



## The Government of the Church

The Church is Jesus' "*new creation by water and the Word.*" As the Belgic Confession has made so clear, to be united to Christ includes being united to his Body, the visible Church. For those not formally belonging to a local manifestation of the catholic Church they are "*duty bound*" to join it with joy. And so there are no "lone ranger" Christians as article 28 pointed out.

In saying this our Confession in Articles 27-29 uses various biblical terms to describe the Church which our Lord has created, such as *congregation* (Exodus 12:3; Acts 15:30), *assembly* (Exodus 12:6; James 2:2), *body* (Isaiah 1:5-6; Romans 12:4-5), and *communion* (Psalm 133; Acts 2:42). These images teach us that the Church is made up of real people who relate to each other as brothers and sisters. For this reason the local church must have order, structure, and discipline. But how is this to occur when the Head and Lord of the Church, Jesus Christ, is in heaven? This was the question John Calvin sought to answer when he opened Book IV, Chapter 3 of his *Institutes* so famously, saying,

*We are now to speak of the order in which the Lord has been pleased that his Church should be governed. For though it is right that he alone should rule and reign in the Church, that he should preside and be conspicuous in it, and that its government should be exercised and administered solely by his word; yet as he does not dwell among us in visible presence (Matthew 26:11), so as to declare his will to us by his own lips, he in this (as we have said) uses the ministry of men, by making them, as it were his substitutes, not by transferring his right and honour to them, but only doing his own work by their lips, just as an artificer uses a tool for any purpose.<sup>1</sup>*

As we continue our exposition and application of the Belgic Confession, we continue with the Reformed belief about the Church (arts. 27-36). And whereas in articles 27-29 the Confession is concerned with the "big picture" of the Church, articles 30-32 deal with the practical matters of how the church functions and is governed until our Lord comes again.

### The necessity of church government

Although "church polity" is not a topic that is going to sell many Christian books, draw large audiences to conferences, or please the parishioners from the pulpit, it is a biblical and necessary topic of our faith and life. This is why Article 30 opens by saying,

*"We believe that this true Church **must** be governed by that spiritual polity which our Lord has taught us in His Word"* (emphasis added).

It is *necessary* for us to "*believe with the heart and confess with the mouth*" that the church must need government. The question, though, is why? Recognize from the outset that the Confession states the necessity of church government residing in the fact that it is a topic "*our Lord has taught us in His Word.*" As Protestants we confess the principle of *sola Scriptura*, that is, that Scripture alone is our ultimate source of authority for faith and life. And as a people of the Word, we turn to it for what we believe about how Christ governs his people.

Yet it is also important to recognize that while the Scriptures do give us commands, principles, and examples on how to order the Church rightly, not every issue of church polity is spelled out in Scripture. This is why the Westminster Confession of Faith, written in 1647, in its article on the Scriptures and their sufficiency, teaches that

*...there are some circumstances concerning the ... government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word (I.6).*

Issues such as how ecclesiastical meetings are to be run can be solved by using the wisdom of “Robert’s Rules,” for example, while the matter of appeals to the various ecclesiastical assemblies can be spelled out using general principles of equity. Louis Berkhof stated this issue well when he said,

*Reformed Churches do not claim that their system of Church government is determined in every detail by the Word of God, but do assert that its fundamental principles are directly derived from Scripture. They do not claim a **jus divinum** for the details, but only for the general fundamental principles of the system, and are quite ready to admit that many of its particulars are determined by expediency and human wisdom.<sup>2</sup>*

Nevertheless, what our Belgic Confession is saying here is that there is enough in Scripture to give us the basic outline and principles of how Christ wants his Church governed.

So it is necessary for the Church to be governed because Christ has taught us this, but also because of our sinfulness. Left to ourselves – even as Christians – we would either be anarchists in which everyone does what is right in his/her own eyes (Judges 21:25) or we would end up being persuaded to follow some charismatic leader based on plausible arguments (Colossians 2:4; cf. 2 Peter 2).

For at least these two reasons, then, the church must be governed. But by what kind of government? Notice that the Confession makes it clear that the government of the church is a *spiritual* task and *spiritual* government. The Church of Christ is no theocratic, theonomic, or political action group, nor is it to be governed as such; instead, the Church is a spiritual kingdom (Matthew 3:2; 1 Corinthians 15:50; Romans 14:17; 1 Peter 2:5) which uses spiritual weapons (2 Corinthians 10:4; Ephesians 6:17) in a spiritual war (Ephesians 6:12). There is an earthly, temporal kingdom of this world and to it God has given the sword and temporal punishment (Romans 13). This distinction between these two kingdoms, their respective governments and discipline is applied in the Church Order of Dort, which says,

*“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 censures...”<sup>3</sup>*

Here we are dealing with the spiritual government of Christ’s Spirit-created people.

## **The basics of Reformed church government**

So what are the “general rules of the Word” (WCF, I.6) our Lord has taught concerning the government of His Church? Article 30 of the Confession continues, saying,

*...there must be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments; also elders and deacons, who, together with the pastors, form the council of the Church...*

These are the three “offices,” that is, the official duties which Christ has given to men to perform in his Church. Generally speaking, we can say that just as Israel had three “offices” by which the LORD led His people (prophet, king, priest), so too the New Testament has three ordinary offices (pastor, elder, deacon).<sup>4</sup>

### ***Pastors***

The Old Testament office of prophet corresponds generally to the New Testament pastors as they are both offices of the Word (Acts 6:4, 13:2; 1 Timothy 4:6, 14). The word “pastor” evokes in us the image of one who is not merely a mouthpiece, but a shepherd. And the pastor shepherds his sheep by feeding them the Word both in its audible form, preaching, and its visible form, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper (cf. Belgic Confession, art. 33). The LORD promised such shepherds to His faithless people through the prophet Jeremiah, saying,

*“And I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding.”*

(Jeremiah 3:15)

And before our Lord ascended, He commissioned His apostle-shepherds, to go out to the nations and feed them with the Word, *“teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you”* (Matthew 28:20).

This prophetic and apostolic teaching is likened in Scripture to various types of food for the souls of God’s people. The Word is likened to milk (1 Peter 2:2), which gives vital nourishment to newborns. It is described as bread (Deuteronomy 8:3), which is the basic staple of life. It is also described as heavenly bread, manna (John 6:35 cf. 6:58), which gives us life in this wilderness pilgrimage we call life. It is also described as solid food (Hebrews 5:12), which is what we eat as we begin to mature into childhood and adulthood. And the Word is described as honey (Psalms 19:10), which is sweet and satisfying. Is it any wonder the Apostle commands Timothy, and all preachers, to preach the Word at all times (2 Timothy 4:2)?

What is so amazing about God’s grace is that for the further confirmation and nourishment of his people, he has given to ministers the task of administering this Word in its visible form: the water of baptism, signifying the washing away of our sins by the blood of Christ (Hebrews 10:22) and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon us (Titus 3:5-6); the bread, signifying the giving of Christ to us as the life-giving bread of our souls (John 6); and the wine, signifying the poured out blood of Christ as our spotless Passover lamb (1 Corinthians 5:7).

## **Elders**

The Old Testament office of king corresponds to New Testament elders as they are offices of rule. The elders are the men<sup>5</sup> in the congregation who with wisdom rule the church along with the minister (Exodus 18; 1 Corinthians 6) by ensuring that Word and sacraments are purely administered by the minister and that the lives of God’s people are in accordance with the Word. This is why it is so vital to the life and future existence of Reformed churches in our land that our elders become serious students of the Word as well as the faithful summaries of that Word in our three confessional documents. In a word, we need a generation of men who are intimately acquainted with and devoted to the Word and applying it in the life of God’s people!

## **Deacons**

Finally, the spiritual polity of our Lord’s church also involves an analogous office to that of the Old Testament priest, at least in terms of the priest’s service to the poor, sick, and needy among the people (e.g., Leviticus 13-15). The New Testament deacons fulfill this task in the life of the church as they have an office of service (Acts 6:1-6). Our “Form for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons” makes this so clear, linking the deacons’ as a continuation of Christ’s ministry, saying,

*The office of deacon is based upon the interest and love of Christ in behalf of His own. This interest is so great that He deems what is done unto the least of His brethren as done unto Him, thus appointing the needy to represent Himself in our expression of sympathy and benevolent service on earth.<sup>6</sup>*

## **The reasons for church government**

This article concludes with a list of the benefits of a biblical church polity of pastors, elders, and deacons, as taught by the Lord, saying,

*...that by these means the true religion may be preserved, and the true doctrine everywhere propagated, likewise transgressors punished and restrained by spiritual means; also that the poor and distressed may be relieved and comforted, according to their necessities. By these means everything will be carried on in the Church with good order and decency, when faithful men are chosen, according to the rule prescribed by St. Paul in his Epistle to Timothy.*

## **Preservation of true religion**

All three offices have a vital interest in preserving true religion. First, the ministers are those who must cultivate true religion in the hearts of God’s people by proclaiming the Word so that the

church has something to preserve. Second, the elders preserve true religion by guarding the sanctity of the Word and sacraments among the people, keeping watch against wolves from within and without the flock (Acts 20; 1 Peter 2; Jude: 3-4). Third, the deacons preserve true religion by stirring up the people to live out this religion in visiting orphans and widows (James 1:27).

The question we must ask ourselves is simply, are we doing this? Are we preserving the Faith or our cultural and personal fancies? May our churches never be those under a famine –

*“not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD.”*

(Amos 8:11)

### ***Propagation of true doctrine***

But preservation is not enough; we must also propagate *“the faith once for all delivered to the saints”* (Jude :3). Ministers must spread the seed of the Word both publicly in preaching and teaching and privately in visitation (Acts 20:20). The elders and deacons of the church must protect the minister from administration and being over-burdened by taking significant roles in the life of the church and by scheduling services, Bible studies, classes, etc. which will allow him to fulfill his calling. As well, the propagation of true doctrine must be a constant theme of the life of the church through family worship as well as church planting. After all, we can preserve the Faith wonderfully by never allowing an aberrant voice to speak to our people, but if that Faith is never passed on to the next generation (Psalm 78), there will be no church left to preserve anything.

### ***Punishment of transgressors***

In setting up a “spiritual polity,” the ever-present task of the ministers and elders in church discipline will be existent. Remember that Belgic Confession Article 29 said church discipline was one of the essential marks of a true church. Without it we are a false church in which “anything goes.” Here the Confession mentions the “negative” side of church discipline, namely, punishing transgressors.

Yet, there is also a “positive” aspect to church discipline which is a blessing in the life of God’s people. As they “submit to the government of the church”<sup>7</sup> they are coming under the care of pastors and elders, who will teach them, pray for and with them, visit them, and encourage them in their Christian walk.

### ***Relief and comfort of the poor & distressed***

Another of the benefits of Christ’s spiritual polity is that the work of benevolence through the hands of the deacons will be fulfilled. While caring for the less fortunate must be a concern of every Christian, the deacons are particularly the Church’s “ministers of mercy.” We would all agree with this as Reformed believers, but what we need to do is apply this principle more effectively in our churches. This means that we need to recapture this Confessional truth about deacons caring for the needy by relieving them of the burden of church finances. As long as we expect our deacons to be financial officers we will not have a robust ministry of mercy in our congregations nor communities.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Good order and decency***

The end purpose of all of this is, in the words of Paul, that *“all things should be done decently and in order”* (1 Corinthians 14:40). God *“is not a God of disorder but of peace”* (1 Corinthians 14:33), and when His people are governed in a way that is biblical, in which the office of Word, rule, and service are present, His people will be built up and He will be glorified.

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## **Study/application questions for article 30**

1. How would you show someone that the Bible teaches “organized religion?”
2. In light of so much bad church government which leads to people having bad experiences with the church, how could you explain to someone the *blessing* of Reformed church government?
3. Explain in your own terms how the New Testament offices take over in some way the Old Testament offices. How does this show the unity between the one people of God throughout both Testaments?

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<sup>1</sup> *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1 vol., trans. Henry Beveridge (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1989), 315-6. On the benefits of this translation see Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 68, 218 n26.

<sup>2</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (reprinted 1994; Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1941), 581.

<sup>3</sup> Article 71. This can be found in the *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Church, 1934), 124.

<sup>4</sup> For an excellent explanation of the offices of Israel and the Church, see Derke P. Bergsma, “Prophets, Priests, and Kings: Biblical Offices,” in *The Compromised Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1998), 117-131.

<sup>5</sup> Note well that as confessional churches we official believe here in Article 30 that the offices of pastor, elder, and deacon are open to “faithful men.” The French text of the Confession uses the masculine noun *personnage*.

<sup>6</sup> *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Church, 1976), 173.

<sup>7</sup> See “Public Profession of Faith: Form Number 1,” *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Church, 1976), 132.

<sup>8</sup> On this topic see William Shisko, “Reforming the Diaconate.” *Ordained Servant* 1:2 (1992): 43-5; “Reforming the Diaconate: Part 2.” *Ordained Servant* 1:3 (September 1992): 63-6; “Reforming the Diaconate: Part 3.” *Ordained Servant* (January 1993): 16-8; Idzerd Van Dellen, “How the Deacons May Really Be Deacons.” *The Banner* (December 16, 1960): 6-7; Rand Lankheet, “The Deformation of the Diaconate.” *Christian Renewal* (March 8, 2004): 18; “The Re-formation of the Diaconate.” *Christian Renewal* (March 22, 2004): 12-3.