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CONGREGATION AND OVERSEERS

Introduction

The relationship between congregation and overseers is rooted in and sustained by the redeeming work of our Lord Jesus Christ. He bought the congregation with His blood and makes the congregation share in his victory through the gift of overseers. Congregation and overseers may never take this relationship for granted. It is a tremendous blessing when it functions well. This can only continue when both congregation and council receive each other in recognition of the love of Christ, the Head of the Church (2 Cor 5:14). In this chapter we will reflect on the relationship between congregation and overseers.

1. Scripture

The Bible teaches that the church belongs to God. From the Old Testament we learn that Israel was His people.

Exod 5:1

Afterward Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Let my people go, so that they may hold a festival to me in the desert.'"

Exod 19:6

You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

The same applies to the church of the New Testament.

1 Cor. 3:16

Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?

1 Cor. 12:27

Now you are the body of Christ

2 Cor 1:1

To the church of God in Corinth

1 Tim. 3:15

... God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth.

1 Pet 2:9

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God,

God is the King of Israel, and the Lord Jesus rules the church. This rule involves the work of office-bearers. The Lord provides leaders, who are called to rule on behalf of God.

Exod 3:10

So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."

Num 11:16-17

The LORD said to Moses: "Bring me seventy of Israel's elders who are known to you as leaders and officials among the people. Have them come to the Tent of Meeting, that they may stand there with you. I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take of the Spirit that is on you and put the Spirit on them. They will help you carry the burden of the people so that you will not have to carry it alone.

Josh 20:4

"When he flees to one of these cities, he is to stand in the entrance of the city gate and state his case before the elders of that city. Then they are to admit him into their city and give him a place to live with them.

Deut 32:7

Remember the days of old; consider the generations long past. Ask your father and he will tell you, your elders, and they will explain to you.

Ezek 33:7

"Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me.

Matt. 16:18

And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

Acts 14:23

Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.

Gal. 1:1

Paul, an apostle - sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father.

Eph 4:10-12

He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe. It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up

The office-bearers are in the first place responsible to the LORD and must abide by His Word.

Deut 27:1

Moses and the elders of Israel commanded the people: "Keep all these commands that I give you today.

Gal. 1:8

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned.

At the same time the office-bearers must realize that the people they are set over belong to the LORD

Deut. 17:18-20

When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his brothers and turn from the law to the right and to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel.

1 Sam 2:12-17

Eli's sons were wicked men; they had no regard for the LORD. ... This sin of the young men was very great in the LORD's sight, for they were treating the LORD's offering with contempt.

Jer 23:1-2

"Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!" declares the LORD. Therefore this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: "Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done," declares the LORD.

Ezek 34:1-24

John 21:15-17

Simon, son of John, do you love me? ... Jesus said "Feed my sheep"

1 Pet 5:2-3

Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers-- not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

The members of the congregation, in turn, have to respect the office-bearers as servants of the Lord.

Num 12:1-9

Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite. "Has the LORD spoken only through Moses?" they asked. "Hasn't he also spoken through us?" And the LORD heard this. (Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.) At once the LORD said to Moses, Aaron and Miriam, "Come out to the Tent of Meeting, all three of you." So the three of them came out. Then the LORD came down in a pillar of cloud; he stood at the entrance to the Tent and summoned Aaron and Miriam. When both of them stepped forward, he said, "Listen to my words: "When a prophet of the LORD is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?" The anger of the LORD burned against them, and he left them.

Num 16:1-3

Korah son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, and certain Reubenites-- Dathan and Abiram, sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth-- became insolent and rose up against Moses. With them were 250 Israelite men, well-known community leaders who had been appointed members of the council. They came as a group to oppose Moses and Aaron and said to them, "You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the LORD's assembly?"

Num 17:8

The next day Moses entered the Tent of the Testimony and saw that Aaron's staff, which represented the house of Levi, had not only sprouted but had budded, blossomed and produced almonds.

1Thes 5:12-13

Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other.

1 Tim 5:17-19

The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. ... Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses.

Heb 13:17

Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.

2. Confession/Forms

2.1. Belgic Confession

The Belgic Confession shows that the office-bearers are servants of the Lord. They must in that capacity serve the congregation. The bond between overseers and congregation is clear in Art. 30 and 31.

Art. 30

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; they see to it that the true doctrine takes its course, that evil men are disciplined in a spiritual way and are restrained, and also that the poor and all the afflicted are helped and comforted according to their need. By these means everything will be done well and in good order when faithful men are chosen in agreement with the rule that the apostle Paul gave to Timothy.

Art 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, as stipulated by the Word of God. Therefore everyone shall take care not to intrude by improper means. He shall wait for the time that he is called by God so that he may have sure testimony and thus be certain that his call comes from the Lord. Ministers of the Word, in whatever place they are, have equal power and authority, for they are all servants of Jesus Christ, the only universal Bishop and the only Head of the Church. In order that this holy ordinance of God may not be violated or rejected, we declare that everyone must hold the ministers of the Word and the elders of the Church in special esteem because of their work, and as much as possible be at peace with them without grumbling or arguing.

Art 32

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. Therefore we reject all human inventions and laws introduced into the worship of God which bind and compel the consciences in any way. We accept only what is proper to preserve and promote harmony and unity and to keep all in obedience to God.

2.2. Forms

The Form for Ordination addresses the relationship between congregation and overseers. Prayers # 13 and 14 are instructive in this regard as well.

Form for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons

Charge

Tend the flock of God, that is in your charge, not by constraint but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly, not as domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock ... On the other hand, beloved brothers and sisters, receive these men as servants of God.

Prayer # 13

Thou hast graciously called us to be office-bearers in Thy church and hast charged us to take heed to ourselves and to all the flock which Christ hast bought with His blood. ... May Thy Word be our only rule and standard, so that our work may be to the glory of Thy Name, serving the well-being of Thy churches and bringing peace to our consciences.

Prayer # 14

Give perseverance to the overseers and the deacons, that they may be a blessing to Thy people through the faithful administration of their offices.

3. Goal

The reflecting on the relationship between congregation and overseers our goal is that the spiritual rule of Christ continues. As Art 32 of the Belgic Confession states it, our goal is "to preserve and promote harmony and unity and to keep all in obedience to God." For the overseers this means to be faithful servants of Christ in the congregation. For the congregation this means to receive the overseers as gifts of the Lord and submit to their instruction and discipline.

4. The Spiritual order

The Belgic Confession in Art.30 uses the word "Spiritual" in connection with the government of the church. What does this mean? It refers to the work of the Holy Spirit. This order is one of the means by which He

makes us willing and ready to serve our Lord Jesus Christ. The word "Spiritual" distinguishes church government from civil government and highlights that the Lord Jesus rules His Church by His Word and Spirit. The overseers come in the power of the Holy Spirit and with the sword of the Spirit, the Word. The purpose of this rule is to keep the church in the redemption which Christ obtained by his death. Both the overseers and the members of the congregation have to see their place within His work. The overseers must realize that they are servants of the Lord Jesus Christ in the congregation. They will have to give account of the way in which they have executed their office. The office bearers may never become an obstacle that prevents the grace of Christ from reaching the lives of God's people. The members of the congregation must realize that it is the Lord who uses the office-bearers to gather, defend and preserve the church. The overseers may not act as dictators, lording it over the congregation. The congregation may not treat the office bearers as their hired-hands. The overseers are servants of Christ given for the upbuilding of the church.

It is a gift of the Lord when congregation and overseers have a good relationship. But such a relationship can only continue when both sides live from the Word of God. Both sides have to see their places before the Head of the Church. Otherwise, it can easily happen that either side only sees its own perceived "rights". Then the overseers try to control the information which the congregation received, hiding behind their "call" and the authority that comes with it, or the congregation looks at the council with distrust as an old boys club, which protects its own interests at all costs. The result will be distrust or even animosity and lead to many misunderstandings. The relationship between congregation and overseers is not one of partisanship, the one side against the other, but one where in unity we bow under the gracious rule of our Lord and so receive His peace.

The spiritual character of the government of the church also means that both congregation and council have to realize that the first requirement is obedience to the Word of God. There is always a danger that the overseers try to please the members as much as possible, even to the point of compromising the proper exercise of the keys of the kingdom. There is also the danger that the congregation looks at the overseers as its representatives who have been elected to do the wishes of the voters. But then again Christ is not in the centre. Living in a time of consumerism and self-centeredness it is important to confess that the government of the church is of a spiritual nature. Our aim is to please the Lord in obeying Him. H.Bouwman, professor Church Polity in the early nineteen hundreds in Kampen, wrote that With every action of the church, the congregation must be able see that in word and deed the Name of Christ is being upheld. Where the Word rules, there we see the rule of Christ, there governs the freedom of God's children (Gereformeerd Kerkrecht, Vol.1, page 30).

5. Church Order

In obedience to the Word, the churches have established a Church Order. Th Lord instructs that all things must be done decently and in good order. This, in turn will promote harmony and peace. Our Church Order has then also a wonderful and long history. After the break with the Rome and its hierarchy, the Reformed churches realized that an order is in place, but then one that reflects the rule of Christ as Head of the Church. The purpose of the Church Order is to maintain good order in the church of Christ (see Art. 1 C.O.). The peace of the congregation can flourish when good order is maintained. In order to determine what is good we need to listen to the Word of God. "We accept only what is proper to preserve and promote harmony and unity and to keep all in obedience to God." (Belgic Confession, art. 32) In the Church Order the churches apply the Word of God to the life of the congregation.

The Reformed churches chose the term "order" rather than "law" when it came to the government of the church. We see the same in Art 30 of the Belgic Confession. The term "law" refers to an absolute rule, whereas the use of the therm "order" shows that the aim is to promite harmony and unity. The order has to be used with that in mind. F.L Rutgers, a well known professor Church Polity in the churches after the Secession, remarks that the history of the Reformed churches shows that while they were very strict with

regard to maintaining sound doctrine as the foundation of church life, they allowed a measure of room when it comes to following the order of the churches. (F.L.Rutgers, *De geldigheid vand de oude kerkenordening der Nederlands gereformeerde kerken*, Ton Bolland, 1971. Page 41). The last article of the Church Order reflects this as well. The Church Order has to be observed in such a way that the church can function properly.

In terms of the relationship between congregation and overseers we note that the Reformed Church Order not only rejects hierarchy, -the lording it over the congregation by the overseers-, but also the populist view as if the overseers are elected representatives. It rejects hierarchy, but also independentism. The Church Order starts from the supremacy of Christ. This gives the congregation and the overseers their proper places. In this section we will follow the division of the Church Order and deal with the articles that address the relationship between congregation and overseers. (For a more detailed explanation of each article see the commentaries on the Church Order.)

5.1. Office

The articles in the Church Order that deal with the calling to office and the ordination and installation of Ministers (Art. 3, 5) outline the cooperation of congregation and council. Council asks the congregation for names for nominations. Then the council nominates and allows the congregation to elect. Following the election the council appoints. The appointments are announced so that the congregation can bring in objections if necessary. The last step is the ordination.

In Art. 11 the churches recognize that due to the brokenness of this life the relationship between a minister and a congregation can break down to the point that he can no longer serve the congregation fruitfully. It would be wrong to sacrifice the congregation for the sake of the minister. This article may only be used when there is no reason for discipline. Both sides must indicate that the relationship has broken down to the point that fruitful cooperation is no longer possible.

The articles 22, 23 and 27 deal with visits made to the homes of the members. See chapter 1 -2 Home Visits, and Diaconal visit.

5.2 Ecclesiastical Matters

Art. 31C.O. is crucial for the relationship between congregation and overseers. The overseers have the authority to make binding decisions, but the members have the right to appeal when they feel wronged by the overseers. The right to appeal protects the congregation from decisions of the overseers that go against Scripture, Confession or Church Order. This way may be used when it becomes clear that the two sides cannot agree. The members should not use it too quickly. They must try to convince the overseers of the wrong involved. On the other hand, the overseers may not block the road of appeal. If, for example, the member requests a written answer, the council or consistory must be prepared to do this. The overseers should never be afraid to have their actions judged by the major assembly. In fact, the overseers must be willing to help the member involved in presenting the case before the major assembly.

What should an appeal contain? It should contain the following elements:

- the decision or the actions of the overseers that has caused this disagreement;
- the text of the brother/sister's complaint, with its grounds;
- the decision made by the consistory regarding the objections of the appellant, together with its grounds;
- an explanation by the appellant why he cannot agree with the answer of the overseers;
- a clear request for the major assembly.

It is proper that the appellant submits a copy of the appeal to the consistory, prior to the Classis. The consistory has the opportunity to react in writing to this appeal. This is to be preferred above giving the delegates to Classis the task to defend the position of the consistory. When the consistory decides to submit a written reaction to the major assembly the appellant should receive a copy as well.

The congregation is involved in the major assemblies in that the dates for convening the assemblies are announced to the congregation. When the council submits a proposal to the major assembly or appeals a decision of a non-disciplinary matter, it would be good to inform the congregation of this. In matters that concern the churches in general the council can solicit the input of the congregation. Members can also request the council to present their concerns to the major assembly.

Members are allowed to attend council meetings, except when it concerns confidential matters. It is proper to ask the council ahead of time. A member can also ask to be heard by the council or consistory. The member should indicate ahead what he wants to address. The member can receive an answer right then, or council can discuss it without the person being present and inform him later.

5.3. Worship, sacrament and ceremonies

The council announces the dates and times of the worship services. This is done by means of the bulletin. The congregation is also informed of the Lord's Supper date two weeks prior to its celebration.

In order to receive an attestation a member must request this from the consistory. This request will be announced from the pulpit one week and published in the bulletin for two weeks. An attestation is to be signed by two members of the consistory. An attestation contains the name(s) of the person(s) involved, the church who will receive this attestation, a judgement by the consistory concerning the life of the person and the request to the receiving church to receive the member(s) in their care. The statistical information is added for the benefit of the receiving church. In case of discipline or if the consistory has concerns regarding a member, see 2-1 Discipline.

The church maintains two sets of membership records. The recording clerk maintains the one and the archivist the other.

The announcements take place before the Votum and Salutation. Prior to the service the council goes over the announcements. The announcements deal with:

- worship services, including Lord's Supper and special services
- collections
- membership, attestations, public profession of faith, deaths
- discipline
- homevisits
- wedding banns
- election and ordination
- council/consistory/deacons meetings
- convening of major assemblies

Information about meetings of societies, school matters etc. must be submitted to the bulletin. If so requested an announcement can be made on behalf of a society or school board.

5.4. Discipline

In the articles of the C.O. about Christian discipline we see again the close cooperation between congregation and consistory. The consistory can only deal with matters that pertain to public sins, or when members have followed the way of Matthew 18. When the consistory takes over the discipline the congregation is involved by means of the various announcements and by the request for prayers and visits.

6. Congregational Meetings

The council meets with the congregation for the purpose of electing office bearers. This is usually done after the afternoon worship service. Once a year council and congregation meet to discuss the finances of the church. The Treasurer presents an Annual Report and the Budget for the new year. The Recording

Clerk presents an Annual Report which deal with the life of the congregation. The annual congregational meeting can be used to discuss other matters as well. The question period at the end of this meeting gives the members the opportunity to bring matters to the attention of council. It must be kept in mind that the Congregational Meeting is a meeting of council with congregation. The members of the congregation cannot make motions unless the council asks for the input of the congregation. If a major decision is to be made the council as a rule seeks the input of the congregation by means of an additional congregational meeting.

7. Committees

Council can appoint committees for a specific purpose. It must provide the Committees with a clear mandate. Each Committee is appointed by the council. When members of committees retire or resign, the committee has to present suggested names to fill the vacancies. Council decides on this suggestion. Those appointed are informed by the a member of Council. The committees submit reports to the council on a regular basis. The committees and their members are published in the yearly Directory.

8. Bulletin

The publication of a bulletin facilitates the communication between the congregation and council. Council should have clear guidelines as to what is published.

9. Evaluation

1. Do we agree with the Scriptural and Confessional basis and goals?
2. Describe the current relationship between congregation and council. Are there elements that need to be improved, changed, added? Why? How?
3. Is the congregation properly informed? Is council open in its communication with the congregation? Are the press releases helpful?
4. How is the involvement of the congregation in the process of election? Are there concerns? How can we promote this involvement? Is the congregation aware of the Regulations for Election?
5. How do we involve the congregation in the work of the major assemblies?
6. Are the announcements sufficient and to the point?
7. Do the congregational meetings function well? Why? How is the attendance? What can we do to promote this?
8. Which committees do we have? Do the Committees function well? Are the committees clear on their mandates? Do we give them room to do their work? Is there periodic retirement?
9. Are we satisfied with the way the bulletin is used? Do we have clear guidelines about the contents of the bulletin? Who is responsible for the contents? Are there things we need to improve on? How can we do this?