



## The "original" authority of consistories

Dr. H. De Moor (professor of church polity) disputes the thesis that a consistory belongs to the essence of the church, while major assemblies belong to the welfare (*wezen* and *welwezen* in Dutch – "being" and "wellbeing") of the church. That, to my mind, constitutes one of his basic errors. When one looks at the New Testament he would be hard pressed to come up with anything that even faintly resembles our (bureaucratic) ecclesiastical setup today. The overwhelming emphasis in the N.T. is upon the local congregation (think of Paul's letters to local churches, and of the seven letters of Christ to the churches in Asia Minor). The Rev. I. De Wolff (*in his De Plaats van het Kerkverband in Schrift en Historie*) goes so far as to say, *"Not a trace is to be found in the N.T. of an external organization of local congregations in synodical connection (verband)."* There was indeed contact between the various congregations, but it was contact based upon an "inward" bond, the bond of having one faith and one God, governed by the one Holy Spirit. Only later, says De Wolff, did churches come together in a more organized way, but this *"was born out of practical difficulties,"* not out of biblical necessity. And wherever the church brought itself to Reformation, there the starting point was the *"independence (zelfstandigheid) of the local church."* And he goes on to state a very basic, underlying principle of Reformed Church polity: *"The federation is there for the sake of the local churches, and the latter are not there for the sake of the federation."* That is what De Moor and too many others seem to forget today. *"The oneness of the church, then,"* De Wolff goes on to say, *"does not consist in this, that the local churches are bound together by means of an external organizational bond, but in the fact that she has grown and branched out in many places and in many lands."* *"The Holy Spirit, who lives in His Church, creates the impulse toward coming and working together."* The Scriptures, says De Wolff, do use the word *"ecclesia"* at times to refer to the entire church (Matthew 16:18; 18:17; Ephesians 1:21; Colossians 1:18, etc.), *"but by far the most times the N.T. speaks about the Church in her local delimitation"* (orig. ital.).

Another enlightening booklet (which should be translated into English and digested by all seminarians and office-bearers today) is *Schriftbeginselen Van Kerkrecht* (inzake meerdere vergadering) by the late Dr. S. Greijdanus. He makes many of the same points as does De Wolff. He is not opposed to some form of federation between local churches — they can even be *"desirable and profitable."* *"But then always in this way, that the independence (zelfstandigheid) of the local churches remains untouched."* Even on the basis of Acts 15, says Greijdanus, all we can conclude is that God did not *forbid* this kind of gathering, but He certainly didn't *prescribe* it either. *"The connection (verband) of the churches rests on the side of the churches only in mutual agreement, voluntary coming together, mutual consensus."* *"The oneness of the church is there regardless, even if all external bond of togetherness is lacking. And that oneness can manifest itself even if there is no visible interlacing organization or connection to see."* Regarding the authority of major assemblies, Greijdanus takes sharp issue with Dr. H.G. Klein, who identified the authority of the classis over the consistory with that of the consistory over the congregation (much as De Moor does, and an idea which was (partly) smuggled into our Church Order in the 1965 revision, sad to say):

*That is now entirely unjust. The authority of the consistory over the congregation is of a completely different character than that of a classical gathering over the consistory. A consistory has a jurisdiction over its congregation which it received directly from God, albeit bound to God's Word of course; a major ecclesiastical assembly — classis, particular, provincial or national synod — lacks all proper, received-from-God authority over the consistories and the congregations, and has jurisdiction over these only in so far as said churches or consistories have, by mutual agreement, given to or conceded to these major*

*assemblies. That is thus a jurisdiction which rests upon the mutual agreement of the churches and is limited by that mutual agreement, and in this respect carries only a human character. But the authority of the office-bearer and consistory over their congregation rests not on mutual agreement between congregation and consistory or office-bearer, but on divine institution and thus carries a divine character. It is true that that which has been determined or prescribed by a major assembly according to God's Word must be observed, but then because it is in agreement with God's Word, hence because God's Word prescribes or commands it, but not because that major assembly ordains it. That major assembly has no proper divine authority.*

That is a clear, concise description of Reformed church polity as set forth in the Scriptures. In similar vein Monsma says:

*From the principle here enunciated it follows that major assemblies have no more authority than that which the churches have attributed to them by mutual agreement ... In fact, Reformed church polity knows of only one type and degree of authority: that vested in the local congregation or its ruling body, the consistory.*

The authority of major assemblies, says Monsma, is derived, limited, smaller in measure, ministering and conditional. He says there is a difference between the authority of the consistory and that of major assemblies as to origin, as to necessity, as to essence, as to duration and as to purpose. The consistory's authority is original in nature (received directly from Christ), essential for the church, and permanent in duration. That of major assemblies is delegated, not essential, and of limited (temporary) duration. It is sad that De Moor wants to do away with these fundamental distinctions, as did his predecessor. No wonder Monsma's Commentary is not esteemed very highly in Calvin Seminary. This kind of teaching at the seminary does not bode well for the future of our churches. It is highly dangerous instead.

To return a moment to Acts 15: We are freighting this gathering with far too much cargo if we try to make this the first "major assembly." We might also say: the flag doesn't cover the cargo. Consider:

- a) it was still the apostolic age when direct revelation was given by God to the apostles;
- b) Paul went up to this meeting by revelation of God (Galatians 2:2); we no longer do that today;
- c) Paul and Barnabas and Peter and others knew very well what the will of God was in this dispute. There was no uncertainty about that. God had made His will abundantly clear on this score (think of Peter and Cornelius). The other party did not want to submit to God's Word, and that caused the controversy. But there was never any doubt about the outcome as far as God's will was concerned;
- d) no assembly today can claim the unequivocal *"it seemed good to the Holy Spirit"* that this gathering claimed. We can learn from this, says De Wolff, that gatherings of a number of churches are not forbidden by God, but at the same time we must say that for Paul and the other apostles this meeting was entirely superfluous. For this and other reasons, says Greijdanus, one can hardly speak of this gathering as a synod in the current understanding of this word. What it can teach us, according to Greijdanus, is that the decision-making process must not take place without the involvement of the congregation.

From the above it seems very clear that Monsma and Van Dellen were absolutely right (Heyns, Kromminga and our history notwithstanding) in saying that *"no major assembly, according to Reformed Church Polity and the Church Order (pre 1965, J.T.), has the right to depose a minor assembly."* This would be *"a violation of the integrity and of the rights of the particular church concerned."* One would think that the debacle of 1944 in the Netherlands alone would be enough to convince one of that.

Finally, De Moor finds it "*incredible*" to suggest that the authority of those present at major assemblies comes not from their being elders and/or deacons (or ministers), but from the fact that they are delegated. Here let me just quote from a retired minister with considerable competence in matters of Church Order and Polity, P.M. Jonker (taken from *The Banner* of Sept. 13, 80):

*The authority with which an elder or minister speaks at classis or synod, and casts his vote, is not derived from his office, but from his being delegated, and through credentials duly authorized, to represent a certain church or group of churches. A fellow-elder of the church at A has the same office and is invested with the same authority in that church as the one who is delegated to classis. Yet he is not allowed to participate in the affairs of classis or synod because he is not delegated.*

*Again, this proves that the authority of the delegates to the major assemblies does not rest in their office, but exclusively in their being **delegated**. It is in view of this that Article 27 of the Church Order states that the authority of the consistory is original (there the office-bearers function as such) and that the authority of the major assembly is **delegated**.*

The formulation of Art. 34, which speaks of elders and ministers and office-bearers, is, says Jonker, an unfortunate one, to say the least. It was not found in the pre-1965 Church Order. But what is meant is "*to ensure that the minor assemblies will delegate those who are the most competent and the most experienced,*" which are usually the elders and the ministers. De Moor should study Church Order a bit more.

In short:

*The Reformed system ... maintains that each local congregation is a complete church, a complete manifestation of the body of Christ. In that sense and insofar each church or congregation is independent in essence (zelfstandig). Local churches can even exist without denominational federation, but a denomination cannot exist without local churches. The real unit is therefore the individual church. And the local churches do not exist for the sake of the denomination, but denominations exist for the sake of the local and individual churches.*

(Monsma in *Commentary*)

This needs stressing today. Consistory members would do well to get this volume (now out of print). It could prevent a lot of wrong thinking and action in our churches. And it could help us to get back to a looser and more biblical form of federation. All hierarchy and bureaucracy stand condemned by Scripture and ought to be an abomination to every Reformed believer.

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