecting the relation between Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:32). Hence the agreement of the churches: <sup>157</sup>

#### **FRCA: Article 67 - Marriage (CanRC: Article 63)**

*The consistory shall ensure that the members of the congregation marry only in the Lord, and that the ministers - as authorised by the consistory - solemnise only such marriages as are in accordance with the Word of God. The solemnisation of a marriage shall take place in a private ceremony, with the use of the adopted Form.*

In order to 'marry in the Lord,' both marriage partners must serve God (first commandment), and both must serve and obey God in the same way, i.e. according to His Word (second commandment). Because the children God may be pleased to give a married couple need to be taught God's ways, it is crucial for each person considering marriage to marry a person who serves God and serves Him obediently. Such a person



one finds only in the church. After all, which church one attends is also a matter of obeying God's command to serve Him in the manner He has prescribed. This is not to say, of course, that church membership is *the* decisive question. Within the church are also hypocrites. But one cannot claim to "marry in the Lord" if one seeks to marry a believer from a church that is not legitimate in God's eyes (see *Belgic Confession*. Article 29).

The minister solemnises the marriage upon authorisation of the consistory. Who one marries is not a private matter alone, but involves the consistory also. For the sake of God's name and the future of the church, the consistory will only authorise the marriage of persons who belong to a church of Jesus Christ.

The churches have agreed that marriages would not be solemnised in a church service, but in a private ceremony. It should be noted, though, that on this point Scripture is silent. Some of the sister churches (particularly the Dutch churches) incorporate a wedding service into a regular church service. The Canadian Church Order includes this agreement:

**CanRC: Article 63 - Marriage**

*... The solemnization of a marriage may take place either in a private ceremony or in a public worship service....*

Precisely because Scripture is silent on this point, not much may be made on this difference in the agreements reached by the churches.

The Church Order makes one last stipulation in relation to marriages, namely, that a marriage shall be solemnised "*with the use of the adopted Form*."<sup>36</sup> This form summarises what God teaches about the institution of marriage, its reflection of the relationship between Christ and His church, the purpose of marriage and the duties of marriage. By use of this form the <sup>158</sup> consistory ensures that the members do not enter marriage on the basis of any false understandings or expectations which Satan would love to implant in a couple's hearts and minds. That the marrying couple understand well what they enter when they marry is so very important since Satan knows only too well that his access to God's covenant children is minimised through 'marriages in the Lord.'

#### 4.4 Funerals

Funerals are emotionally laden times. There is something understandable about the historic Roman Catholic practice and belief that the dead are dependent on the prayers and intercessions of the church in order to be accepted into heaven. So the churches have agreed that at funerals the consistory shall not call the congregation together for a church service - lest the service become a prayer for the dead. Here is an element of pastoral care for the flocks.

**FRCA: Article 68 - Funerals (CanRC: Article 65)**

*Church services shall not be conducted for funerals.*

The family, however, may certainly request to be comforted from Scripture. At the family's discretion, this can be done in church or elsewhere.

<sup>159</sup>

## Chapter 7

### Church Discipline

#### Articles 69-79

The churches have historically agreed that their covenant together should include a section on church discipline. It was considered beneficial that within a federation of churches discipline should be administered in a uniform fashion. Rather than repeat what Scripture and Confessions already teach about church discipline, Section 4 of the Church Order spells out how scriptural principles on church discipline should be put into practice.

#### 1. The Need for Church Discipline

##### 1.1 The Church is Holy

The church is not a society or club belonging to the members. The church is the result of the Lord's work through Jesus Christ, and so is His possession. Since the Lord is holy, His people are holy also. To His people of the Old Testament the Lord said in Exodus 22:31, **"And you shall be holy men to Me..."** and in Leviticus 11:44, **"For I am the LORD your God. You shall therefore consecrate yourselves, and you shall be holy; for I am holy...."** Peter echoes this in the New Testament with these words of 1 Peter **1:15**, **"but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct"** and in 1 Peter 2:9, **"But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people...."** The church, the people of the Lord, is to be identified with holiness. <sup>161</sup>

This holiness of the Lord's church is drawn out the more when Scripture speaks of God dwelling in the midst of His people. The Lord told Israel in Exodus 29:45 that, **"I will dwell among the children of Israel and will be their God."** The same thought is echoed in the New Testament in 1 Corinthians 3:16. Paul says to the saints in Corinth, **"Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?"** Since a holy God dwells with His people, Christ's church both *is* holy and *must be* holy.

##### 1.2 Sin May Have No Place in the Church

Satan, whom Peter compared to a roaring lion (1 Peter 5:8), makes it his business to attack and devour God's church. Satan does so under various guises. As Paul warns the Corinthians. **"... Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light"** (2 Corinthians 11:14). Though we belong to the Lord we remain vulnerable to sin and evil, prey to Satan's attacks (1 Corinthians 10:12). Therefore the church, though it is and must be holy, can also be infiltrated with sin. In light of the holiness which holy God demands of His church, such infiltration of sin is not acceptable. God shall see to it that sin tolerated in His church shall receive His punishments. In the Old Testament God taught this principle with the words of Deuteronomy 28:15, **"But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments and His statutes which I command you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you."** Verses 16-68 list the curses God promised to send upon His disobedient covenant people.

This principle has not changed in the New Testament. This is clear, for example, from what Paul wrote to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 11:27-32. There the apostle stresses the need for self-examination prior to the celebration of the Lord's supper. **"For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself."** To eat and drink judgment to oneself is to call *God's judgment* upon oneself. Since the Corinthians failed to judge themselves, failed to examine themselves for the presence of sin in their lives, God judged them and found them wanting. So they suffered weakness, sickness and many 'slept' ('sleep' is here a euphemism for death). Unholiness amongst God's flock in Corinth attracted God's displeasure in a graphic manner. This drove home to the

members of the congregation that they had to make a point of cutting sin out of the church. See also Acts 5:11. <sup>162</sup>

### 1.3 The Wages of Sin is Death

How is one to cut sin out of the Church of the Lord? The pattern of the Old Testament involved physically killing the sinner. In Deuteronomy one reads of several examples of sins that required punishment. The purpose of the punishment was to remove sin, unholiness, from God's people. Hence the repeated refrain, *"so you shall put away the evil from among you."* For example, Deuteronomy 13 speaks of the possibility of a false prophet arising within Israel saying, *"Let us go after other gods... and let us serve them"* (vs 2). God's response to such prophecy is. *"... that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death.... So you shall put away the evil from your midst"* (vs 5). A similar warning is given in the verses 6-11. If anyone sought to entice God's people away from faithful service to Him, that sinner had to be cut off in order to remove the sin from Israel. Said God to Israel, *"you shall not consent to him or listen to him, nor shall your eye pity him, nor shall you spare him or conceal him; but you shall surely kill him.... And you shall stone him with stones until he dies, because he sought to entice you away from the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage. So all Israel shed I hear and fear, and not again do such wickedness as this among you."* The penalty for transgression against God's commandments was death. The sinner had to be removed so that sin itself might be removed. Holy God could tolerate no unholiness amongst His holy people. So one reads again in Deuteronomy 17:2-7 that *"any man or woman who has been wicked in the sight of the LORD ... shall be put to death.... So you shall put away the evil from among you."* As for the man who would not accept the verdict of the priest or judge, he too had to be put to death. *"So you shall put away the evil from Israel"* (Deuteronomy 17:8-12). Again, in Deuteronomy 19:19 one reads that a false witness is to receive the punishment the accused man would have received, and *"so you shall put away the evil from among you."* Sin could not be ignored or tolerated amongst God's people, for it polluted them and called for God's inevitable judgment.

This same principle is carried through in the New Testament. 1 Corinthians 5:1 tells of a man in the church living illicitly with his stepmother. The church in Corinth had failed to deal with this brother's sin and so there was evil in their midst. Paul therefore urges the saints at Corinth to *"deliver such a one to Satan"* (verse 5). Paul explains the term 'delivering to Satan' in verse 13 by a quote from the Old Testament. He writes, *"Therefore put away from yourselves the evil person."* The sinner was, therefore, to be cut off from the flock, excommunicated. For in the <sup>163</sup> church of Jesus Christ there is no room for evil. Again, in his letter to Timothy, Paul records what he did to two brothers who suffered shipwreck concerning the faith. Paul says that he has *"delivered to Satan"* these two brothers *"that they may learn not to blaspheme"* (1 Timothy 1:19f). The concept of excommunicating a sinner from the church arises also in 2 Thessalonians 3:14, where Paul addresses the church of the Thessalonians with this instruction, *"And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him...."* John instructs his readers about the person who brings a false teaching under the guise of being a Christian: *"If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him"* (2 John 10).

The church discipline of the Old Testament, then, reaches through into the New Testament. The reader notices, though, a difference in the manner this discipline is administered. The Old Testament spoke of death, while the New Testament speaks of putting away, of placing distance between oneself and the sinner. One is inclined to think that New Testament discipline is far gentler, much less radical, than Old Testament discipline was. That perception, however, is incorrect. God has moved forward in His plan of salvation. So the saints addressed in the letter to the Hebrews are told (12:18-29) that they, unlike their brethren of the Old Testament gathered around Mt Sinai, *"have not come to the mountain that may be touched and that burned with fire...."* Instead, these New Testament saints *"have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the*

*living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel" (vs 22-24). The implication of these words is to be found in the verses 25-29, "See then that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth (the reference is to the Israelites gathered around Mt Sinai, who saw so much of God's holiness), much more shall we not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven.... **Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire.**" Much has happened since Mt Sinai, for God has sent His Son to earth to die for sin. In the events of Calvary, we have seen more of God's holiness than the Israelites ever saw around Mt Sinai. That makes our responsibility in the New Testament dispensation the greater. If we give ourselves <sup>164</sup> to sin, the penalty is worse for us than it ever was for the saints of the Old Testament.*

One might ask how the penalty for us, excommunication, could possibly be worse than the death penalty of the Old Testament. Is the death penalty not the ultimate punishment for sin? The point is that the death penalty is not the equivalent of going to hell. Rather, for the child of God death is the gateway to Heaven (Philippians 1:21-23; I Thessalonians 5:9, 10). The sinner of the Old Testament who was condemned to death could still repent of his sin and embrace in faith the gospel of forgiveness proclaimed by the sacrifices of the tabernacle. The death sentence would be for him, then, the means by which the Lord would take this repentant child of His to glory. One may think here, for example, of the murderer on the cross (Luke 23:41-43).

Excommunication, on the other hand, has eternal repercussions: it is not simply something that is valid for this life only. When Jesus addressed His disciples about how to exercise discipline against wayward members. He said to them, *"Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth **will be bound in heaven**, and whatever you loose on earth **will be loosed in heaven**"* (Matthew 18:18). Excommunication serves as a message to a wayward member that he is spiritually dead, is on his way to hell. This makes excommunication far worse than the death penalty of the Old Testament. At the same time, there is mercy here, for the excommunicated is not directly sent to hell. He receives opportunity yet to repent (see Paragraph 6.1 and 6.4 below). This opportunity, though, takes nothing away from the radical seriousness of excommunication.

The church of Christ, then, holy as it is, may never minimise or neglect church discipline. We live in the New Dispensation and so have seen more of God's justice displayed in Christ Jesus. That means consequently that we have a greater responsibility to tolerate no love for sin in the church of Christ. To remain a *true* church, the church must remain faithful in exercising church discipline.

## 2. The Purpose of Church Discipline

In their covenant about Church Discipline, the churches express first in brief terms what the aim of church discipline is.

### **FRCA: Article 69 -Aim of discipline**

*Church discipline shall be exercised in accordance with the Word of God and to His honour. Its aim is to reconcile the sinner with God and the neighbour, and to remove the offence from the church of Christ.* <sup>165</sup>

### **CanRC: Article 66 - Nature and Purpose**

*Since Church discipline is of a spiritual nature and, as one of the keys of the kingdom of heaven, has been given to the Church to shut and to open that kingdom, the consistory shall ensure that it is used to punish sins against both the purity of doctrine and the piety of conduct, in order to reconcile the sinner*

*with the Church and with his neighbour, and to remove all offence out of the Church of Christ - which can be done only when the rule given by our Lord in Matthew 18; 15-17 is followed in obedience.*

Church discipline is able to serve its intended aim only if it is conducted according to God's Word. John Calvin<sup>37</sup> saw church discipline as serving the following three aims, all three of which can be found back in the Article quoted above:

1. *"... that they who lead a filthy and infamous life may not be called Christians, to the dishonour of God, as if his holy church [cf Eph. 5:25-26] were a conspiracy of wicked and abandoned men, "*

Calvin's argument here is that because the church is God's and God is holy, the moment sin is honoured in the congregation the name of the Lord is dishonoured. Article 69 echoes this in the words. *"Church discipline shall be exercised ... to [God's] honour."*

2. *"... that the good be not corrupted by the constant company of the wicked."*

Here Calvin summarises the lesson of 1 Corinthians 5:6.7. where the apostle speaks of leaven. *"...Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened...."* As yeast in a batch of dough permeates the whole batch, so sin in the congregation eventually infects the entire congregation. For that reason the sinner needs to be removed. As Article 69 states, the aim of church discipline is *"to remove the offence from the church of Christ."*

3. *"... that those overcome by shame for their baseness begin to repent."* This is in line with what Paul instructed the Corinthians to do in 1 Corinthians 5:5, namely, to *"deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, **that his spirit may be saved** in the day of the Lord Jesus."* Church discipline aims to move the sinner to repentance; it seeks the sinner's salvation. To use the words of Article 69, *"Its aim is to reconcile the sinner with God and the neighbour."* 166

### 3. Who Must Exercise Church Discipline?

Church discipline tends to be considered as the exclusive responsibility of the consistory. That can be explained by the fact that the consistory plays the most *visible* role in seeing to it that sin is cut out from the congregation. Further, the consistory has the authority to withhold someone from the Lord's table, and make the public announcements which lead to excommunication. However, Scripture teaches that the exercising of church discipline is not in the first place the responsibility of the consistory. Church discipline is first and foremost the responsibility of the *church membership* at large. The following data of Scripture support this concept.

- The people of Israel congregated around Mt Sinai received from God this instruction: *"You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbour, and not bear sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD"* (Leviticus 19:17, 18). Notice that this instruction is directed not to Israel's leaders, but to the persons of Israel individually. Each was to see it as his personal responsibility to rebuke the neighbour: failure to do so would be sin on one's own part.

Why would failure to rebuke the neighbour be sin on one's own part? By giving himself to sin, the neighbour places a barrier between himself and God, and so prevents God's blessings from coming upon him. In love for the erring neighbour, the Israelite was (said God) to make it his business to help him remove the barrier he placed between himself and God. It made no difference who the victim of the neighbour's sinful act was. God's point was that none was to consider the neighbour's conduct his own business, but each was to be concerned about the neighbour's



spiritual health. So too, none was to seek vengeance on the neighbour by standing by to let God's wrath come upon the unrepentant brother because of what he did, nor was any to bear any grudge or harbour hatred against the one who hurt him. Instead, the Lord gave to each Israelite the duty to rebuke the erring brother and seek his repentance; failure to do so was sin, was in fact an act of hatred.

- This principle surfaces also in Jesus' instruction in Matthew 18. There Jesus spoke the following well-known words: "... if your brother sins against you. **go and tell him his fault** between you and him alone" (Matthew 18:15). One must bear in mind that the brother is guilty of sin. By sinning against you he has also sinned against God and ruined the good relationship that exists between himself and God. Jesus' instruction <sup>167</sup> is that you, even though you may have been offended by him, perhaps even hurt by him, *you* take the initiative and approach him, telling him his fault. Whether or not this is an easy thing for you to do is irrelevant, for the Lord has given us His Spirit so that we can do His will. Our motivation will not be to tell the wayward brother about the hurt he did to me. Rather, the point of the admonition must be to tell the brother that what he did affects his relationship with God and that he needs to repent of that sin lest God's wrath be poured out upon him.
- The epistles of the New Testament make the same point. Paul urged the Galatian believers to look after each other. "*Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual **restore such a one** in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted*" (Galatians 6:1).
- When James draws out the fruits of such mutual discipline, he implies that each is to make it his business to seek out the wanderer: "*Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and **someone turns him back**, let him know that **he who turns a sinner** from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins*" (James 5:19.20).
- Paul saw need to address the church at Corinth about the sinful relationship between a brother in the church and his stepmother, and gave the instruction to drive out the sinner (1 Corinthians 5). But note that Paul's instruction is not given to the elders of the church in Corinth. From 1 Corinthians 1:2 we learn that Paul addressed his letter "*To the **church** of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints....*" The saints at Corinth are responsible to drive out the wicked person from among them.

On the basis of such clear testimony from Scripture about where the onus for church discipline lies, the churches have agreed to leave church discipline first and foremost with the membership.

**FRCA: Article 70 - Mutual responsibility (CanRC: Article 66)**

*If anyone departs from the pure doctrine or is delinquent in conduct and this is a secret matter which does not give rise to public offence, the rule which Christ clearly prescribes in Matthew 18 shall be observed.*

That is to say: the individual congregation members are to act according to the responsibility God has given to each individual church member regarding wayward brothers and sisters. Never may the churches consider <sup>168</sup> discipline to be strictly a matter for the consistory. The churches feel so strongly about it that the matter is emphasised more pointedly still:

**FRCA: Article 71 - Consistory Involvement (CanRC: Article 67)**

*The consistory shall not deal with any report of sin unless it has first ascertained that both private admonitions and admonitions in the presence of one or two witnesses have remained fruitless, or the sin committed is of a public character.*

Article 70 spoke of "the rule which Christ clearly prescribes in Matthew 18." The relevant verses read as follows:



*"Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven " (Matthew 18: 15-18).*

In this instruction from the Lord, the first question that arises is whether the obligation to admonish a brother applies only if one has been personally offended by that brother. It would seem so, since Jesus' discourse about mutual discipline begins with, "... *if your brother sins against you...*" If indeed the sin must have been committed against you before you have a duty to address the sinner, *"the rule which Christ clearly prescribes in Matthew 18"* would in effect restrict the occasions when one would need to address the sinner. After all, not all sins are committed *"against you."*

It must be borne in mind that in Matthew 18 Jesus was speaking to the disciples in the specific context of sin against the self. This fact, however, does not mean that the Lord would have His people address only those who sin against them personally. Scripture lays before us a broader principle. Leviticus 19:18, for example, instructs the child of God like this, *"You shall surely rebuke your neighbour."* Here is no mention of whether or nor the neighbour sinned against you personally or not. Similarly, James speaks in general terms about the person to be admonished. "... *If anyone among you wanders from the truth and **someone** turns him back, let him know that he who turns **a sinner** from the error of his way...*" (James 5:19,20). Paul writes in Galatians 6:1, *"Brethren, if **a man** is overtaken in **any trespass....**"* Whether one is personally affected by the brother's sin or not, love <sup>169</sup> for the erring brother as well as love for the God Who gave His Son to save this brother must motivate one to address the sinner. The task to address a sinner does not become operative only when that sinner has transgressed *"against you"*. *"The rule which Christ clearly prescribed in Matthew 18"*, then, has general application.

Should the admonition of one person prove to be ineffective, Jesus stipulates that the wayward brother must be visited together with two or three witnesses. *"But if he will not hear, take with you **one or two more**, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established'"* (Matthew 18:16). Here the Lord echoes the principle of the Old Testament: *"One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits; **by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established**"* (Deuteronomy 19:15). In the presence of these witnesses one is to tell the brother what his sin is and why it is sin, and urge him in God's Name to repent. Should he then still persist in his sins the other witnesses, motivated by the same love you have for the erring brother should also urge him to repent. Should he still refuse to repent at this stage, then *"tell it to the church"* (Matthew 18:17). What is to be told to the church, then, is not the initial sin alone: the line point to be told to the church is that the sinner refuses to repent of the initial sin and there are multiple witnesses who have heard that refusal.

In our age of tolerance, Church discipline is considered to be an outdated concept. So the danger is real that churches fail to exercise church discipline. However, when church discipline is not exercised in a church, we may not lay the blame first of all at the consistory's feet. Granted, the consistory has an important responsibility in exercising church discipline (see below). But it needs to be fixed in our minds that church discipline is first and foremost the responsibility of the church membership.

#### **4. Against Whom must Church Discipline be Administered?**

It holds true for every individual in this life, Christian or no Christian, that sin ruins one's relationship with God. However, can a congregation member bring to the attention of consistory the misconduct of his *non-churchgoing neighbour*? No! As Article 20

stipulates, the consistory has been given the task of looking after the congregation. *"The elders shall together with the ministers of the Word **govern the congregation** with pastoral care and discipline."* Office-bearers have authority only in the church in which they have been ordained, and hence have no authority over a <sup>170</sup> member of another church (not even within a bond of churches), let alone over the non-churchgoer across the road. The objects of church discipline are the members of the Church.

This was so in the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy 17:7 God commanded, *"So you shall put away the evil **from among you**."* 'Among you' was not a reference to what was happening amongst the Moabites; it was rather a reference to what was happening *within Israel*. The same idea can be found in the New Testament in 1 Corinthians 5:12, 13. There Paul writes. *"For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside" Do you not judge those who are **inside**? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore 'put away from yourselves the evil person.'"* Church discipline can be administered only within the church. Therefore, if someone decides to withdraw from the church whilst undergoing church discipline, consistory's authority over him ceases at the moment of his withdrawal. He is then no longer under the oversight of the consistory, and he can therefore no longer be placed under church discipline.

Those who withdraw try to short-circuit church discipline, largely because they disagree with the discipline - as if the discipline is simply a matter between people. In reality, though, church discipline is a matter between, the sinner and God. The brothers who do the admonishing (or the consistory that exercises formal discipline) are actually tools in God's hands in *His* dispute with His sinning child. Even though a sinner under church discipline may withdraw from the church, the fact remains that he still has an unresolved problem with God. Withdrawal from church, therefore, is never a legitimate escape from church discipline. One day the sinner has to meet his Maker. Then he cannot afford to have sins on his hands from which he has not repented.

## 5. What Sins are Worthy of Church Discipline?

The church is *"a holy congregation and assembly of the true Christian believers, who expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, are washed by His blood, and are sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit"* (Belgic Confession, Article 27). Its members *"flee from sin and pursue righteousness, love the true God and their neighbour without turning to the right or left, and crucify their flesh and its works"* (Belgic Confession, Article 29). Nevertheless, *"great weakness remains in them"* so that these saints *"fight against it by the Spirit all the days of their life"* (Belgic Confession, Article 29). The abiding weakness is so great that even those whom men consider to be 'giants' of the faith can fall into gross sin. Noah gave <sup>171</sup> himself to drunkenness and nakedness, even though he was regenerated by the Spirit of God (Genesis 9:21ff; cf Hebrews 11:7). Moses, though *"washed by [Jesus'] blood, and ... sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit"* killed the Egyptian (Exodus 2:12; cf Hebrews 11:24ff). God Himself said of Job that he was *"a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil"* (Job 1:8). Yet the weight of his despair was so great that he *"cursed the day of his birth"* (Job 3:1) and had to *"repent in dust and ashes"* of his sins (Job 42:6). David was regenerated by the Spirit of God when he took Bathsheba to his bedroom and when he killed Uriah (2 Samuel 11; cf David's expressions of trust in the Lord as are recorded in the psalms he wrote when he was being chased by King Saul, eg. Psalms 3, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 63, 142). Well do we confess in Lord's Day 23 of the *Heidelberg Catechism* that even the righteous man is *"still inclined to all evil."* And in Lord's Day 44: *"even the holiest has only a small beginning of the obedience Cod requires."* The Canons of Dort repeat it:

*"Although the power of Cod whereby He confirms and preserves true believers in grace is so great that it cannot be conquered by the flesh, yet the converted are not always so led and moved by Cod that they cannot in certain particular actions turn aside through their own fault from the guidance of grace and be seduced by and yield to the lusts of the flesh.... The lamentable fall of David, Peter, and other saints, described in Holy*

*Scripture, demonstrates this" (Chapter V, Article 4).*

It is not just *"serious and atrocious sins"* (Canons of Dort, V.4) that saints can fall into. Paul writes concerning himself. *"For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells: for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but **the evil I will not to do, that I practice.... O wretched man that I am!**"* (Romans 7:18-24). No matter how great our respect for Paul might be, he was the first to admit how much of a sinner he was and continued to be. Said Paul in 1 Timothy 1:15, *"This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief."* Notice how the *regenerated* apostle used the present tense. One should, therefore, not be surprised to find sins in the church of God, be they 'common' by our understanding or 'gross'. Nor should one be surprised to find a saint refusing to repent of sin. David certainly did not repent of his adultery and murder straightaway.

When, now, is a person to become an object of church discipline? When one sins? If that were the case, we all would be objects of church discipline all the time. When one commits a *particular* sin, then? Like one of the <sup>172</sup> *"serious and atrocious sins"* that Noah fell into, or Moses or David or Peter? Not at all. Church discipline has a place not when someone commits a *particular* sin, but rather when a person *does not repent from any sin he has committed*. In every man there is sin, but from Psalm 32:1, 2 we learn that God declares blessed the person who repents of sin. *"Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit."* But when there is no repentance, there is no forgiveness of sin and therefore no blessing from the Lord; that sinner remains under the curse of God. And church discipline would assist the sinner to escape from that curse of God!

Ultimately, one sin alone is addressed in church discipline. It is the sin of not repenting of whatever sin one has fallen into. This is also the significance of Jesus' words in Matthew 18:17; the refusal to repent (and the refusal was heard by multiple witnesses) must be reported to the church.

## 6. The 'How' of Church Discipline

### 6.1 Determination of Repentance

It is intriguing that the Church Order precedes the two articles concerning formal church discipline procedures with an article on repentance.<sup>38</sup> In so doing the churches give expression to their hope and expectation that church discipline will achieve its desired effect. The aim is not to get rid of a person from the congregation, or to get him into hell. The aim of discipline, as Article 69 had said, is to save the sinner. As soon as possible, a disciplinary procedure is to cease. This hope and aim receives early formulation in the Church Order like this:

**FRCA: Article 72 - Repentance (CanRC: Article 69)**

*When someone repents of a public sin or of a sin which had to be reported to the consistory, the latter shall not accept his confession of sin unless the member concerned has shown real amendment. The consistory shall determine whether the congregation shall be informed afterwards.*

The remorse of David after his affair with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12:13), his repentance after he numbered the people (2 Samuel 24:10), and Peter's tears after he denied the Lord (Luke 22:62) serve as examples of repentance from sin. After repentance, each was received again in grace (cf 2 Samuel 12:13b; 2 Samuel 24:18,25; Mark 16:7; John 21:15-19). <sup>173</sup>

## 6.2 Discipline of Communicant Members

The Church is the gathering of the true Christian believers (*Belgic Confession*, Article 27), including the children God in mercy has given to these believers (*Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord's Day 27). With all members, adults and children alike, God has established His covenant of grace. Given the nature of the covenant, all must respond to it.

Those members of the Church who have responded to God's covenant of grace by professing the faith are known as "communicant members"; these have taken upon themselves the responsibilities God has built into the covenant. Those who have not (yet) responded to God's covenant of grace (and so have not yet taken upon themselves the responsibilities that come with the covenant) are known as "non-communicant members". With respect to discipline, the two groups cannot be *treated* fully alike. Hence two articles appear in the Church Order detailing the steps of church discipline to communicant and non-communicant members respectively.

**FRCA: Article 73 - Discipline in respect of communicant members (CanRC: Article 68)**

*A communicant member who obstinately rejects the admonition by the consistory or who has committed a public or some other serious sin shall be suspended from the Lord's Supper. If he continues to harden himself in sin, the consistory shall publicly announce this to the congregation so that the congregation may be engaged in prayer and admonition and the excommunication may not take place without its cooperation.*

It is the responsibility of each, before he attends the supper of the Lord, to "examine himself" (I Corinthians 11:28). The elders, however, also have a responsibility (see Article 57). The table of the Lord should not be profaned by a person who refuses to acknowledge sin and repent of it. For the sake of the Lord's holiness and the sanctity of His table, then, the elders shall close the table to the sinner. By so doing, the message is impressed on the sinner that he may think he will join in the supper of the Lord of the Last Day (Revelation 19:9,10), but, if he continues in his sin, he in fact will not join in that supper. His being withheld from the table on this earth, then, is intended to spell out to him the seriousness of his situation, and so encourage repentance

If the brother nevertheless refuses to repent, the consistory and congregation can appeal to the promises he made when he publicly professed the faith. He said at this public profession that he believed the doctrine of <sup>174</sup> the Word of God and promised to continue in this doctrine always, he embraced God's covenant promises as true for himself, he declared that he loved the Lord and desired to serve him, and he promised "to submit willingly to the admonition and discipline of the Church, if it should happen ... that you become delinquent either in doctrine or conduct."<sup>39</sup> Because the sinner made these declarations "before God and His holy Church" at some point in the past, appeal can be put on the sinner, on the basis of his own statements, to repent of his sins and return to his promises. For that reason the churches have agreed to no less than three public announcements.

## 6.3 Congregational Involvement

How must the consistory deal with the sinner who refuses to repent? Discipline, we noted above, is first and foremost a congregational responsibility (see Chapter 7, Paragraph 3). When, therefore, there is a hardening in sin, the consistory involves the congregation by way of public announcements.

### 6.3.1 Announcements

The churches have agreed to the following procedure:

**FRCA: Article 74 - Announcements during the procedure (CanRC: Article 68)**

*In the first public announcement the name of the sinner shall not be mentioned. In the second public announcement, which shall be made only after the advice of classis has been obtained, the name and address of the sinner shall be mentioned. In the third public announcement a date shall be set at which the excommunication of the sinner shall take place in accordance with the adopted Form. The time interval between the various announcements shall be determined by the consistory.*<sup>40</sup>

The first public announcement<sup>41</sup> urges the congregation to pray for the wayward member. The congregation does not (should not) yet know the identity of the sinner, but already the congregation can be mobilised to use the greatest weapon God has given to His Church: prayer. As James wrote, "... *the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another...*" (James 5:15, 16).

If the prayers of the congregation do not lead to repentance, a second announcement provides the name of the member so that, in addition to praying, the congregation may also take up contact with the member, be it 175 by way of correspondence or a visit. Again, where there is a continuing hardening in sin a third announcement informs the congregation of the date the member will be excommunicated, together with the urge to seek once more to impress on the erring brother the need to repent. Excommunication is done in a church service in the presence of the congregation, for it is the congregation - be it under the leadership of the consistory - that excommunicates. This is again according to the pattern of 1 Corinthians 5, where the apostle told the *congregation* to deliver the sinner to Satan (verse 5).

### 6.3.2 Time Frame

All of this takes time. Why may an excommunication not occur immediately? The Church Order seems to allow for the passage of considerable time between the consistory being informed of the refusal to repent and the step of excommunication. The *Form for the Excommunication of Communicant Members*<sup>42</sup> speaks of "several earnest admonitions" which the unrepentant sinner has received. Repeated admonitions, with time to heed the admonitions and repent, require time. It is quite apparent that church discipline according to the Church Order is not something that is quickly done.

Nevertheless, one may wonder whether an extended time frame is really Scriptural. After all, Jesus did not seem to allow for much time to lapse between 'telling it to the church' and excommunication. Said Jesus: "*And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector*" (Matthew 18:17). Paul does not seem to have much patience either: "*Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition*" (Titus 3:10). Further, is the church not holy? If a member, then, refuses to confess and repent of sin, is it not proper that his excommunication follow as a matter of urgency?

It is because of the holiness of the church of God that the churches have agreed in Article 73 that such a member "*shall be suspended from the Lord's Supper.*" The instruction of the Lord in 1 Corinthians 11:27-32 was not lost on the churches; it was because the table of the Lord had not been guarded in Corinth (church discipline was not exercised) that many in the congregation were sick or had died. So the first formal step of church discipline, suspension from the Lord's table, cannot be long in coming. The elders need to guard the purity and holiness of the table of the Lord.

But from here on, one needs to recognise that a certain measure of patience is required when dealing with unrepentant sinners. The road to repentance requires time and so one needs to be wary of excommunicating 176 too hastily. Take David, for example. How long did it take for him to admit to his sin of adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah? Even after he found out that Bathsheba was pregnant (certainly a period of weeks), he added to his sin by having Uriah killed. It was not until after the widow Bathsheba had been taken into his house (had six months now passed since the initial



sin?) that, through Nathan's prompting, David confessed his transgression. In Psalm 32 David himself admitted that God's heavy hand had to press on him for some time before he acknowledged his sin. David said,

*"When I kept silent, my bones grew old  
Through my groaning all the day long.  
For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me:  
My vitality was turned into the drought of summer" (vss 3, 4).*

This certainly cannot be read to assume a quick repentance. In the broken-ness of this life, repentance amongst God's elect does not necessarily happen overnight. Further, the church needs to show to the wayward something of the patience and compassion that God showed to Israel. Repeatedly He sent prophets to warn; God did not send His people into exile after the first admonition (2 Chronicles 36:15, 16).

The steps of withholding someone from the communion of the table of the Lord, the first, second and third announcements before excommunication, and the involvement of classes, all take time. The three announcements are not to be made in consecutive weeks. A number of months may well be required. In recognition of the patience required in order for a sinner to come to repentance, the churches have agreed in Article 74 that *"the time interval between the various announcements shall be determined by the consistory."*

That the advice of classis is sought by a church prior to proceeding with a second announcement is in agreement with the Lord's word in Proverbs 11:14: *"in the multitude of counsellors there is safety."* Seeking advice acts, then, as a safeguard to ensure that a church, rather than trying to get rid of a stubborn member, is truly seeking to gain the member.

### 6.3.3 Excommunication

In due time, excommunication becomes necessary. The hardened sinner is cut off from the church of Jesus Christ. No longer may he consider himself to belong to the redeemed for whom Christ laid down His life. Instead, he must know himself to be Satan's property (1 Corinthians 5:5; 1 Timothy 1:20). 177

At this point, church discipline formally comes to an end. This does not, however, close the chapter on the excommunicated person, since the aim of church discipline included the sinner's repentance (Article 69). In Matthew 18:17 Jesus instructed His disciples, "... *But if he refuses even to hear the church, **let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.***" What did Jesus mean by having to treat the excommunicated member as a heathen and a tax collector? Was it Jesus' point that the unrepentant were to be avoided like the plague? The answer is No. It is true on the one hand that the Lord God instructed Israel to remain separate from the heathen around them, and permit no warm and friendly relations with them (Deuteronomy 7:2; Joshua 2:14). At the same time God's saving work in Jesus Christ was not meant for the people of Israel alone (Genesis 12:3). Israel's manner of interacting with the nations around them, though at arm's length, still had to demonstrate compassion and draw foreigners to faith in God (see Leviticus 19:10, 33, 34). This, in fact, is also how Jesus Himself treated heathens and tax collectors. He did not leave them alone or avoid them. Jesus tended to the needs of the Roman centurion (Luke 7:6), the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7:29). and the demon-possessed man of the Gadarenes (Mark 5:8). Zacchaeus *"was a chief tax collector."* but Jesus *"said to him, 'Zacchaeus, make haste ... for today I must stay at **your** house* (Luke 19:2-5).

In Matthew 18:17. then, Jesus does not give instruction to close the door on the excommunicated. Rather. His wish is that the wayward covenant child remains the object of one's interest, love, and admonition. This attitude of Christ is what the *Form for Excommunication* urges us to imitate. After a member has been excommunicated, the Consistory addresses the congregation with these words.



*"We exhort you, beloved Christians, not to look on him (her) as an enemy. On the contrary, **try to warn him (her) as a brother (sister)**. But do not associate with him (her), that he (she) may be ashamed and come to repentance."*<sup>43</sup>

This is a scriptural exhortation derived from 2 Thessalonians 3:14, 15, where Paul writes to the Thessalonians, *"And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed. **Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.**"* Though the children of God are to ensure that there is distance between the excommunicated member and themselves, the excommunicated person must remain the object of loving admonition. The purpose of excommunication is and remains the repentance of the sinner. <sup>178</sup>

## 6.4 Purpose Achieved

The churches reckon with the gracious work of God in breaking hardened hearts. What, then, ought to be done when a sinner returns in repentance? The churches have agreed to follow a uniform pattern in reinstating the repentant sinner as a member of the Church.

### **FRCA: Article 75 - Re-admission (CanRC: Article 70)**

*When someone who has been excommunicated repents and desires to be again received into the communion of the church, the congregation shall be informed of this desire in order to see whether there are any lawful objections. The time between the public announcement and the re-admission of the sinner shall be not less than one month. If no lawful objection is raised the re-admission shall take place, with the use of the adopted Form.*

Church discipline is first and foremost the responsibility of the congregation. When, therefore, church discipline has achieved its desired purpose, the congregation is again to be involved.

The churches have agreed that there should be a period of not less than one month before the repentant sinner is readmitted. In this period the congregation is given opportunity to raise any lawful objections to the sinner's readmission. This is not to make things difficult for the sinner, but to ensure that the sinner's repentance is indeed *genuine*. See Article 72. The congregation, after all, has a fundamental role to play in maintaining congregational holiness. The congregation also has more eyes and ears than the office-bearers. A reasonable time has to be granted to the congregation to be satisfied that the returning sinner is truly repentant.

The announcement made to the congregation acknowledges repentance as a fruit of excommunication: *"Beloved in the Lord: In the year ... brother (sister) was excommunicated from the Church of Christ. The consistory may now inform you with gratitude that **this remedy has borne fruit.**"*<sup>44</sup>

## 6.5 Discipline of Non-communicant Members

Non-communicant members, like communicant members, are included in God's covenant, and therefore have all the riches of Christ promised to them (see Chapter 6, Paragraph 2.1.1). Given what God has done for them and to them, it follows that they must in due time respond to their baptism with faith in Jesus Christ. By the grace of God, many do and so also live a life of service to God. These make profession of faith (see Chapter <sup>179</sup> 6, Paragraph 2.1.3). Others, however, do not. By their conduct or their lack of faith they show themselves to be unbelieving and ungodly. Can such persons continue indefinitely to belong to Christ's body?

The answer is negative. Christ's body *is* holy, and therefore must *be* holy. The aims of church discipline (see Paragraph 2 above) are valid for the non-communicant sinner too. Granted, he has not made profession of the faith, and so not taken to himself the

responsibilities the Lord has built into the covenant of grace. For that reason, this wayward non-communicant member cannot be approached in a manner identical to those who have voiced the vow of faith. The Churches have agreed to the following procedure:

**FRCA: Article 79 - Discipline in respect of non-communicant members (CanRC: Article 68)**

*A baptised member shall be admonished by the consistory when he as an adult fails to make public profession of faith or where in other respects he is not loyal to the calling to new obedience in God's covenant. If he obstinately rejects the admonition of the consistory and thereby clearly demonstrates that he is indifferent and averse to the covenant or is even hostile to the service of the Lord, the matter shall be made known to the congregation without mentioning the name of the sinner; and the congregation shall be urged to pray for him. If the member continues in sin and is unwilling to listen to the admonitions, then with the advice of the classis the consistory shall make a second public announcement, mentioning the name of the sinner and the term after which the excommunication shall take place. If he does not in the said term show any real repentance, the consistory shall in a church service exclude him from the communion of the church, using the adopted Form. If he, after this excommunication, comes to repentance and desires to rejoin the communion of the church, he shall be admitted by way of his public profession of faith after the consistory has made his repentance known to the congregation.*<sup>45</sup>

Since the non-communicant member has not promised allegiance to God through public profession of faith, an effort to move him to repentance cannot include an appeal to the promises he made to God. That is why the second announcement as pertains to communicant members has been omitted. Instead, the church proceeds directly (of course, after an interval of time) to the sinner's excommunication. Here, too, though, excommunication is not the end of the matter. The aim remains the repentance of this wayward covenant child. For the non-communicant member readmission to the Church is by way of public profession of faith. <sup>180</sup>

It should be noted that the churches have not agreed to an age when non-communicant members who fail to make profession of the faith should be censured. There is wisdom in this decision. A person's character as well as his personal circumstances and culture dictate that each case be dealt with on its own merit.

## **7. Sin Amongst Office-Bearers**

The men whom God calls to office in His church have need of God's saving work as much as anyone else. They are as inclined to evil and are as inclined to refuse to repent from sin as another. The Bible gives ample evidence of office-bearers who fell into sin. There was King David who refused to repent of his sin of adultery and murder (2 Samuel 11, 12), the disciple Peter who denied his Lord three times (Matthew 26:69-75), the apostle Peter who erred in doctrine (Galatians 2:11ff), the sons of Aaron who burnt unholy fire (Leviticus 10:1-3), the many kings of Israel and Judah of whom it is written, *"and he did evil in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his fathers had done."* In recognition of the fact that office-bearers can fall into sin, Paul told the elders at Ephesus to *"take heed to yourselves"* (Acts 20:28). Let no one, then, be surprised when an office-bearer falls into sin.

### **7.1 Manner of Discipline**

How, though, ought the Church to deal with office-bearers who fall into grievous sin? The following is agreed:

**FRCA: Article 76- Suspension and deposition of office-bearers (CanRC: Article 71)**

*If a minister, elder or deacon has committed a public or otherwise gross sin, or refuses to heed the admonitions by the consistory, he shall be suspended from office by the judgment of his own consistory and of the consistory of a neighbouring congregation. In the case of a minister this neighbouring congregation shall be appointed by the classis. If he hardens himself in the sin, or if the sin committed is of such a nature that he can not continue in office, an elder or a deacon shall be deposed by the judgment of the above-mentioned consistories. Classis, with the advice of the deputies of synod, shall judge whether a minister is to be deposed.*<sup>46</sup>

Why must an office-bearer be suspended from office immediately? Why is no consideration given for the passing of some time, as in Articles <sup>181</sup> 73 and 79? One factor is the holiness of the church of the Lord. That a known leader has given himself to gross sin gives cause for congregation and community alike to deride the good name of the Lord. More, by definition a leader is followed. If a leader in the congregation gives himself to sin and no consequence follows with respect to his leadership, the flock may feel free to follow his bad example. For the sake of the holiness of the flock, then, the office-bearer who has become delinquent in doctrine or conduct must be dealt with strictly and swiftly.

Where an office-bearer has fallen into grievous sin, the consistory that appointed the brother to office also suspends him from office. In Article 76 one does not read of the congregation's involvement as in Articles 73 and 79. Here the consistory shall need to deal decisively in giving leadership to the congregation.

However, a consistory may not suspend an office-bearer on its own accord. An office-bearer *"shall be suspended from office by the judgment of his own consistory **and of the consistory of a neighbouring congregation. In the case of a minister this neighbouring congregation shall be appointed by the classis.**"* The churches have agreed that no consistory may act unilaterally; the judgment of a neighbouring church must be sought to safeguard against consistories getting rid of office-bearers for unlawful reasons, be they personality clashes or otherwise. Since a minister has a task also within a bond of churches, classis plays a larger role in his suspension and deposition than for elders and deacons.

Suspension from office gives the office-bearer the opportunity to repent. But if there is no repentance or the nature of the sin warrants it, an office-bearer must be deposed simply because the congregation needs to be protected.

## 7.2 Which Sins require Suspension?

Article 77 mentions specific sins that are grounds for the suspension or deposition of office-bearers:

**FRCA: Article 77 - Serious and gross sins on the part of office-bearers (CanRC: Article 72)**

*As serious and gross sins which are grounds for the suspension or deposition of office-bearers the following are to be mentioned particularly: False doctrine or heresy, public schisms, blasphemy, simony, faithless desertion of office or intrusion upon that of another, perjury, adultery, fornication, theft, acts of violence, habitual drunkenness, brawling, unjustly enriching oneself; and further all <sup>182</sup> such sins and serious misdemeanours that rate as ground for ex-communication with respect to other members of the church.*

As in any case of church discipline, people's emotions can stand in the way of determining correctly what is sin or not. That helps to explain why a list of sins is mentioned here. Regardless of one's personal connections with the sinner (as was also the case in Deuteronomy 13:6), sin must be labelled as the sin it is, and judged accordingly.

### 7.3 Mutual Discipline

Office-bearers also need to engage in mutual discipline, speaking frankly with each other concerning the shortcomings they see in each other's work. That office-bearers have an obligation towards each other was already stated in Articles 16 and 20: "[Ministers] shall watch over their fellow office-hearers..." and "[elders] shall watch that their fellow office-hearers are faithful in carrying out their duties...." This is carried further in Article 78 as follows:

**FRCA: Article 78 - Christian censure (CanRC: Article 73)**

*The ministers, elders, and deacons shall mutually exercise Christian censure and shall exhort and kindly admonish one another with regard to the execution of their office.*

Office-bearers are common, average people, quite able to be negligent in their God-given task of looking after the Hock of the Lord. To ensure that the Hock for which Christ shed His blood is tended as best as is humanly possible, every effort ought to be made to encourage one another to carry out the office to the best of one's ability. This is in keeping with Paul's instruction to the elders of Ephesus: "*Take heed to yourselves*" (Acts 20:28). Not only is each office-bearer to look to himself that he carry out his office properly, but each office-bearer is also to look to his neighbour, that the flock is well tended by the other office-bearer also. So, if there is need, office-bearers are to admonish each other on points of doctrine or conduct. Paul's candidness with Peter (Galatians 2:11-21) and his words of admonition and encouragement to the elders (see, for example, Acts 20:17-35) serve as Biblical precedents.

To make sure that the brothers indeed have nothing against the way any other brother carries out the office God laid on him, the good practice has developed at consistory meetings to give opportunity at fixed intervals for brothers to make use of Article 78.

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## Chapter 8

### Concluding Articles

#### Articles 80, 81

In a final, brief section, the FRCA Church Order prints two overarching principles of Scriptural church polity. For the background to these two principles, the reader is referred to earlier portions of this book.

#### 1. Principle 1: No Lording over Others

Jesus had said in Matthew 23:8 that *"One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren."* If Jesus Christ is Head of the Church, and office-bearers are all tools in His hands to shepherd His flock, no office-bearer may take or receive from others a position of captain over other office-bearers. Similarly, since each church is a complete body of Christ, each governed by Christ the Head (through His office-bearers), no church may impose itself over another church, nor may any church accept another church as its headquarters.

**FRCA: Article 80 - No lording over others (CanRC: Article 74)**

*No church shall in any way lord it over other churches, no office-bearer over other office-bearers.*

That this principle is critical for Reformed church polity has been drawn out above (Chapter 1, Paragraph 2.3; Chapter 3, Paragraph 2.1). Suffice it to say that the principle bears repeated enunciation, since the human heart remains depraved. Always there are those, also in the church of <sup>185</sup> Christ, who would lord it over others. And always there are those, also in the church of Christ, who would listen to men instead of to God. Let those inclined to giving leadership recall that the risen Saviour is Head of the Church and they but one tool amongst many in His hands - and so it behoves them to be modest in giving instructions to those not entrusted to their care. Equally, let those office-bearers inclined to receiving instructions make it their business to consider for themselves what it is that the Head of the Church desires them to do in caring for His flock.

#### 2. Principle 2: Observance and Revision of the Church Order

##### 2.1 Observance of the Church Order

*"We believe that this true Church must be governed according to the Spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in His Word" (Belgic Confession, Article 32).* On the basis of material drawn from God's Word, the churches have agreed to a spiritual order that, in their judgment, is fitting for the churches of Jesus Christ. True churches of Jesus Christ govern themselves *"according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and regarding Jesus Christ as the only Head"* (Belgic Confession, Article 29). So it is for Christ's churches *"diligently to observe the provisions of this Church Order."* This is the principle reflected in the final article of the adopted Spiritual order:

**FRCA: Article 81 - Observance and revision of the Church Order (CanRC: Article 76)**

*These articles, which regard the lawful order of the church, have been adopted with common accord. If the interest of the churches demands such, they may and ought to be changed, augmented or diminished. However no consistory or classis shall be permitted to do so, but they shall endeavour diligently to observe the provisions of this Church Order as long as they have not been changed by synod.*

This is not to say that the Church Order is to be seen as law, in the sense that a higher authority has imposed the Church Order upon the churches. The Bible alone is 'law', in the sense that God Most High has expressed in it His will for His people. The Church Order captures what men, to the best of their ability, understand to be *"the Spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in His Word."* Precisely this origin of the Church Order gives the reason why churches are bound to abide by the adopted Church Order.

<sup>186</sup> Since the Church Order is *"the Spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in His Word,"* no church or office-bearer or member may act in a fashion disagreeing with this order (see also Chapter 1, Paragraph 1.3).

Yet it is also true that not every article of the Church Order is directly and obviously rooted in passages of Scripture. I think, for example, about the agreement relating to Ecclesiastical Feast Days (Article 65) or Funerals (Article 68). To insist that the churches maintain articles as these on the grounds that our Lord has taught us this about feast days or funerals is asking too much. So it is fitting to acknowledge that a second ground exists explaining why the churches *"shall endeavour diligently to observe the provisions of this Church Order."* This second (and secondary) ground is captured in the first sentence of Article 81: *"These articles, which regard the lawful order of the church, have been adopted with common accord."* No church was pressured to agree to the various articles of this Church Order. Since the churches have voluntarily adopted this Order, it is for each church to abide by its agreements. For the people of God keep their word (Psalm 15:4).

## 2.2 Revision of the Church Order

The fact that the adopted Church Order captures *"the Spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in His Word"* does not mean that this Church Order is above correction. It remains the work of men, and shall for that very reason show the weaknesses that characterise all human effort. If the Lord will grant greater insight into an aspect of His revealed will, the churches of necessity must alter their agreement in accordance with this greater insight.

A more likely cause for altering the Church Order, though, is the fact that one's circumstances can change. The fact that the Free Reformed Churches of Australia found themselves in a bond of (initially) three churches prompted the churches to revisit the adopted system of multiple assemblies. In response to this circumstance (the reader will recall), the FRCA deleted from its Church Order the reference to a Regional Synod, and replaced, for the time being, the concept of 'classis' with the concept of a 'classis church' (see Chapter 5, Paragraph 9). That such circumstances constitute legitimate cause to change the Church Order is reflected in the second sentence of Article 81: *"If the interest of the churches demands such, [these articles] may and ought to be changed, augmented or diminished."* As the ecclesiastical scene rearranges itself around the world today, it is fitting to acknowledge that one can modify one's Church Order - as long as *"the Spiritual order"* <sup>187</sup> *which our Lord has taught us in His Word"* is accurately reflected and acknowledged in the concrete circumstances of the day.

Yet it is not for churches to change their Order independently of each other. Where change is required, the churches need to take into account the unity God has placed between His churches (Chapter 1, Paragraph 3.3). Hence the concluding sentence of Article 81: *"...no consistory or classis shall be permitted to Intake changes), but they shall endeavour diligently to observe the provisions of this Church Order as long as they have not been changed by synod."*

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## **Appendices**

## **Appendix 1**

### **Church Order of Dort (as adopted in 1618-1619)<sup>47</sup>**

#### ***Article 1 - Purpose and Content of the Church Order***

For the maintenance of good order in the Church of Christ it is necessary that there should be: offices; assemblies; supervision of doctrine, sacraments, and ceremonies; and Christian discipline; of which matters the following articles treat in due order.

#### **Concerning the Offices**

#### ***Article 2 - The Four Kinds of Offices***

The offices are of four kinds: of the ministers of the Word, of the Professors of Theology, of the Elders, and of the Deacons.

#### ***Article 3 - The Necessity of the Lawful Calling***

No one, though he be a Professor of Theology, Elder, or Deacon, shall be permitted to enter upon the ministry of the Word and the Sacraments without having been lawfully called thereunto. And when any one acts contrary thereto, and after being frequently admonished does not desist, the Classis shall judge whether he is to be declared a schismatic or is to be punished in some other way.

#### ***Article 4 - The Lawful Calling***

The lawful calling of those who have not previously been in office, in cities as well as rural districts, consists:

First, in the Election, after previous fasting and prayer, by the Consistory and Deacons, not without (proper correspondence with the Christian magistrates of the respective districts, and) the knowledge or advice of the Classis, where this had been customary up to now.

Secondly, in the Examination, both of doctrine and life, by the Classis, in the presence of all, or some of the delegates of Synod.

Thirdly, in the Approbation and indorsement (by the magistrates and then also) by the members of the Reformed Congregation of that city, if, the name of the Minister having been announced in the Churches over a period of fourteen days, no objection rises.

Finally, in the public Ordination before the congregation, which shall take place with appropriate stipulations and interrogations, prayer and the laying on of the hands by the ordaining Minister and by other Ministers, if more are present, in accordance with the Form for this purpose. It is understood that the imposition of hands may take place in the Classical assembly to the newly graduated Ministers being sent to the Churches under the Cross.

#### ***Article 5 - The Calling of Ministers That are in Office***

Ministers already in the ministry of the Word who are called to another congregation, shall likewise be called in this manner, (including aforesaid correspondence) in cities as well as rural districts, by the Consistory and the Deacons, with the advice or approval of the Classis, to whom the aforesaid Ministers called, shall show good ecclesiastical testimonials of doctrine and life: (after approval by the magistrate of the respective district and) after being presented to the congregation over a period of fourteen days, as before stated, they shall be installed after previous stipulations and prayers. All due regard must also be given here to the things previously mentioned with respect to proper right of presentation, or any other right, in so far as it can be employed to edification, without detriment to the Church of God and good Church Order; to which (the Civil authorities and) the Synods of the respective districts are to give their careful

attention, and make proper regulations, to the welfare of the Churches.

#### ***Article 6 - Affiliation with a Local Congregation***

No minister shall be at liberty to serve in any private manors, institutions of mercy, or otherwise, unless he previously be admitted in accordance with the preceding Articles; and he shall, no less than others, be subject to the Church Order.

#### ***Article 7 - The Assignment of a Sphere of Labor***

No one shall be called to the ministry of the Word without stationing himself in a particular place, unless he be sent either to preach in one place or another for the Churches under the Cross, or to do Church extension work.

#### ***Article 8 - Ministers Without Theological Training***

No school teachers, artisans, or others who have not studied, shall be admitted to the ministry, unless there is definite assurance of their being exceptionally gifted, godly, humble, modest, and possessed of good sense and discretion, as well as gifts of public address. When such persons present themselves for the ministry, the Classis shall (if the Synod approve) first examine them, and, the examination being satisfactory, permit them to preach in private for a certain length of time, and then further deal with them as it shall deem edifying.

#### ***Article 9 - About Novices***

Novices, priests, monks, and others who have left some sect, shall not be admitted to the ministry in the Church, except with extreme caution and circumspection, and after a definite period of probation.

#### ***Article 10 - The Departure of the Minister of the Word***

A Minister, once lawfully called, may not leave the congregation which unconditionally received him, to accept a call elsewhere, without the consent of the consistory and the deacons, (and those who previously held the office of elder and deacon, together with the magistrate), nor without the knowledge of the Classis; likewise no other church shall be permitted to receive him until he has presented a legal certificate of dismissal from the church and the classis where he served.

#### ***Article 11 - The Maintenance of the Ministers***

On the other hand, the Consistory, as representing the congregation, shall also be bound to provide for the proper support of its Ministers, and shall not dismiss them without the knowledge and judgment of the Classis who, in the event of lack of support, shall judge whether or not to remove aforesaid Ministers.

#### ***Article 12 - Changing to a Secular Vocation***

Inasmuch as a Minister of the Word, once lawfully called in conformity to the above, is bound to the service of the Church for life, he is not allowed to enter upon a secular vocation except for important and weighty reasons, which shall be subject to the cognizance and judgment of the Classis.

#### ***Article 13 - Retirement (Becoming Emeritus)***

In the event that Ministers are rendered incapable of performing the duties of their office due to age, sickness, or otherwise, they shall nevertheless retain the honor and title of a Minister, and the church which they have served shall honorably provide for them in their needs, also for the widows and orphans of Ministers.

#### ***Article 14 - Temporary Release***

If any Minister, for the aforesaid or any other reason, is compelled to discontinue his service for a time, which shall not take place without the advice of the Consistory, he

shall nevertheless at all times he and remain subject to the call of the congregation.

### ***Article 15 - Preaching Elsewhere***

No one shall be permitted, neglecting the ministry of his Church, or being without a fixed charge, to preach indiscriminately without the consent and authority of Synod or Classis. Likewise, no one shall be permitted to preach or administer the Sacraments in another Church without the consent of the Consistory.

### ***Article 16- The Office of the Ministers of the Word***

The office of the Ministers is to continue in prayer and in the Ministry of the Word, to dispense the Sacraments, to watch over their brethren, the Elders and Deacons, as well as the Congregation, and finally with the Elders, to exercise church discipline and to see to it that everything is done decently and in good order.

### ***Article 17 - Equality in Office***

Among Ministers of the Word, equality shall be maintained with respect to the duties of their office and also in other matters as far as possible, according to the judgment of the consistory, and, if necessary, of the Classis; which equality shall be maintained in the case of the Elders and Deacons.

### ***Article 18 - The Office of Professor of Theology***

The office of the Doctors or Professors of Theology is to expound the Holy Scriptures and to uphold sound doctrine against heresies and errors.

### ***Article 19 - The Support of the Students***

The Churches shall make efforts to obtain students of theology, which are to be supported by them (ex bonis publicis).

### ***Article 20 - Practice Preaching***

In the churches having more capable Ministers the practice of preparing some for the ministry of the Word by allowing them to speak a word of edification shall be instituted, in conformity to the rule in this matter, as specially prescribed by this Synod.

### ***Article 21 - The Ecclesiastical Care of the Schools***

The consistories everywhere shall see to it that there are good school teachers, not only to teach the children reading, writing, languages, and the liberal arts, but also to instruct them in godliness and in the Catechism.

### ***Article 22 - The Election of Elders***

The Elders shall be chosen by the judgment of the Consistory and the Deacons, so that every church shall be at liberty, according to its circumstances, to present to the Congregation as many Elders as are needed, that they may be installed with public prayers and stipulations after being approved by and with the assent of the congregation, unless any obstacle arise: - or twice the number of Elders needed may be present, half of them to be chosen by the congregation, and installed in office in the same manner, according to the Form for this purpose.

### ***Article 23 - The Duties or Task of the Elder***

The office of the Elders, in addition to what was said in Article 16 to be their duty in common with the Ministers of the Word, is to take heed that the Ministers, together with their other Fellow-helpers and the Deacons, faithfully discharge their office; - and, insofar as circumstances of time and place permit, to do housevisitation both before and after the Lord's Supper for the edification of the congregation, in order particularly to comfort and instruct the members of the congregation, and also to exhort others in respect to the Christian Religion.

### ***Article 24 - The Election of Deacons***

The Deacons shall be chosen, approved, and installed in the same manner as was stated concerning the Elders.

### ***Article 25 - The Office of the Deacons***

The office peculiar to the Deacons is diligently to collect alms and other contributions of charity, and after mutual counsel, to distribute the same faithfully and diligently to the poor, both to residents and to strangers, as their needs may require it: to visit and comfort those in distress, and to exercise care that the alms are not misused; of which they shall render an account in Consistory, and also (if anyone desires to be present) to the Congregation, at such a time as the Consistory may see fit.

### ***Article 26 - Correspondence with Other Bodies in the Work of Benevolence***

In places where there are Visitants to shut-ins or other Almoners, the Deacons shall request them to maintain proper correspondence with them to the end that the alms may the better be distributed among those who have the greatest need.

### ***Article 27 - The Term of Office for Elders and Deacons***

The Elders and Deacons shall serve two years, and every year half their number shall retire and others shall be substituted, unless the circumstances and the profit of any church require otherwise.

### ***Article 28 - Relationship with the Government***

As it is the office of the Christian Magistrate to promote holy Divine Services in every way, to recommend them by their example to their subjects, and to assist whenever necessary the Ministers, Elders, and Deacons and to protect them by proper regulations, so it is the duty of all Ministers, Elders, and Deacons diligently and sincerely to impress upon the entire Congregation the obedience, love, and respect which they owe the Magistrates; further, all Church Officers shall set a good example to the Congregation, and seek to gain and retain the good will of the Magistrates toward the Churches by means of proper respect and correspondence, to the end that, each acting for the mutual welfare, in the fear of the Lord, all suspicion and distrust may be prevented, and true concord be maintained to the welfare of the Churches.

## **The Ecclesiastical Assemblies**

### ***Article 29 - The Ecclesiastical Assemblies***

Four kinds of ecclesiastical assemblies shall be maintained: the Consistory, the Classical Meetings, the Particular Synod, and the General or National Synod.

### ***Article 30 - The Authority of the Ecclesiastical Assemblies***

In these assemblies ecclesiastical matters only shall be transacted and that in an ecclesiastical manner. In major assemblies only such matters shall be dealt with as could not be finished in minor assemblies, or such as pertain to the churches of the major assembly in common.

### ***Article 31 - The Right of Appeal***

If anyone complain that he has been wronged by the decision of a minor assembly, he shall have the right to appeal to a major ecclesiastical assembly, and whatever may be agreed upon by a majority vote shall be considered settled and binding, unless it be proved to conflict with the Word of God or with the Articles formulated in this General Synod, as long as they are not changed by another General Synod.

### ***Article 32 - The Opening and Closing of Ecclesiastical Assemblies***

The proceedings of all assemblies shall begin by calling upon the Name of God and be

closed with thanksgiving.

### ***Article 33 - The Credentials***

Those who are delegated to the assemblies shall bring with them their credentials and instructions, signed by those sending them, and they only shall have a vote.

### ***Article 34 - The Officers, and Task of the Clerk***

In all assemblies there shall be not only a president, but also a clerk to keep a faithful record of that which deserves to be recorded.

### ***Article 35 - The Office of the President***

The office of the president is to state and explain the business to be transacted, to see to it that everyone observe due order in speaking, to silence the captious and those who are vehement in speaking; and properly to discipline them if they refuse to listen. Furthermore his office shall cease when the assembly arises.

### ***Article 36- The Authority of the Major Assemblies Over the Minor Ones***

The Classis has the same jurisdiction over the Consistory as the Particular Synod has over the Classis and the General Synod over the Particular.

### ***Article 37 - About the Consistory***

In all churches there shall be a Consistory composed of the Ministers of the Word and the Elders, who shall meet at least once a week. The Minister of the Word, or the Ministers, if there be more than one, in turn, shall preside and regulate the proceedings. (And also the Magistrates of the place respectively shall, if they desire to do so, delegate one or two of their number, being members of the Congregation, to the Consistory to listen to the matters under discussion and to participate in the deliberation.)

### ***Article 38 - Of Constituting a New and Of Small Consistories***

In places where the Consistory is to be constituted for the first time this shall not take place except with the advice of the Classis. And whenever the number of Elders is very small, the Deacons may be added to the Consistory.

### ***Article 39 - Where There is Not Yet a Consistory***

In places where as yet there is no Consistory, the Classis shall in the meantime take care of the work which would otherwise be performed by the Consistory in accordance with this Church Order.

### ***Article 40 - The Meeting of the Deacons***

Likewise the Deacons shall meet every week to transact the business pertaining to their office, calling upon the Name of God: whereunto the Ministers shall take good heed and if necessary they shall be present.

### ***Article 41 - The Meetings of Classis***

The Classical meetings shall consist of neighboring churches that respectively delegate, with proper credentials, a Minister and an Elder, to meet at such a time and place as was determined by the previous Classical meeting, with the understanding that this be within the next three months. In these meetings the Ministers shall preside in rotation or the assembly shall choose one to preside; however, the same Minister shall not be chosen twice in succession. Furthermore, the president shall, among other things, ask each of them if Consistory meetings are held in their churches; if church discipline is exercised; if the poor and the schools are cared for; lastly, if they need the judgment and help of the Classis for the proper government of their Church. The Minister designated by the previous Classis shall preach a brief sermon from the Word of God, of which the others shall judge and point out if anything be lacking in it. Finally, at the last meeting before



the Particular Synod delegates shall be chosen to attend said Synod.

***Article 42 - Concerning Two or More Ministers Representing One Church in the Classis***

When there are more Ministers than one in a church, all of them may attend the Classis and have a vote, except in matters which particularly concern their persons or churches.

***Article 43 - The Censure in Major Assemblies***

At the close of the Classical and other major Assemblies, censure shall be exercised over those who have done something worthy of punishment in the meeting, or who have scorned the admonition of the minor assemblies.

***Article 44 - The Church Visitation***

The Classis shall authorize a number of its Ministers, at least two of the oldest, most experienced and competent ones, to visit all the Churches once a year in cities as well as in rural districts, and to take heed whether the Ministers, Consistories, and School-teachers faithfully perform the duties of their office, adhere to sound doctrine, observe in all things the adopted order, and properly promote as much as lies in them, by word and deed, the edification of the Congregation including the youth, to the end that they may in time fraternally admonish those who have in anything been negligent, and may by their advice and assistance help direct all things unto peace, upbuilding, and greatest profit of the Churches and Schools. And each Classis may continue these Visitors in service as long it sees fit, except where the visitors themselves request to be released for reasons of which the Classis shall judge.

***Article 45 - Taking Care of Written Records***

It shall be the duty of the church in which the Classis, and likewise the Particular or General Synod meets, to furnish the following meeting with the minutes of the preceding.

***Article 46 - Instructions for the Major Assemblies***

Instructions concerning matters to be considered in major assemblies shall not be written until the decisions of the previous Synod have been read, in order that what was once decided be not again proposed unless a revision be deemed necessary.

***Article 47 - The Particular Synod***

Every year, or if need be oftener, four or five or more neighboring Classes shall meet as a Particular Synod, to which each Classis shall delegate two Ministers and two Elders. At the close of both, the Particular and the General Synod, some church shall be empowered to determine with the advice of the Classis the time and place of the next Synod.

***Article 48 - The Correspondence***

Each Synod shall be at liberty to solicit and hold correspondence with its neighboring Synod or Synods, in such manner as they shall judge most conducive to general edification.

***Article 49 - The Deputies of the Particular Synod***

Each Synod shall delegate some to execute everything ordained by Synod both as to what pertains to the High Authorities and to the respective Classes resorting under it; and likewise to supervise together or in smaller number all examinations of future Ministers. And furthermore, in all other eventual difficulties they shall extend help to the Classes in order that proper unity, order, and soundness of doctrine may be maintained and established. They shall also keep proper record of all their actions to report thereof to synod, and if it be demanded, give reasons. They shall also not be discharged from

their service before and until Synod itself discharges them.

### ***Article 50 - The National Synod***

The National Synod shall ordinarily be held every three years, unless an urgent need arises to make it a shorter period. Two Ministers and two Elders shall be sent from each Particular Synod (from both the German and the Welsh speaking churches). Further, the church charged with appointing the time and place of the General Synod shall convene its Particular Synod if the General Synod is to be called within the three years (and inform the nearest church speaking the other language, which is to send four persons there) to determine jointly the time and place. (When the church which has been appointed to convene the General Synod is consulting with the Classis regarding the time and place, it is to inform the High Authorities in due time, that with their knowledge, if it be their pleasure also to send some to the Classis, the matter be decided in the presence and with the advice of their Deputies.)

### ***Article 51 - The Relationship Toward the Walloon Churches***

Whereas two languages are spoken in the Netherlands, it is deemed proper that the churches of the German and the Welsh languages each have their own Consistories, Classical Meetings, and Particular Synods.

### ***Article 52 - The Relationship Toward the Walloon Churches***

Notwithstanding, it is resolved that in the cities where beforementioned Welsh churches are found, some Ministers and Elders from both sides meet every month to maintain proper unity and correspondence with each other and, as much as possible, assist one another with advice as the need arises.

## **Of Doctrines, Sacraments and Other Ceremonies**

### ***Article 53 - Subscription to the Forms by Ministers and Professors***

The Ministers of the Word of God and likewise the Professors in Theology shall subscribe to the Confession of Faith of the Netherlands Churches (which is proper for the other Professors as well), and the Ministers who refuse to do so shall de facto be suspended from their office by the consistory or classis until they shall have declared themselves fully in this matter, and if they obstinately persist in refusing, they shall be deposed from their office.

### ***Article 54 - Subscription by School Teachers***

Likewise the Schoolteachers shall subscribe to the aforesaid Articles or instead thereof to the Christian Catechism.

### ***Article 55 - Censure of Books***

No one of the Reformed Religion shall presume to have printed or published in any other way any book or writing, treating of Religion, prepared or translated by himself or by someone else, unless it is previously looked over and approved by the Ministers of the Word of his Classis, or by the Particular Synod, or by the Professors of Theology of these provinces, but with the knowledge of his Classis.

## **Concerning Baptism**

### ***Article 56 - Concerning Baptism***

The Covenant of God shall be sealed to the children of Christians by Baptism as soon as the administration thereof is feasible, in the public assembly when the Word of God is preached. But in those places where sermons are preached less frequently, a certain day of the week shall be set aside for the administration of Baptism in a special service, not however, without the preaching of a sermon.

### ***Article 57 - Parents and Godparents (Sponsors, Witnesses)***

The Ministers shall do their best and put forth every effort to have the father present his child for baptism. And in the Congregations where Sponsors or Witnesses are taken at Baptism beside the father (which custom, not being objectionable in itself, is not easily changed) it is proper that such be taken who agree with the pure doctrine and are pious in their conversation.

### ***Article 58 - The Form for Baptism***

In baptizing both children and adults the Ministers shall employ the Forms pertaining to the institution and administration of Baptism which have been drawn up respectively for this purpose.

### ***Article 59 - Adult Baptism and the Lord's Supper***

Adults are incorporated through Baptism into the Christian Church and are received as members of the Church, and are therefore obliged also to partake of the Lord's Supper, which they shall promise to do at their Baptism.

### ***Article 60 - The Baptismal Register***

The names of those baptized, together with those of the parents and witnesses, and likewise the date of Baptism, shall be recorded.

## **Concerning the Lord's Supper**

### ***Article 61 - Admittance to the Lord's Supper***

None shall be admitted to the Lord's Supper except those who, according to the usage of the church to which they unite themselves, have made Confession of Religion, besides being reputed to be of a godly conversation, without which also those who come from other Churches shall not be admitted.

### ***Article 62 - The Manner of Administering the Lord's Supper***

Every Church shall administer the Lord's Supper in such a manner as it shall judge most conducive to edification; provided, however, that the outward ceremonies as prescribed in God's Word be not changed and all superstition be avoided, and that at the conclusion of the sermon and the usual prayers on the pulpit, the Form for the administration of the Lord's Supper, together with the prayer for that purpose, shall be read at the Table.

### ***Article 63 - The Regular Celebration of the Lord's Supper***

The Lord's Supper shall be administered once every two months, wherever possible, and it will be edifying that it take place at Easter, Pentecost, and Christmas where the circumstances of the Church permit. However, in those places where the Church has not yet been instituted, first of all Elders and Deacons shall be provided.

## **Rules Pertaining to Special Occasion Preaching**

### ***Article 64 - The Evening Prayer Meetings***

Whereas the Evening Prayer Meetings are found profitable in many places, every Church shall govern their use in a manner they judge to conduce most to their edification. However, in case they would desire to discontinue them, this is not to be done without the judgment of the Classis (and of the Authorities who favor the Reformed Religion).

### ***Article 65 - The Funeral Sermon***

If funeral sermons are not in use. they are not to be introduced, and if they already have come to be accepted, diligence shall be exercised to dispose of them by the most suitable means.

### ***Article 66 - Prayer Days***

In times of war, pestilence, calamities, heavy persecution of the Churches, and other general distresses, the Ministers of the Churches shall request the Government to employ their authority and command that public days of Fasting and prayer be appointed and set aside.

### ***Article 67 - The Holy Days***

The Churches shall observe, in addition to Sunday, also Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost, with the following day, and whereas in most of the cities and provinces of the Netherlands the day of Circumcision and of Ascension of Christ are also observed. Ministers in every place where this is not yet done shall take steps with the Government to have them conform with the others.

### ***Article 68 - The Preaching of the Catechism***

The Ministers everywhere shall briefly explain on Sunday, ordinarily in the afternoon sermon, the sum of Christian doctrine comprehended in the Catechism which at present is accepted in the Netherland Churches, so that it may be completed every year in accordance with the division of the Catechism itself made for the purpose.

### ***Article 69 - Congregational Singing***

In the Churches only the 150 Psalms of David, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the Twelve Articles of Faith, the Song of Mary, that of Zacharias, and that of Simeon shall be sung. It is left to the individual Churches whether or not to use the hymn "Oh God! who art our Father." All other hymns are to be excluded from the Churches, and in those places where some have already been introduced they are to be removed by the most suitable means.

### ***Article 70 - Regulation of Marriage Ceremonies***

Whereas up to now various usages in regard to marriages are maintained everywhere, and it nevertheless is proper that uniformity be exercised in this matter, therefore the Churches shall adhere to the method which they, in conformity to the Word of God and previous ecclesiastical regulations have maintained up to now, until the High Authorities (which are to be asked to do so at the earliest opportunity) shall prepare a general Regulation with the advice of the Ministers of the Churches, to which this Church Order refers itself in this matter.

## **Of Censure and Ecclesiastical Admonition**

### ***Article 71 - Censure Upon the Members***

As Christian discipline is of a spiritual nature, and exempts no one from civil trial or punishment by the authorities, so also besides civil punishment there is need of ecclesiastical censure, to reconcile the sinner with the Church and with his neighbor to remove the offence out of the Church of Christ.

### ***Article 72 - Church Discipline or Brotherly Admonition***

In case anyone transgresses against the purity of doctrine or godliness of conversation, as long as it is of a private character and has not given public offence, the rule clearly prescribed by Christ in Matthew 18 shall be followed.

### ***Article 73 - Secret Sins***

Secret sins of which the sinner repents after being admonished by one person in private or in the presence of two or three witnesses, shall not be laid before the Consistory.

### ***Article 74 - Report to Consistory***

If anyone, having been admonished in love concerning a secret sin by

two or three persons, does not give heed, or otherwise has committed a public sin, the matter shall be reported to the Consistory.

#### ***Article 75 - The Reconciliation Before Excommunication***

The reconciliation of all such sins as are of their nature of a public character, or have become public because the admonition of the Church was despised, shall take place, when definite signs of repentance are evident, publicly, by the judgment of the Consistory; and in rural districts or smaller towns having only one Minister, with the advice of two neighboring Churches, in such a form and manner as shall be judged to be conducive to the edification of each Church.

#### ***Article 76 - The Suspension From the Lord's Supper***

Such as obstinately reject the admonition of the Consistory, and likewise those who have committed a public or otherwise gross sin, shall be suspended from the Lord's Supper. And if he, having been suspended after repeated admonitions, shows no signs of repentance, the Consistory shall at last proceed to the extreme remedy, namely, excommunication, agreeably to the Form adopted for that purpose according to the Word of God. But no one shall be excommunicated except with previous advice of Classis.

#### ***Article 77 - Excommunication***

Before proceeding to the excommunication, the obstinacy of the sinner shall be publicly made known to the Congregation, explaining the offence, together with the diligence bestowed upon him in reproof, suspension from the Lord's Supper, and manifold admonitions; and the Congregation shall be exhorted to speak to him and to pray for him. There shall be three such admonitions. In the first the name of the sinner shall not be mentioned, that he be somewhat spared. In the second, with the advice of the Classis, his name shall be mentioned. In the third the Congregation shall be informed that, unless he repent, he will be excluded from the fellowship of the Church, so that his excommunication, in case he remains obstinate, may take place with the tacit approbation of the Church. The interval between the admonition shall be left to the discretion of the Consistory.

#### ***Article 78 - Reinstatement***

Whenever anyone who has been excommunicated desires to become reconciled to the Church in the way of penitence, it shall be announced to the Congregation, either before the administration of the Lord's Supper or at some opportune time, in order that, in so far as no one can mention anything against him to the contrary, at the next Lord's Supper he may, with profession of his repentance be publicly reinstated, according to the Form for that purpose.

#### ***Article 79 - Censure of Office Bearers***

When Ministers of the Divine Word, Elders, or Deacons have committed any public, gross sin, which is a disgrace to the Church, or worthy of punishment by the Authorities, the Elders and Deacons shall immediately, by preceding sentence of the Consistory of that Church and the nearest adjoining Church, be deposed from their office, but the Ministers shall be suspended. But whether or not they are to be entirely deposed from their office shall be subject to the judgment of the Classis.

#### ***Article 80 - Censurable Sins***

Furthermore, among the gross sins which are worthy of being punished with suspension or deposition from office, these are the principal ones: false doctrine or heresy, public schism, public blasphemy, simony, faithless desertion of office or intrusion upon that of another, perjury, adultery, fornication, theft, acts of violence, habitual drunkenness, brawling, filthy lucre: in short, all sins and gross offences as render the perpetrators infamous before the world, and which in any private member of the Church would cause

him to be considered worthy of excommunication.

***Article 81 - Christian Censure***

The Ministers of the Word, Elders, and Deacons shall exercise Christian censure among themselves, and in a friendly spirit admonish one another with regard to the discharge of their office.

***Article 82 - Certificates of Dismission (Attestations)***

To those who remove from the Congregation, a Certificate of Dismission or testimony regarding their conversation shall be given them at the discretion of the Consistory, under the seal of the Church, or where there is no seal, signed by two.

***Article 83 - (Assisting) the Removing Poor***

Furthermore, the poor shall, when removing for sufficient reasons, receive assistance from the Deacons at their discretion provided it be noted on the reverse side of their Certificate of Dismission to places to which they wish to go, and the assistance they have received.

***Article 84 - No Hierarchy***

No Church shall in any way lord it over other Churches, no Minister over other Ministers, no Elder or Deacon over other Elders or Deacons.

***Article 85 - Foreign Churches***

Foreign Churches whose usages regarding non-essentials differ from ours shall not be rejected.

***Article 86 - Alteration of the Church Order***

These Articles, relating to the lawful Order of the Churches, have been so drafted and adopted by common consent, that they, if the profit of the Churches demand otherwise, may and ought to be altered, augmented, or diminished. However, no particular Congregation, Classis, or Synod shall be at liberty to do so, but they shall show all diligence in observing them, until it be otherwise ordained by the General, or National Synod.



## **Appendix 2**

### **Church Order of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia<sup>48</sup>**

Note: Articles in *italic print* are in force until classes have been formed.<sup>49</sup>

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **I. OFFICES AND SUPERVISION OF DOCTRINE**

#### **ARTICLE 2 - The offices**

The offices are those of the minister of the Word, of the elder, and of the deacon.

#### **ARTICLE 3 - The calling to office**

##### **A. All office-bearers**

No one shall take any office upon himself without having been lawfully called thereto. The calling to office shall take place by the consistory with the deacons, with the cooperation of the congregation, after prayer, and in accordance with the local regulations adopted for that purpose. Prior to the ordination or installation the names of the appointed brothers shall be public ly announced to the congregation for its approval on at least two consecutive Sundays. If no lawful objection is brought forward the ordination or installation shall take place with the use of the adopted Form.

##### **B. Elders and deacons**

The consistory with the deacons shall give the congregation the opportunity to draw the attention of the consistory to brothers deemed suitable for the respective offices. The consistory with the deacons shall present to the congregation at the most twice as many candidates as there are vacancies to be filled. From this number the congregation shall choose as many office-bearers as are needed. Those elected shall be appointed by the consistory with the deacons. If necessary the consistory with the deacons may present to the congregation the same number of candidates as there are vacancies.

##### **C. Ministers**

Before a vacant church extends a call the advice of the counsel lor shall be sought. The approval of classis shall be required for a repeated call to the same minister for the same vacancy.

#### **ARTICLE 4 - Bound to a church**

No one shall serve in the ministry unless he is bound to a certain church.

#### **ARTICLE 5 - Eligibility for the ministry**

##### **A. Eligibility**

Only those shall be called to the office of minister of the Word who:

- (1) have been declared eligible for call by the churches; or
- (2) are already serving in that capacity in one of the churches; or
- (3) have been declared eligible or are serving in one of the churches with which The Free Reformed Churches of Australia maintain a sister relationship. The churches shall observe the general ecclesiastical ordinances for the eligibility of those ministers who have served in these sister-churches.

## **B. Declared eligible**

Only those shall be declared eligible for call within the churches who

- (1) have passed a preparatory examination by the classis in which they live, which examination shall not take place unless those presenting themselves for it submit the necessary documents to prove that they are members in good standing of one of the churches and have successfully completed a course of study as required by the churches; or
- (1) have passed a preparatory examination by the synod in which they live, which examination shall not take place unless those presenting themselves for it submit the necessary documents to prove that they are members in good standing of one of the churches and have successfully completed a course of study as required by the churches; or*
- (2) have satisfied the requirements of Article 8; or
- (3) have satisfied the requirements of Article 9.

## **ARTICLE 6 - Ordination and installation of ministers of the Word**

A. Regarding those who have not served in the ministry before, the following shall be observed:

1. They shall be ordained only after classis has approved the call.  
Classis shall approve the call
  - a. upon satisfactory testimony concerning the soundness of doctrine and conduct of the candidate, attested by the consistory of the church to which he belongs; and
  - b. following a peremptory examination of the candidate with satisfactory results. This classis examination shall take place with the cooperation and concurring advice of deputies of synod.
  - b. following a peremptory examination of the candidate by synod with satisfactory results.*
2. For the ordination they shall also show to the consistory good testimonials concerning their doctrine and conduct from the church(es) to which they have belonged since their preparatory examination.

B. Regarding those who are serving in the ministry the following shall be observed:

They shall be installed after classis has approved the call.

*They shall be installed after classis church has approved the call.*

1. For this approval as well as for the installation the minister shall show good testimonials concerning his doctrine and conduct, together with a declaration from the consistory with the deacons and from classis that he has been honourably discharged from his service in that church and classis, or from the church only in case he remains within the same classis.
- 1. For this approval as well as for the installation the minister shall show good testimonials concerning his doctrine and conduct, together with a declaration from the consistory with the deacons and from classis church.*
2. For the approval of a call of those who are serving in one of the churches with which The Free Reformed Churches of Australia maintain a sister relationship a colloquium shall be required which will deal especially with the doctrine and polity of The Free Reformed Churches of Australia.

C. The approval of a call shall require written certification by the calling church that the required announcements were made and that the congregation has approved the call.

## **ARTICLE 7 - From one church to another**

A minister once lawfully called shall not leave the church to which he is bound to take up the ministry elsewhere without the consent of his consistory with the deacons and the approval of classis. Likewise, no church shall receive him unless he has presented a proper certificate of release from the church and the classis where he served, or from the church only if he remains within the same classis.

*A minister once lawfully called shall not leave the church to which he is bound to take up the ministry elsewhere without the consent of his consistory with the deacons and the approval of the classis church. Likewise, no church shall receive him unless he has presented a proper certificate of release from the church he served.*

## **ARTICLE 8 - Exceptional gifts**

Persons who have not pursued the regular course of theological study shall not be admitted to the ministry unless there is convincing evidence of their exceptional gifts of godliness, humility, modesty, good intellect, and discretion, as well as the gift of public speech. When any such person presents himself for the ministry, classis shall (with synod's prior approval) examine him, and upon a favourable outcome allow him, as candidate, to speak an edifying word in the churches of the classis for a set period of time. Thereafter the classis shall further deal with him as it shall deem edifying, observing the ecclesiastical regulations adopted for this purpose.

*Persons who have not pursued the regular course of theological study shall not be admitted to the ministry unless there is convincing evidence of their exceptional gifts of godliness, humility, modesty, good intellect, and discretion, as well as the gift of public speech. When any such person presents himself for the ministry, the classis church shall seek to obtain this evidence by way of enquiry from the church to which he belongs, and from elsewhere if necessary. The examination shall take place in a synod (extraordinary if necessary) This synod shall set a period during which the person may, as candidate, speak an edifying word in the churches of the classis area. Thereafter the classis church, with the advice of deputies of synod, shall further deal with him as it shall deem edifying, observing the ecclesiastical regulations adopted for this purpose.*

## **ARTICLE 9 - Admission of ministers who have recently joined the church**

A minister of the Word who has recently joined one of the churches and originates from a church with which the churches do not maintain a sister relationship shall only be admitted to the ministry with great caution. He shall not be declared eligible for call within the churches unless he has been well tested for a reasonable period of time and carefully examined by the classis in whose area he lives. This classis examination shall be conducted with the cooperation of the deputies of synod.

*A minister of the Word who has recently joined one of the churches and originates from a church with which the churches do not maintain a sister relationship shall only be admitted to the ministry with great caution. He shall not be declared eligible for call within the churches unless he has been well tested for a reasonable period of time and carefully examined by synod (extraordinary if necessary).*

## **ARTICLE 10 - Officiating in another church**

No one shall preach the Word or administer the sacraments in another church without the permission of the consistory of that church.

## **ARTICLE 11 - Proper support**

The consistory, with the deacons, on behalf of the congregation which it represents in this matter, shall provide for the proper support of its minister(s).

## **ARTICLE 12 - Call to an extraordinary task**

If a minister accepts a call or an appointment to an extraordinary task the nature of the relationship between him and the church to which he is bound must be arranged with the consent of the classis. Some ministers may be appointed for the training of students for the ministry, others may be called for mission work.

*If a minister accepts a call or an appointment to an extraordinary task the nature of the relationship between him and the church to which he is bound must be arranged with the consent of the classis church. Some ministers may be appointed for the training of students for the ministry, others may be called for mission work.*

## **ARTICLE 13 - Retirement of ministers**

If a minister of the Word, by reason of age, sickness or otherwise, is rendered incapable of performing the duties of his office he shall retain the honour and title of minister of the Word. He shall also retain his official bond with the church which he served last, and this church shall provide honourably for his support. The same obligation exists towards a minister's widow and orphans.

## **ARTICLE 14 - Dismissal**

The consistory with the deacons shall not dismiss a minister from his bond with the congregation without approval of classis and the concurring advice of the deputies of synod.

*The consistory with the deacons shall not dismiss a minister from his bond with the congregation without approval of the classis church and the concurring advice of the deputies of synod.*

## **ARTICLE 15 - Bound for life**

A minister of the Word, once lawfully called, is bound to the service of the church for life and therefore not allowed to enter upon another vocation unless it be for exceptional and substantial reasons. The decision of his consistory to relieve him of his office in order to enter upon another vocation shall receive the approval of classis, with the concurring advice of deputies of synod.

*A minister of the Word, once lawfully called, is bound to the service of the church for life and therefore not allowed to enter upon another vocation unless it be for exceptional and substantial reasons. The decision of his consistory to relieve him of his office in order to enter upon another vocation shall receive the approval of the classis church, with the concurring advice of deputies of synod.*

## **ARTICLE 16 - Task of ministers**

The task of ministers is to faithfully lead in prayer, preach the Word and administer the sacraments. They shall watch over their fellow office-bearers and over the congregation. Together with the elders they shall exercise church discipline and see to it that everything is done decently and in good order.

## **ARTICLE 17 - Training for the ministry**

The churches shall support or, if possible, maintain an institution for the training for the ministry. The task of the professors of theology is to expound the Holy Scriptures and to defend the sound doctrine against heresies and errors, so that the churches may be provided with ministers of the Word who are able to fulfil the duties of their office as these have been described above. The churches together are obliged to provide properly for the professors of theology and for their widows and orphans.

## **ARTICLE 18 - Students of theology**

The churches shall strive to ensure that there are students of theology, extending

financial aid where necessary.

### **ARTICLE 19 - Task of missionaries**

When ministers of the Word are sent out as missionaries, they shall in the specific region assigned to them proclaim the Word of God, administer the sacraments to those who have come to the profession of their faith, teaching them to observe all that Christ has commanded His church, and ordain elders and deacons when this appears feasible, according to the rules given in the Word of God.

### **ARTICLE 20 - Task of elders**

The elders shall together with the ministers of the Word govern the congregation with pastoral care and discipline. For the upbuilding of the congregation they shall make homevisits as often as is profitable but at least once a year. They shall watch that their fellow office-bearers are faithful in carrying out their duties and ensure that in the congregation everything is done decently and in good order.

### **ARTICLE 21 - Task of deacons**

The deacons shall perform the ministry of mercy. They shall acquaint themselves with difficulties; visit, help and encourage where there is need; and urge church members to render assistance where necessary. They shall collect and manage the gifts of the congregation, and after mutual consultation distribute them where there is need. The deacons shall give account of their policies and management to the consistory.

### **ARTICLE 22 - Equality of respective duties**

In the local congregation equality shall be maintained among the ministers, among the elders, and among the deacons, regarding their respective duties, and in other matters, as much as possible.

### **ARTICLE 23 - Term of office**

The elders and deacons shall serve two or more years according to local regulations, and a proportionate number shall retire each year. The places of the retiring office-bearers shall be taken by others unless the consistory with the deacons judges that the circumstances and the well-being of the church render it advisable to call them into office again. In that case the rule of Article 3 shall be observed.

### **ARTICLE 24 -Subscription to the Confession by ministers and teaching staff**

All ministers of the Word and all teaching staff at the theological seminary shall subscribe to the Three Forms of Unity of The Free Reformed Churches of Australia by signing the Form(s) adopted for that purpose. Anyone refusing to subscribe in that manner shall not be ordained or installed in office. Anyone who, being in office, refuses to do so shall because of that very fact be immediately suspended from office by the consistory, and classis shall not receive him. If he obstinately persists in his refusal he shall be deposed from office.

### **ARTICLE 25 - Subscription to the Confession by elders and deacons**

Elders and deacons shall also subscribe to these Three Forms of Unity by signing the Form adopted for that purpose. Anyone being in office who refuses to do so shall because of that very fact be immediately suspended from office by the consistory. If he obstinately persists in his refusal he shall be deposed from office.

### **ARTICLE 26 - False doctrine**

To ward off false doctrines and errors the ministers and elders shall use the means of instruction, of refutation, of warning and of admonition, in the ministry of the Word as well as in Christian teaching and family visiting.

## **ARTICLE 27 - Office-bearers and the government**

The office-bearers shall impress upon the congregation its obligation to be obedient and show respect to the government, because God has instituted it. They must set a good example in this regard and by means of proper communication invoke the government to protect the ministry of the church.

## **II. ASSEMBLIES**

### **ARTICLE 28 - The ecclesiastical assemblies**

Three kinds of ecclesiastical assemblies shall be maintained: the consistory, the classis, and the synod.

*Three kinds of ecclesiastical assemblies shall be maintained: the consistory, the classis-church, and the synod.*

### **ARTICLE 29 - Proceedings**

The proceedings of all assemblies shall begin and end with prayer.

### **ARTICLE 30 - Authority of the assemblies**

These assemblies shall only deal with ecclesiastical matters and in an ecclesiastical manner. A major assembly shall deal only with matters which could not be finished in the minor assembly or which belong to its churches in common. A new matter may be put on its agenda only when the minor assembly has dealt with it.

### **ARTICLE 31 - Appeals**

If anyone complains that he has been wronged by the decision of a minor assembly he shall have the right of appeal to the major assembly; and whatever may be agreed upon by a majority vote shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved to be in conflict with the Word of God or with the Church Order.

*As long as there are no classes, appeals under Article 31 CO shall be conducted as follows:*

- a. Stage 1: to the appointed classis church*
- b. Stage 2: to the appointed second appeal church*
- c. Stage 3: to the synod*

*Note: Stage 2 will not function when an appeal is made within two months prior to a synod.*

### **ARTICLE 32 - Credentials and voting**

Delegates to a major assembly shall bring with them their credentials, signed by the minor assembly. They shall have a vote in all matters except those in which either they themselves or their churches are directly involved

### **ARTICLE 33 - Proposals**

Matters once decided upon may not be proposed again unless they are substantiated by new grounds.

### **ARTICLE 34 Chairman and clerk**

In all assemblies there shall be a chairman and a clerk. The chairman's task is to present and explain clearly the matters to be dealt with and ensure that every one observes due order in speaking; he shall deny the floor to those who argue about minor things or who let themselves be carried away and cannot control their emotions, and discipline those who refuse to listen. His task shall cease when the assembly ends. The clerk shall keep an accurate record of all things worthy of being recorded.



## **ARTICLE 35 - Jurisdiction**

The classis has the same jurisdiction over the consistory as the synod has over the classis.

*The classis church has the same jurisdiction over the consistory as the synod has over the classis church.*

## **ARTICLE 36 - Consistory**

In all churches there shall be a consistory composed of the minister(s) of the Word and the elders. It shall meet regularly and be chaired by the minister. If a church is served by more than one minister they shall chair in turn. The consistory shall also meet regularly with the deacons to deal with those matters as described for that purpose by the Church Order, and further with all things which the consistory considers necessary for general management, including the material affairs of the church.

## **ARTICLE 37 - Consistory and the deacons**

Where the number of elders and deacons is small the deacons may be added to the consistory by local arrangement. This shall invariably be done where there are less than three elders and less than three deacons. In these circumstances matters pertaining to supervision and discipline shall be handled with the advice of the deacons and matters pertaining to the office of deacons with the advice of the elders.

## **ARTICLE 38 - Constitution of a consistory**

If a consistory is to be constituted for the first time or anew, the advice of classis shall be sought.

*If a consistory is to be constituted for the first time or anew, the advice of the classis church shall be sought.*

## **ARTICLE 39 - Places without a consistory**

Places where as yet no consistory can be constituted shall be assigned by classis to the care of a neighbouring consistory.

*Places where as yet no consistory can be constituted shall be assigned by synod to the care of a neighbouring consistory.*

## **ARTICLE 40 - Meetings of deacons**

The deacons shall meet regularly to deal with the matters pertaining to their office. Their meetings shall begin and end with prayer.

## **ARTICLE 41 - Classis**

Neighbouring churches shall come together in a classis by delegating a minister and an elder, or if a church has no minister, two elders. Classes shall be held at least once every three months. The ministers shall be chairman in rotation, or one shall be chosen to be chairman; however the same minister shall not be chairman twice in succession. The chairman shall ask whether the ministry of the office-bearers is being continued, whether the decisions of the major assemblies are being honoured and whether there is any matter in which the consistories need the judgment and help of classis for the proper government of their church. Every classis shall determine where and when the churches shall meet again. The last classis before synod shall choose delegates to that synod.

## **ARTICLE 42 - Ministers who are not delegated to a classis**

If two or more ministers are serving the same church, those who have not been delegated shall have the right to attend classis in an advisory capacity.

### **ARTICLE 43 - Counsellors**

Each vacant church shall request classis to appoint as counsellor the minister it desires as such, to the end that he may assist the consistory in maintaining good order and especially may lend his aid in the matter of the calling of a minister; he shall also sign the letter of call.

*Each vacant church shall request the classis church to appoint as counsellor the minister it desires as such, to the end that he may assist the consistory in maintaining good order and especially may lend his aid in the matter of the calling of a minister; he shall also sign the letter of call. When a vacancy arises less than two months prior to a synod meeting, the synod shall appoint a counsellor.*

### **ARTICLE 44 - Church visitors**

Each year classis shall authorise at least two of the more experienced and able ministers to visit the churches in that year. If necessary the classis may authorise a capable elder to carry out this task together with a minister. It shall be the task of these visitors to inquire whether all things are regulated and done in full harmony with the Word of God, whether the office-bearers fulfil the duties of their office faithfully as they have promised, and whether the Church Order is being observed and maintained in every respect, in order that they may in good time fraternally admonish those who are found negligent in any thing, and that by their good counsel and advice all things may be directed towards the edification and preservation of Christ's church. They shall submit written reports of their visits to classis.

*The synod shall appoint some of the most experienced and capable ministers to visit the churches in that year. If necessary synod may appoint a capable elder to carry out this task together with a minister. It shall be the task of these visitors to inquire whether all things are regulated and done in full harmony with the Word of God, whether the office-bearers fulfil the duties of their office faithfully as they have promised, and whether the Church Order is being observed and maintained in every respect, in order that they may in good time fraternally admonish those who are found negligent in any thing, and that by their good counsel and advice all things may be directed towards the edification and preservation of Christ's church. They shall submit written reports of their visits to synod, with copies to the consistory concerned.*

### **ARTICLE 45 - Synod**

The synod shall be held once every three years. Each classis shall delegate two ministers and two elders to synod. At the close of synod the time and place for the next synod shall be determined and a church shall be appointed to convene it. A synod shall be convened before the appointed time if according to the judgment of at least two classes this appears necessary. Its time and place shall be decided by the church appointed as convening church for the next regular synod, subject to the approval of its classis .

*The synod shall be held once every two years. Each consistory shall delegate one minister and one elder to synod. At the close of synod the time and place for the next synod shall be determined and a church shall be appointed to convene it. A synod shall be convened before the appointed time if according to the judgment of at least two churches this appears necessary. Its time and place shall be decided by the church appointed as convening church for the next regular synod, subject to the approval of its classis church.*

### **ARTICLE 46 - Relationship with other churches**

The relationship with other churches shall be regulated by synod. With churches of Reformed confession sister relations shall be maintained as much as possible. On non-essential points of ecclesiastical practice other churches shall not be rejected.

## **ARTICLE 47 - Censure in classis and synod**

At the close of the major assemblies censure shall be exercised over those who in the meeting have done something worthy of reproof.

## **ARTICLE 48 - Deputies of major assemblies**

Each synod shall appoint deputies who are to assist the classes in all matters provided for in the Church Order. A classis may request these deputies to assist in cases of special difficulties. Each synod shall also appoint deputies to carry out its own decisions. Different deputies shall be appointed as much as possible for separate matters. All deputies shall keep proper record of their work and submit a written report.

## **ARTICLE 49 - Archives**

The assemblies shall ensure that proper care is taken of the archives.

## **ARTICLE 50 - Mission**

The churches shall endeavour to fulfil their missionary task. In doing so they shall observe the provisions of this Church Order. When churches cooperate in mission work they shall as much as possible observe the division into classes.

# **III. WORSHIP, SACRAMENTS AND CEREMONIES**

## **ARTICLE 51 - Administration of sacraments**

The sacraments shall be administered only in a church service by a minister of the Word with the use of the adopted Forms, and under the supervision of the elders.

## **ARTICLE 52 - Baptism of infants**

The consistory shall ensure that the covenant of God is sealed by baptism to the children of believers as soon as feasible.

## **ARTICLE 53 - Baptismal promise and education**

The consistory shall make sure that the parents honour their vows to instruct their children, to the utmost of their power, in the doctrine of the Scriptures as summarised in the confessions, and to have them instructed in the same by the instruction provided by the consistory. In accordance with the same vow, the consistory shall see to it that the parents, to the best of their ability, and with the cooperation of the communion of saints, give their children education (as stipulated by the civil government) which is based on Scripture and Confession.

## **ARTICLE 54 - Public profession of faith**

Those who desire to publicly profess their faith shall be examined by the consistory on their motivation and knowledge of the doctrine of God's Word. The public profession shall take place in a church service, with the use of the adopted Form.

## **ARTICLE 55 - Baptism of adults**

Adults who have not been baptised shall be grafted into the Christian church by holy baptism upon their public profession of faith.

## **ARTICLE 56 - Lord's Supper**

The Lord's Supper shall be celebrated at least once every three months.

## **ARTICLE 57 - Admission to the Lord's Supper**

The consistory shall admit to the Lord's Supper only those who have made public profession of the Reformed faith and lead a godly life. Members of sister churches shall

be admitted on the basis of a good attestation concerning their doctrine and conduct.

#### **ARTICLE 58 - Church records**

The consistory shall maintain Church records in which the names of the members and the dates of their birth, baptism, public profession of faith, marriage, and departure or death are properly recorded.

#### **ARTICLE 59 - Attestations for communicant members**

Communicant members who move to another congregation shall be given, following appropriate announcements to the congregation, an attestation regarding their doctrine and conduct, signed on behalf of the consistory by two authorised office-bearers. This attestation shall also record their children who have not yet made public profession of faith. The consistory of the congregation concerned shall be notified in due time.

#### **ARTICLE 60 - Attestations for non-communicant members**

An attestation for a non-communicant member shall be sent directly to the consistory of the church concerned with the request to take the member under its supervision and discipline.

#### **ARTICLE 61 Support after departure**

When members depart to another congregation where they will be cared for in institutions, aged persons homes or nursing homes, they shall in respect of deacon support remain under the care of the church they are leaving. If this is not possible support will be arranged by consultation between the consistories and deacons concerned.

#### **ARTICLE 62 - Church services**

The consistory shall call the congregation together for church services twice on the Lord's Day.

#### **ARTICLE 63 - Catechism preaching**

The consistory shall ensure that as a rule once every Sunday the doctrine of God's Word as summarised in the Heidelberg Catechism is proclaimed, preferably in the afternoon service.

#### **ARTICLE 64 - Psalms and hymns**

In the church services only the psalms and hymns approved by synod shall be sung.

#### **ARTICLE 65 - Ecclesiastical feast days**

On Christmas Day, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Ascension Day and at Pentecost the consistory shall call the congregation together for church services. The sacred events which the congregation commemorates in particular on these days shall therein be proclaimed.

#### **ARTICLE 66 - Days of prayer**

In times of war, general calamities and other great afflictions the presence of which is felt throughout the churches a day of prayer may be proclaimed by the church appointed for that purpose by synod.

#### **ARTICLE 67 - Marriage**

The consistory shall ensure that the members of the congregation marry only in the Lord, and that the ministers - as authorised by the consistory - solemnise only such marriages as are in accordance with the Word of God. The solemnisation of a marriage shall take place in a private ceremony, with the use of the adopted Form.

## **ARTICLE 68 - Funerals**

Church services shall not be conducted for funerals.

## **IV. CHURCH DISCIPLINE**

### **ARTICLE 69 - Aim of discipline**

Church discipline shall be exercised in accordance with the Word of God and to His honour. Its aim is to reconcile the sinner with God and the neighbour, and to remove the offence from the church of Christ.

### **ARTICLE 70 - Mutual responsibility**

If anyone departs from the pure doctrine or is delinquent in conduct and this is a secret matter which does not give rise to public offence, the rule which Christ clearly prescribes in Matthew 18 shall be observed.

### **ARTICLE 71 - Consistory involvement**

The consistory shall not deal with any report of sin unless it has first ascertained that both private admonitions and admonitions in the presence of one or two witnesses have remained fruitless, or the sin committed is of a public character.

### **ARTICLE 72 - Repentance**

When someone repents of a public sin or of a sin which had to be reported to the consistory, the latter shall not accept his confession of sin unless the member concerned has shown real amendment. The consistory shall determine whether the congregation shall be informed afterwards.

### **ARTICLE 73 - Discipline in respect of communicant members**

A communicant member who obstinately rejects the admonition by the consistory or who has committed a public or some other serious sin shall be suspended from the Lord's Supper. If he continues to harden himself in sin, the consistory shall publicly announce this to the congregation so that the congregation may be engaged in prayer and admonition and the excommunication may not take place without its cooperation.

### **ARTICLE 74 - Announcements during the procedure**

In the first public announcement the name of the sinner shall not be mentioned. In the second public announcement, which shall be made only after the advice of classis has been obtained, the name and address of the sinner shall be mentioned. In the third public announcement a date shall be set at which the excommunication of the sinner shall take place in accordance with the adopted Form. The time interval between the various announcements shall be determined by the consistory.

*In the first public announcement the name of the sinner shall not be mentioned. In the second public announcement, which shall be made only after the advice of the classis church has been obtained, the name and address of the sinner shall be mentioned. In the third public announcement a date shall be set at which the excommunication of the sinner shall take place in accordance with the adopted Form. The time interval between the various announcements shall be determined by the consistory.*

### **ARTICLE 75 - Re-admission**

When someone who has been excommunicated repents and desires to be again received into the communion of the church, the congregation shall be informed of this desire in order to see whether there are any lawful objections. The time between the public announcement and the re-admission of the sinner shall be not less than one month. If no lawful objection is raised the re-admission shall take place, with the use of the adopted Form.

## **ARTICLE 76 - Suspension and deposition of office-bearers**

If a minister, elder or deacon has committed a public or otherwise gross sin, or refuses to heed the admonitions by the consistory, he shall be suspended from office by the judgment of his own consistory and of the consistory of a neighbouring congregation. In the case of a minister this neighbouring congregation shall be appointed by the classis. If he hardens himself in the sin, or if the sin committed is of such a nature that he can not continue in office, an elder or a deacon shall be deposed by the judgment of the above-mentioned consistories. Classis, with the advice of the deputies of synod, shall judge whether a minister is to be deposed.

*If a minister, elder or deacon has committed a public or otherwise gross sin, or refuses to heed the admonitions by the consistory, he shall be suspended from office by the judgment of his own consistory and of the classis church. If he hardens himself in the sin, or if the sin committed is of such a nature that he can not continue in office, an elder or a deacon shall be deposed by the judgment of the above-mentioned consistories. The second - appeal church, with advice of the deputies of synod, shall judge whether a minister is to be deposed.*

## **ARTICLE 77 - Serious and gross sins on the part of office-bearers**

As serious and gross sins which are grounds for the suspension or deposition of office-bearers the following are to be mentioned particularly: False doctrine or heresy, public schisms, blasphemy, simony, faithless desertion of office or intrusion upon that of another, perjury, adultery, fornication, theft, acts of violence, habitual drunkenness, brawling, unjustly enriching oneself; and further all such sins and serious misdemeanours that rate as ground for excommunication with respect to other members of the church.

## **ARTICLE 78 - Christian censure**

The ministers, elders, and deacons shall mutually exercise Christian censure and shall exhort and kindly admonish one another with regard to the execution of their office.

## **ARTICLE 79 - Discipline in respect of non-communicant members.**

A baptised member shall be admonished by the consistory when he as an adult fails to make public profession of faith or where in other respects he is not loyal to the calling to new obedience in God's covenant. If he obstinately rejects the admonition of the consistory and thereby clearly demonstrates that he is indifferent and averse to the covenant or is even hostile to the service of the Lord, the matter shall be made known to the congregation without mentioning the name of the sinner; and the congregation shall be urged to pray for him. If the member continues in sin and is unwilling to listen to the admonitions, then with the advice of the classis the consistory shall make a second public announcement, mentioning the name of the sinner and the term after which the excommunication shall take place. If he does not in the said term show any real repentance, the consistory shall in a church service exclude him from the communion of the church, using the adopted Form. If he, after this excommunication, comes to repentance and desires to rejoin the communion of the church, he shall be admitted by way of his public profession of faith after the consistory has made his repentance known to the congregation.

*A baptised member shall be admonished by the consistory when he as an adult fails to make public profession of faith or where in other respects he is not loyal to the calling to new obedience in God's covenant. If he obstinately rejects the admonition of the consistory and thereby clearly demonstrates that he is indifferent and averse to the covenant or is even hostile to the service of the Lord, the matter shall be made known to the congregation without mentioning the name of the sinner; and the congregation shall be urged to pray for him. If the member continues in sin and is unwilling to listen to the admonitions, then with the advice of the classis church the consistory shall make a second public announcement, mentioning the name of the sinner and the date at which*



*excommunication shall take place. If he does not in the said term show any real repentance, the consistory shall in a church service exclude him from the communion of the church, using the adopted Form. If he, after this excommunication, comes to repentance and desires to rejoin the communion of the church, he shall be admitted by way of his public profession of faith after the consistory has made his repentance known to the congregation.*

## **CONCLUDING ARTICLES**

### **ARTICLE 80 - No lording over others**

No church shall in any way lord it over other churches, no office-bearer over other office-bearers.

### **ARTICLE 81 - Observance and revision of the Church Order**

These articles, which regard the lawful order of the church, have been adopted with common accord. If the interest of the churches demands such, they may and ought to be changed, augmented or diminished. However no consistory or classis shall be permitted to do so, but they shall endeavour diligently to observe the provisions of this Church Order as long as they have not been changed by synod.

## ***Appendix 3***

### **Church Order of the Canadian Reformed Churches<sup>50</sup>**

#### **I. INTRODUCTION**

##### ***Article 1 - Purpose and Division***

For the maintenance of good order in the Church of Christ it is necessary that there be: offices and supervision of doctrine; assemblies; worship, sacraments, and ceremonies; and discipline.

These matters will be dealt with in the above-mentioned order.

#### **II. OFFICES AND SUPERVISION OF DOCTRINE**

##### ***Article 2 - The Offices***

The offices are those of the minister of the Word, of the elder, and of the deacon.

##### ***Article 3 - The Calling to Office***

No one shall take any office upon himself without having been lawfully called thereto.

Only those male members shall be eligible for office who have made profession of faith and may be considered to meet the conditions as set forth in Holy Scripture, e.g. in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

The election to any office shall take place with the co-operation of the congregation, after preceding prayers, and according to the regulations adopted for that purpose by the consistory with the deacons.

The consistory with the deacons shall be free to give the congregation the opportunity beforehand to draw the attention of the consistory to brothers deemed fit for the respective offices.

The consistory with the deacons shall present to the congregation either as many candidates as there are vacancies to be filled, or at the most twice as many, from which number the congregation shall choose as many as are needed.

Those elected shall be appointed by the consistory with the deacons in accordance with the adopted regulations.

Prior to the ordination or installation the names of the appointed brothers shall be publicly announced to the congregation for its approbation on at least two consecutive Sundays.

The ordination or installation shall take place with the use of the relevant forms.

##### ***Article 4 - Eligibility for the Ministry***

###### **A.. ELIGIBILITY**

Only those shall be called to the office of minister of the Word who

1. Have been declared eligible for call by thee Churches;
2. Are already serving in that capacity in one of the Churches; or
3. Have been declared eligible in, or are serving in one of the Churches with which the Canadian Reformed Churches maintain a sister-church relationship.

## B. DECLARED ELIGIBLE

Only those shall be declared eligible for call within the Churches who

1. Have passed a preparatory examination by the classis in which they live. This examination shall not take place unless those presenting themselves for it submit the documents necessary to prove that they are members in good standing of one of the Churches and have successfully completed a course of study as required by the Churches.
2. Served in the Churches with which the Canadian Reformed Churches do not maintain a sister-church relationship, and have been examined by the classis in which they live, with due observance of the general ecclesiastical regulations adopted for that purpose.
3. Have been examined according to the rule described in Article 8.

## C. CALLING TWICE

For a second call to the same minister in the same vacancy the approval of classis shall be required.

## D. COUNSELLOR

When a vacant Church extends a call, the advice of the counsellor shall be asked.

### ***Article 5 - Ordination and Installation of Ministers of the Word***

A. Regarding those who have not served in the ministry before, the following shall be observed:

1. They shall be ordained only after classis has approved the call. Classis shall approve the call
  - a.. Upon satisfactory testimony concerning the soundness of doctrine and conduct of the candidate, signed by the consistory of the Church to which he belongs;
  - b. Upon a peremptory examination of the candidate by classis with satisfactory results. This examination shall take place with the co-operation and concurring advice of deputies of the regional synod.
2. For the ordination they shall show also to the consistory good testimonials concerning their doctrine and conduct from the Church(es) to which they have belonged since their preparatory examination.

B. Regarding those who are serving in the ministry the following shall be observed:

They shall be installed after classis has approved the call. For this approbation as well as for the installation the minister shall show good testimonials concerning his doctrine and conduct, together with a declaration from the consistory with the deacons and from classis that he has been honourably discharged from his service in that Church and classis, or from the Church only, in case he remains within the same classis.

- C. For the classical approbation of a call of those who are serving in one of the Churches with which the Canadian Reformed Churches maintain a sister-Church relationship a colloquium shall be required which will deal especially with the doctrine and polity of the Canadian Reformed Churches.
- D. For the classical approbation of a call shall further be required a declaration by the calling Church that the proper announcements have been made and that the congregation has given its approval to the call.

### ***Article 6 - Bound to a Church***

No one shall serve in the ministry unless he is bound to a certain Church, to be stationed in a certain place, or to be sent out for the gathering of the Church from among the

heathen or from among those who have become estranged from the gospel; or is to be charged with some other special ministerial task.

### ***Article 7 - Recent Converts***

No one who has recently come to the confession of the Reformed Religion shall be declared eligible for call within the Churches unless he has been well tested for a reasonable period of time and has been carefully examined by classis with the co-operation of the deputies of the regional synod.

### ***Article 8 - Exceptional Gifts***

Persons who have not pursued the regular course of study shall not be admitted to the ministry unless there is assurance of their exceptional gifts of godliness, humility, modesty, good intellect, and discretion, as well as the gift of public speech.

When such persons present themselves for the ministry, classis, after the approval of regional synod, shall examine them in a preparatory examination and allow them to speak an edifying word in the Churches of the classis; and further deal with them as it shall deem edifying, with observance of the general ecclesiastical regulations adopted for this purpose.

### ***Article 9 - From One Church to Another***

A minister, once lawfully called, shall not leave the Church to which he is bound to take up the ministry elsewhere without the consent of the consistory with the deacons and the approval of classis.

On the other hand, no Church shall receive him unless he has presented a proper certificate of release from the Church and the classis where he served, or of the Church only, if he remains within the same classis.

### ***Article 10 - Proper Support***

The consistory with the deacons, as representing the congregation, shall be bound to provide for the proper support of its minister(s).

### ***Article 11 - Dismissal***

If a minister of the Word is judged unfit and incapable of serving the congregation fruitfully and to its edification, without there being any reason for Church discipline, the consistory with the deacons shall not dismiss him from his service within the congregation without the approbation of classis and the concurring advice of the deputies of regional synod, and not without proper arrangements regarding the support of the minister and his family for a reasonable period of time.

If no call is forthcoming in three years, he shall be declared released from his ministerial status by the classis in which he served last.

### ***Article 12 - Bound for Life***

Inasmuch as a minister of the Word, once lawfully called, is bound to the service of the Church for life, he is not allowed to enter upon another vocation unless it be for exceptional and substantial reasons, of which the consistory with the deacons shall judge, and which shall receive the approval of classis with the concurring advice of deputies of regional synod.

### ***Article 13 - Retirement of Ministers***

If a minister of the Word is rendered incapable of performing the duties of his office because of age, illness, or physical or mental disability, he shall retain the honour and title of minister of the Word. He shall also retain his official bond with the Church which he served last, and this Church shall provide honourably for his support. The same obligation exists towards a minister's widow and/or dependants.

Retirement of a minister shall take place with the approval of the consistory with the deacons and with the concurring advice of classis and of deputies of regional synod.

#### ***Article 14 - Temporary Release***

If a minister, because of illness or for other substantial reasons, requests a temporary release from his service to the congregation, he can receive the same only with the approval of the consistory with the deacons and shall at all times be and remain subject to the call of the congregation.

#### ***Article 15 - Preaching in Other Places***

No one shall be permitted to preach the Word or to administer the sacraments in another Church without the consent of the consistory of that Church.

#### ***Article 16- The Office of Ministers of the Word***

The specific duties of the office of minister of the Word are: thoroughly and sincerely to proclaim to the congregation the Word of the Lord; to administer the sacraments; publicly to call upon the Name of God in behalf of the whole congregation; also to instruct the children of the Church in the doctrine of salvation, to visit the members of the congregation in their homes, and to comfort the sick with the Word of God; and further, with the elders, to keep the Church of God in good order, to exercise discipline, and to govern it in such a manner as the Lord has ordained.

#### ***Article 17 - Equality among the Ministers of the Word***

Among the ministers of the Word equality shall be maintained with respect to the duties of their office and in other matters as far as possible, according to the judgement of the consistory and, if necessary, of classis.

#### ***Article 18 - Missionaries***

When ministers of the Word are sent out as missionaries, they shall be and remain subject to the Church Order. They shall report and give account of their labours to the Church which sent them and shall at all times remain subject to its calling.

It shall be their task, in the specific region assigned to them or chosen by them in consultation with the Church that sent them, to proclaim the Word of God, to administer the sacraments to those who have come to the profession of their faith, teaching them to observe all that Christ has commanded His Church, and to ordain elders and deacons when this appears feasible, according to the rules given in the Word of God.

#### ***Article 19 - Training for the Ministry***

The Churches shall maintain an institution for the training for the ministry. The task of the professors of theology is to instruct the students of theology in those disciplines which have been entrusted to them, so that the Churches may be provided with ministers of the Word who are able to fulfil the duties of their office as these have been described above.

#### ***Article 20 - Students of Theology***

The Churches shall endeavour that there be students of theology, extending financial aid to those who are in need of it.

#### ***Article 21 -An Edifying Word***

Besides those who have been permitted, according to Article 8, to speak an edifying word, also others may be given such consent in accordance with general ecclesiastical regulations, for their own training and in order that they may become known to the congregations.

### ***Article 22 - The Office of Elder***

The specific duties of the office of elder are: together with the ministers of the Word, to have supervision over Christ's Church, that every member may conduct himself properly in doctrine and life according to the gospel; faithfully to visit the members of the congregation in their homes to comfort, instruct, and admonish them with the Word of God, reproving those who behave improperly. They shall exercise Christian discipline according to the command of Christ against those who show themselves unbelieving and ungodly and refuse to repent; they shall watch that the sacraments are not profaned. They further are to take care, being stewards of the house of God, that in the congregation all things are done decently and in good order, and to tend the flock of Christ which is in their charge. Finally, it is their duty to assist the ministers of the Word with good counsel and advice and to supervise their doctrine and conduct.

### ***Article 23 - The Office of Deacon***

The specific duties of the office of deacon are: to see to the good progress of the service of charity in the congregation; to acquaint themselves with existing needs and difficulties, and to exhort the members of Christ's body to show mercy; further, to gather and manage the offerings and to distribute them in Christ's Name according to need. They shall encourage and comfort with the Word of God those who receive the gifts of Christ's love, and promote with word and deed the unity and fellowship in the Holy Spirit which the congregation enjoys at the table of the Lord.

### ***Article 24 - Term of Office***

The elders and deacons shall serve two or more years, according to local regulations, and a proportionate number shall retire each year. The place of the retiring office-bearers shall be taken by others, unless the consistory with the deacons judges that the circumstances and the benefit of the Church render it advisable to have them serve another term, or to extend their term, or to declare them immediately eligible for re-election.

### ***Article 25 - Equality to Be Maintained***

Among the elders as well as among the deacons equality shall be maintained with respect to the duties of their office, and also, as far as possible in other matters, of which the consistory shall judge.

### ***Article 26 - Subscription to the Confession***

All ministers of the Word, elders, deacons, and professors of theology shall subscribe to the Confessions of the Canadian Reformed Churches by signing the form(s) adopted for that purpose.

Anyone refusing to subscribe in that manner shall not be ordained or installed in office. Anyone who, being in office, refuses to do so shall, because of that very fact, be immediately suspended from office by the consistory with the deacons, and classis shall not receive him; and if he obstinately persists in his refusal, he shall be deposed from office.

### ***Article 27 - False Doctrine***

To ward off false doctrines and errors which could enter the congregation and constitute a danger to the purity of its doctrine or conduct, the ministers and elders shall use the means of instruction, of refutation, of warning, and of admonition, as well in the ministry of the Word as in Christian teaching and family visiting.

### ***Article 28 - Civil Authorities***

As it is the office of the civil authorities to promote in every way the holy ministry, so all office-bearers are in duty bound to impress diligently and sincerely upon the whole

congregation the obedience, love, and respect which are due to the civil authorities: they shall set a good example to the whole congregation in this matter, and endeavour by due respect and communication to secure, and retain the favour of the authorities towards the Church, so that the Church of Christ may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way.

### **III. THE ASSEMBLIES**

#### ***Article 29 - The Ecclesiastical Assemblies***

Four kinds of ecclesiastical assemblies shall be maintained: The consistory, the classis, the regional synod, and the general synod.

#### ***Article 30 - Ecclesiastical Matters***

These assemblies shall deal with no other than ecclesiastical matters and that in an ecclesiastical manner.

A major assembly shall deal with those matters only which could not be finished in the minor assembly or which belong to its Churches in common.

A new matter which has not previously been presented to that major assembly may be put on the agenda only when the minor assembly has dealt with it.

#### ***Article 31 - Appeals***

If anyone complains that he has been wronged by the decision of a minor assembly, he shall have the right to appeal to the major ecclesiastical assembly; and whatever may be agreed upon by a majority vote shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved to be in conflict with the Word of God or with the Church Order.

#### ***Article 32 - Credentials***

Delegates to the major assemblies shall bring with them their credentials, signed by those sending them; they shall have a vote in all matters except those in which either they themselves or their Churches are particularly involved.

#### ***Article 33 - Proposals***

Matters once decided upon may not be proposed again unless they are substantiated by new grounds.

#### ***Article 34 - Proceedings***

The proceedings of all assemblies shall begin and end with calling upon the Name of the Lord.

#### ***Article 35 - President***

In all assemblies there shall be a president whose task it is to present and explain clearly the matters to be dealt with, to ensure that every one observe due order in speaking, to deny the floor to those who argue about minor things or who let themselves be carried away and cannot control their strong emotions; and to discipline those who refuse to listen.

In major assemblies the office of the president shall cease when the assembly has ended.

#### ***Article 36 - Clerk***

Also a clerk shall be appointed whose task it shall be to keep an accurate record of all things worthy to be recorded.



### ***Article 37 - Jurisdiction***

The classis has the same jurisdiction over the consistory as the regional synod has over the classis, and the general synod over the regional synod.

### ***Article 38 - Consistory***

In all Churches there shall be a consistory composed of the ministers of the Word and the elders who, as a rule, shall meet at least once a month. As a rule the ministers of the Word shall preside. If a Church is served by more than one minister, they shall preside in turn.

### ***Article 39 - Consistory and the Deacons***

Where the number of elders is small, the deacons may be added to the consistory by local arrangement; this shall invariably be done where the number of elders or the number of deacons is less than three.

### ***Article 40 - Constitution of a Consistory***

In places where a consistory is to be constituted for the first time or anew, this shall be done only with the advice of classis.

### ***Article 41 - Places without a Consistory***

Places where as yet no consistory can be constituted shall be assigned by classis to the care of a neighbouring consistory.

### ***Article 42 - Meetings of Deacons***

When the deacons meet separately, as a rule once a month, to deal with the matters pertaining to their office, they shall do so with calling upon the Name of God. They shall give account of their labours to the consistory.

The ministers shall acquaint themselves with the work of the ministry of mercy and, if need be, also may visit these meetings.

### ***Article 43 - Archives***

The consistories and the major assemblies shall ensure that proper care is taken of the archives.

### ***Article 44 - Classical Meetings***

The classical meetings shall consist of neighbouring Churches that respectively delegate, with proper credentials, a minister and an elder, or, if a Church has no minister, two elders, at such a time and place as were determined by the previous classis. Such meetings shall be held at least once in three months, unless the convening Church, in consultation with the neighbouring Church, concludes that no matters have been sent in by the Churches which would warrant the convening of a classis. Cancellation of a classis shall, however, not be permitted to occur twice in succession.

In these meetings the ministers shall preside in rotation, or one shall be chosen to preside; however, the same minister shall not be chosen twice in succession.

The president shall ask whether the ministry of the office-bearers is being continued, whether the decisions of the major assemblies are being honoured, and whether there is any matter in which the consistories need the judgement and help of classis for the proper government of their Church.

At the close of the classical and other major assemblies, censure shall be exercised over those who in the meeting have done something worthy of reproof, or who have scorned the admonition of the minor assemblies. At the last classis before regional synod delegates shall be chosen to that synod.

If two or more ministers are serving a Church, those who have not been delegated shall have the right to attend the classical meetings in an advisory capacity.

#### ***Article 45 - Counsellors***

Each vacant Church shall request classis to appoint as counsellor the minister it desires as such, to the end that he may assist the consistory in maintaining good order and especially may lend his aid in the matter of the calling of a minister: he shall also sign the letter of call.

#### ***Article 46- Church Visitors***

Each year classis shall authorize at least two of the more experienced and able ministers to visit the Churches in that year.

It shall be the task of these visitors to inquire whether all things are regulated and done in full harmony with the Word of God. whether the office bearers fulfil the duties of their office faithfully as they have promised, and whether the adopted order is being observed and maintained in every respect; in order that they may in good time fraternally admonish those who are found negligent in any thing, and that by their good counsel and advice all things may be directed towards the edification and preservation of Christ's Church.

They shall submit a written report of their visits to classis.

#### ***Article 47 - Regional Synod***

Each year some neighbouring classes shall send delegates to meet in a regional synod. To this regional synod each classis shall delegate four ministers and four elders. If there are three classes, the number shall be three ministers and three elders; if there are four or more classes, the number shall be two ministers and two elders.

At the close of the regional as well as of the general synod the time and place of the next synod shall be determined and the convening Church for that meeting appointed.

In case it appears necessary to convene a regional or general synod before the appointed time, the convening Church shall determine the time and place with the advice of the classis or regional synod respectively.

At the last regional synod before the general synod delegates shall be chosen to that general synod.

#### ***Article 48 - Deputies of Regional Synod***

Each regional synod shall appoint deputies who are to assist the classes in all cases provided for in the Church Order, and - upon the request of the classes - in cases of special difficulties.

These deputies shall keep proper record of their actions and submit a written report on them to synod, and, if so required, they shall give account of their actions.

They shall not be discharged from their task before and until synod itself discharges them.

#### ***Article 49 - General Synod***

The general synod shall be held once every three years. Each regional synod shall delegate to this synod four ministers and four elders.

A general synod shall be convened before the appointed time if, according to the judgement of a regional synod, such appears necessary.

#### ***Article 50 - Churches Abroad***

The relation with Churches abroad shall be regulated by general synod. With foreign Churches of Reformed confession a sister-church relationship shall be maintained as

much as possible. On minor points of Church Order and ecclesiastical practice Churches abroad shall not be rejected.

#### ***Article 51 - Mission***

The Churches shall endeavour to fulfil their missionary task. When Churches co-operate in this matter, they shall, as much as possible, observe the division into classes and regional synods.

### **IV. WORSHIP, SACRAMENTS, AND CEREMONIES**

#### ***Article 52 - Worship Services***

The consistory shall call the congregation together for worship twice on the Lord's Day.

The consistory shall ensure that, as a rule, once every Sunday the doctrine of God's Word as summarized in the Heidelberg Catechism is proclaimed.

#### ***Article 53 - Days of Commemoration***

Each year the Churches shall, in the manner decided upon by the consistory, commemorate the birth, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ, as well as His outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

#### ***Article 54 - Days of Prayer***

In time of war, general calamities, and other great afflictions the presence of which is felt throughout the Churches, a day of prayer may be proclaimed by the Churches appointed for that purpose by general synod.

#### ***Article 55 - Psalms and Hymns***

In the worship services the Psalms will be sung in the rhyming adopted by general synod and the Hymns approved by general synod.

#### ***Article 56 - Administration of Sacraments***

The sacraments shall be administered only under the authority of the consistory, in a public worship service, by a minister of the Word, with the use of the adopted Forms.

#### ***Article 57 - Baptism***

The consistory shall ensure that the covenant of God is sealed by baptism to the children of believers as soon as feasible.

#### ***Article 58 - Schools***

The consistory shall ensure that the parents, to the best of their ability, have their children attend a school where the instruction given is in harmony with the Word of God as the Church has summarized it in her Confessions.

#### ***Article 59 - Baptism of Adults***

Adults who have not been baptized shall be engrafted into the Christian Church by holy baptism upon their public profession of faith.

#### ***Article 60 - Lord's Supper***

The Lord's Supper shall be celebrated at least once every three months.

#### ***Article 61 - Admission to the Lord's Supper***

The consistory shall admit to the Lord's Supper only those who have made public profession of the Reformed faith and lead a godly life. Members of sister-Churches shall be admitted on the ground of a good attestation concerning their doctrine and conduct.

### ***Article 62 - Attestations***

Communicant members who move to a sister-Church shall be given, after previous announcements to the congregation, an attestation regarding their doctrine and conduct, signed on behalf of the consistory by two of its members.

In the case of non-communicant members such an attestation shall be sent directly to the consistory of the Church concerned.

### ***Article 63 - Marriage***

The consistory shall ensure that the members of the congregation marry only in the Lord, and that the ministers - as authorized by the consistory - solemnize only such marriages as are in accordance with the Word of God.

The solemnization of a marriage may take place either in a private ceremony or in a public worship service. The adopted Form for the Solemnization of Marriage shall be used.

### ***Article 64 - Church Records***

The consistory shall maintain Church records in which the names of the members and the dates of their birth, baptism, public profession of faith, marriage, and departure or death are properly recorded.

### ***Article 65 - Funerals***

Funerals are not ecclesiastical but family affairs, and should be conducted accordingly.

## **V. CHRISTIAN DISCIPLINE**

### ***Article 66 - Nature and Purpose***

Since Church discipline is of a spiritual nature and, as one of the keys of the kingdom of heaven, has been given to the Church to shut and to open that kingdom, the consistory shall ensure that it is used to punish sins against both the purity of doctrine and the piety of conduct, in order to reconcile the sinner with the Church and with his neighbour, and to remove all offence out of the Church of Christ - which can be done only when the rule given by our Lord in Matthew 18: 15-17 is followed in obedience.

### ***Article 67 - Consistory Involvement***

The consistory shall not deal with any matter pertaining to purity of doctrine or piety of life that is reported to it unless it has first ascertained that both private admonitions and admonitions in the presence of one or two witnesses have remained fruitless, or that the sin committed is of a public character.

### ***Article 68 - Excommunication***

Anyone who obstinately rejects the admonition by the consistory or who has committed a public sin shall be suspended from the Lord's Supper. If he continues to harden himself in sin, the consistory shall inform the congregation of this by means of public announcements, so that the congregation may be engaged in prayer and admonition, and the excommunication may not take place without its co-operation.

In the first public announcement the name of the sinner shall not be mentioned.

In the second public announcement - which shall be made only after the advice of classis has been obtained - the name and address of the sinner shall be mentioned.

In the third public announcement a date shall be set at which the excommunication of the sinner shall take place.

In case a non-communicant member hardens himself in sin, the consistory shall in the same manner inform the congregation by means of public announcements.

In the first public announcement the name of the sinner shall not be mentioned.

In the second public announcement - which shall be made only after the advice of classis has been obtained - the name and address of the sinner shall be mentioned and a date shall be set at which the excommunication of the sinner shall take place.

The time between the various announcements shall be determined by the consistory.

### ***Article 69 - Repentance***

When someone repents of a public sin or of a sin which had to be reported to the consistory, the latter shall not accept his confession of sin unless he has shown real amendment.

The consistory shall determine whether the benefit of the congregation requires that this confession of sin shall be made publicly and - in case it is made before the consistory or before two or three office-bearers - whether the congregation shall be informed afterwards.

### ***Article 70 - Readmission***

When someone who has been excommunicated repents and desires to be again received into the communion of the Church, the congregation shall be informed of his desire in order to see whether there are any lawful objections.

The time between the public announcement and the readmission of the sinner shall be not less than one month.

If no lawful objection is raised, the readmission shall take place with the use of the Form for that purpose.

### ***Article 71 - Suspension and Deposition of Office-bearers***

When ministers, elders, or deacons have committed a public or otherwise gross sin, or refuse to heed the admonitions by the consistory with the deacons, they shall be suspended from office by the judgement of their own consistory with the deacons and of the consistory with the deacons of the neighbouring Church. When they harden themselves in their sin or when the sin committed is of such a nature that they cannot continue in office, the elders and deacons shall be deposed by the judgement of the above-mentioned consistories with the deacons. Classis, with the concurring advice of the deputies of regional synod, shall judge whether the ministers are to be deposed.

### ***Article 72 - Serious and Gross Sins on the Part of Office-bearers***

As serious and gross sins which are grounds for the suspension or deposition of office-bearers the following are to be mentioned particularly: false doctrine or heresy, public schisms, blasphemy, simony, faithless desertion of office or intrusion upon that of another, perjury, adultery, fornication, theft, acts of violence, drunkenness, brawling, unjustly enriching oneself; and further all such sins and serious misdemeanours that rate as ground for excommunication with respect to other members of the Church.

### ***Article 73 - Christian Censure***

The ministers, elders, and deacons shall mutually exercise Christian censure and shall exhort and kindly admonish one another with regard to the execution of their office.

### ***Article 74 - No Lording It Over Others***

No Church shall in any way lord it over other Churches, no office-bearer over other office-bearers.

### ***Article 75 - Property of the Churches***

All property, both real and personal, which belongs to the Churches comprised respectively in classes, regional synods, and general synods in common, shall be held in trust for such Churches in equal shares by deputies or trustees appointed for that purpose from time to time by the appropriate classis, regional synod, or general synod, and such deputies or trustees shall be bound by the terms of their appointment and instruction and are subject to being discharged by a subsequent classis, regional synod, or general synod.

### ***Article 76- Observance and Revision of the Church Order***

These articles, which regard the lawful order of the Church, have been adopted with common accord. If the interest of the Churches demand such, they may and ought to be changed, augmented, or diminished. However, no consistory, classis, or regional synod shall be permitted to do so, but they shall endeavour diligently to observe the articles of this Church Order as long as they have not been changed by a general synod.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this publication, all quotes from the *Belgic Confession*, *Heidelberg Catechism* and *Canons of Dort* come from the *Book of Praise*, revised edition (Winnipeg: Premier Printing Ltd, 1984), pg 440-576. The *Book of Praise* is copyrighted by the Standing Committee for the Publication of the *Book of Praise* of the Canadian Reformed Churches. Used by permission.

<sup>2</sup> The 1990 Synod of the FRCA commissioned deputies to "adapt the Canadian text so that it clearly reflects the specific Australian circumstances" (*Acts*. Article 149).

<sup>3</sup> Note: the Greek does not have the definite article "the". It is therefore wrong to translate here "the body of Christ". Rather, the church of Corinth is "a body of Christ", complete in itself. See further J. Faber. *Lectures on the Church* (Kelmscott: Pro Ecclesia Publishers, 1991), pg 7f.

<sup>4</sup> This his principle, in my conviction, is not sufficiently recognised in Presbyterian church polity. See my *The Doctrine of the Church in Reformed/Presbyterian Contexts* (Kelmscott: Pro Ecclesia Publishers. 1991). pg 20ff.

<sup>5</sup> *Book of Praise*, pg 437.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, pg 440.

<sup>7</sup> J. Kamphuis. *Zo Vonden Wij Elkaar* (Groningen: De Vuurbaak. n.d.) pg 24. quoted in *Acts* of the 1996 Synod of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia, pg 204.

<sup>8</sup> The text of this article is now Article 81 of the Church Order of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia and Article 76 of the Canadian Reformed Church Order.

<sup>9</sup> Form for Ordination of Elders and Deacons", *Book of Praise*, pg 632.

<sup>10</sup> (1) *have passed a preparatory examination by the synod, which examination shall not take place unless those presenting themselves for it submit the necessary documents to prove that they are members in good standing of one of the churches and have successfully completed a course of study as required by the churches;*

<sup>11</sup> *Persons who have not pursued the regular course of theological study shall not be admitted to the ministry unless there is convincing evidence of their exceptional gifts of godliness, humility, modesty, good intellect, and discretion, as well as the gift of public speech. When any such person presents himself for the ministry the classis church shall seek to obtain this evidence by way of inquiry from the church to which he belongs, and from elsewhere if necessary. The examination shall take place in a synod (extraordinary if necessary). This synod shall set a period during which the person may, as candidate, speak an edifying word in the churches of the classis area. Thereafter the classis church, with the advice of deputies of synod, shall further deal with him as it shall deem edifying, observing the ecclesiastical regulations adopted for this purpose.*

<sup>12</sup> *A minister of the Word who has recently joined one of the churches and originates from a church with which the churches do not maintain a sister relationship shall only be admitted to the ministry with great caution. He shall not be declared eligible for call within the churches unless he has been well tested for a reasonable period of time and carefully examined by synod (extraordinary if necessary).*

<sup>13</sup> 1. *They shall be ordained only after synod has approved the call. Synod shall approve the call*  
a. *upon satisfactory testimony concerning the soundness of doctrine and conduct of the candidate, attested by the consistory of the church to which he belongs; and*  
b. *following a peremptory examination of the candidate by Synod with satisfactory results.*

<sup>14</sup> *They shall be installed after the classis church has approved the call.*

1. *For this approval as well as for the installation the minister shall show good testimonials concerning his doctrine and conduct, together with a declaration of honourable discharge from the consistory with the deacons and from the classis church.*

<sup>15</sup> *A minister of the Word, once lawfully called, is bound to the service of the church for life and therefore not allowed to enter upon another vocation unless it be for exceptional and substantial reasons. The decision of his consistory to relieve him of his office in order to enter upon another vocation shall receive the approval of the classis church, with the concurring advice of deputies of*



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synod.

<sup>16</sup> A minister once lawfully called, shall not leave the church to which he is bound to take up the ministry elsewhere without the consent of his consistory with the deacons and the approval of the classis church. Likewise, no church shall receive him unless he has presented a proper certificate of release from the church he served.

<sup>17</sup> The consistory with the deacons shall not dismiss a minister from his bond with the congregation without approval of the classis church and the concurring advice of the deputies of synod.

<sup>18</sup> If a minister accepts a call or an appointment to an extraordinary task the nature of the relationship between him and the church to which he is bound must be arranged with the consent of the classis church. Some ministers may be appointed for the training of students for the ministry, others may be called for mission work.

<sup>19</sup> Three kinds of ecclesiastical assemblies shall be maintained: the consistory, the classis church, and the synod.

<sup>20</sup> The classis church has the same jurisdiction over the consistory as the synod has over the classis church.

<sup>21</sup> The synod shall be held once every two years.

<sup>22</sup> For further details on this convent see Chapter 3, Paragraph 2.

<sup>23</sup> The synod shall appoint some of the most experienced and capable ministers to visit the churches each year. If necessary synod may appoint a capable elder to carry out this task together with a minister. It shall be the task of these visitors to inquire whether all things are regulated and done in full harmony with the Word of God, whether the office-bearers fulfil the duties of their office faithfully as they have promised, and whether the Church Order is being observed and maintained in every respect, in order that they may in good time fraternally admonish those who are found negligent in any thing, and that by their good counsel and advice all things may be directed towards the edification and preservation of Christ's church. They shall submit written reports of their visits to synod, with copies to the consistories concerned.

<sup>24</sup> Each vacant church shall request its classis church to appoint as counsellor the minister it desires as such, to the end that he may assist the consistory in maintaining good order and especially may lend his aid in the matter of the calling of a minister; he shall also <sup>190</sup> sign the letter of call. When a vacancy arises less than two months prior to a synod meeting, the synod shall appoint a counsellor.

<sup>25</sup> (1) have passed a preparatory examination by the synod ....

<sup>26</sup> As long as there are no classes, appeals under Article 31 CO shall be conducted as follows:

- a. stage 1: to the appointed classis church
- b. stage 2: to the appointed second appeal church
- c. stage 3: to the synod.


Note: stage 2 will not function when an appeal is made within two months prior to a synod

<sup>27</sup> The synod shall be held once every two years. Each consistory shall delegate one minister and one elder to synod. At the close of synod the time and place for the next synod shall be determined and a church shall be appointed to convene it. A synod shall be convened before the appointed time if according to the judgment of at least two churches this appears necessary. Its time and place shall be decided by the church appointed as convening church for the next regular synod, subject to the approval of its classis church.

<sup>28</sup> If a consistory is to be constituted for the first time or anew, the advice of the classis church shall be sought.

<sup>29</sup> Places where as yet no consistory can be constituted shall be assigned by synod to the care of a neighbouring consistory.

<sup>30</sup> Book of Praise, pg 584-606.

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- <sup>31</sup> *Book of Praise*, pg 587.
- <sup>32</sup> *Book of Praise*, pg 593-594.
- <sup>33</sup> *Book of Praise*, pg 588-592.
- <sup>34</sup> *Book of Praise*, pg 594-602.
- <sup>35</sup> For the Australian churches it is currently the responsibility of the Free Reformed Church at Launceston.
- <sup>36</sup> *Book of Praise*, pg 634-40.
- <sup>37</sup> John Calvin. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV. 12.5. The quotes are from the Battles translation.
- <sup>38</sup> This is the order of the original Church Order of Dort, and is followed by the Free Reformed Churches of Australia. The Canadian Reformed Churches have placed the entire church discipline procedure into one article, and placed it before their article on repentance.
- <sup>39</sup> This is the fourth question of the "Form for the Public Profession of Faith", *Book of Praise*, pg 593-594.
- <sup>40</sup> *In the first public announcement the name of the sinner shall not be mentioned. In the second public announcement, which shall be made only after the advice of the classis church has been obtained, the name and address of the sinner shall be mentioned. In the third public announcement a date shall be set at which the excommunication of the sinner shall take place in accordance with the adopted Form. The time interval between the various announcements shall be determined by the consistory.*
- <sup>41</sup> The wording of the announcement to be used is found in the *Book for Praise*, pg 610.
- <sup>42</sup> *Book of Praise*, pg 610-614. 
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, pg 612.
- <sup>44</sup> Quoted from the adopted form referred to in Article 75, namely the "Form for Readmission into the Church of Christ" as printed in the *Book of Praise*, pg 615-18.
- <sup>45</sup> *A baptised member shall be admonished by the consistory when he as an adult fails to make public profession of faith or where in other respects he is not loyal to the calling to new obedience in God's covenant. If he obstinately rejects the admonition of the consistory and thereby clearly demonstrates to be indifferent and averse to the covenant or is even hostile to the service of the Lord, the matter shall be made known to the congregation without mentioning the name of the sinner; and the congregation shall be urged to pray for him. If the member continues in sin and is unwilling to listen to the admonitions, then with the advice of the classis church the consistory shall make a second public announcement, mentioning the name of the sinner and the date at which the excommunication shall take place. If he does not in the said term show any real repentance, the consistory shall in a church service exclude him from the communion of the church, with the use of the adopted Form. If he, after this excommunication, comes to repentance and desires to rejoin the communion of the church, he shall be admitted by way of his public profession of faith after the consistory has made his repentance known to the congregation.*
- <sup>46</sup> *If a minister, elder or deacon has committed a public or otherwise gross sin, or refuses to heed the admonitions by the consistory, he shall be suspended from office by the judgment of his own consistory and of the classis church. If he hardens himself in the sin, or if the sin committed is of such a nature that he can not continue in office, an elder or a deacon shall be deposed by the judgment of the above-mentioned consistories. The second-appeal church, with the advice of the deputies of synod, shall judge whether a minister is to be deposed.*
- <sup>47</sup> This English translation of the Church Order adopted by the Synod of Dort, 1618-1619 is drawn from K deGier, *Explanation of the Church Order of Dordt in Questions and Answers*, as published by the Synod of the Netherlands Reformed Congregations, 1974. Used with permission. The headings over the articles also come largely from this publication.
- <sup>48</sup> This edition has been adopted by Synod 1994, and can be found in the *Acts* of that Synod.

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<sup>49</sup> For details on this point, see the Comment in relation to Article I of the Church Order.

<sup>50</sup> This edition comes from the *Book of Praise* (Winnipeg: Premier Printing, 1984, reprinted with corrections in 1998), pg 654-676. Used with permission.