



An Unheralded Gem

Taking things for granted

A particular human trait that we all share is the tendency to take certain things for granted. You may, for example, be driving a certain make of car or truck and think nothing of it, but then someone approaches you and says that they just love the vehicle that you are driving. Or, you may live in a certain area and spend little time considering your surroundings, when out of the blue someone tells you that you are living in a fantastic place. The same sort of thing may happen with many other things, circumstances, and situations. What we deem to be ordinary or plain may attract someone else's attention and interest, even their admiration.

The Church Order

Why do I write about this and bring this to your attention? It is due to the fact that on my trips to China I have been struck repeatedly by this trait or tendency. To be more specific, our church life as members of the Canadian Reformed Churches is governed by the Church Order. In it we find all sorts of instructions, rules, or stipulations about all types of things: the offices of deacon, elder, and minister, the assemblies of consistory, classis, regional synod and general synod, practices relating to worship, sacraments, membership, and discipline. In short, the Church Order is filled with numerous directives, guidelines, and regulations.

Yet how often do we give these things much thought? When was the last time that you turned to the back of the Book of *Praise* and read all or part of the Church Order? Most of us know it is there and we may glance at it once in a while, but for the rest we yawn when it is mentioned. The only time it may receive some special attention is when there is a debate or discussion going on about a certain procedural matter.

You see the Church Order is something that we know exists but which we tend to ignore or even dismiss. Often it is seen as nothing else than part of the almost invisible ecclesiastical furniture or as a necessary evil.

In China

Only not in China! No sooner was this particular document translated into Chinese and made available and it proceeded to garner all sorts of interest and attention. Calls, inquiries, and questions about it were received in large numbers. It generated a great deal of enthusiasm. Why, some churches there no sooner read it and they decided to adopt it. They wanted their church life to be governed by it immediately.

At the same time we were asked to teach it on site. The result was that a large number of church leaders and workers gathered together in a certain place and for a whole week I went through the Church Order with them. The students listened intently, wrote notes diligently, and asked more than a thousand questions. The reception that this material received was nothing short of astounding and it was a rare delight to teach this course.

It should also be added that so enthusiastic was the response that we felt the need to slow things down and offer some cautionary words. After all, the Church Order did not drop out of the sky overnight. It took a long time to formulate and to arrive at its present redaction. As well, it was crafted in a certain historic, social, and religious context. Hence we urged them, and we still keep

on telling those who want to embrace and implement it right away, to slow down, study it carefully, identify the main principles, and be very sensitive to their own circumstances and situation.

Now, you may be wondering as to why the Chinese (and let me add that the enthusiasm for our Church Order is not limited by any means to the Chinese) are so taken with it? A number of factors can be identified.

The guidance factor

The first can be called the guidance factor. Imagine yourself, if you can, in a missionary context in which the gospel is being preached, people are coming to faith, gathering together for worship and building a church. How are they going to build it? What basic biblical principles need to be identified? What norms apply? What offices should be instituted? What practices should be adopted?

It is no easy thing to set up a proper church life, as well as identify and implement the necessary principles and practices. It can create an enormous amount of debate. It also tends to generate a lot of disagreement, as well as confusion.

Hence in such a setting it is of great benefit to be able to turn to a document in which so many of the principles are spelled out and so much wisdom is to be found. The Church Order is thus a great and necessary guide when it comes to identifying and implementing the nuts and bolts of church life.

The brevity factor

The second factor can be called the *brevity* factor. If you look around and want to know how different churches govern their life you are often confronted with thick books containing endless rules and procedures, as well as long mandates for a great number of committees. It is all so detailed and so complicated. As a result it may be difficult to grasp just how exactly this church governs itself.

The same cannot be said about our Church Order. If anything it tends to keep matters brief and concise. It only takes seventy-six articles to describe how we function and operate as Reformed churches. And there is both beauty and attractiveness in that. Indeed, one thing that has always made me hesitant about the Proposed Joint Church Order that the Canadian Reformed and United Reformed Churches have drafted together is that it contains more details and adds a greater degree of complexity. Some people will tell you that "small is beautiful," but "short is beautiful" too.

The clarity factor

The third aspect that attracts others to our Church Order has to do with what may be called the clarity factor. While being short may be a laudable thing when it comes to church government, it alone is not enough. You need to make sure that it is both short and clear.

Here too our Church Order excels. Even a brief look at it soon reveals that it is all organized around only four main headings: offices, assemblies, worship, and discipline. Now, it has to be admitted that what it under these four headings does not say it all; however, most of the main details, the key principles, and the basic practices can be found there. You do not have to consult dense massive tomes or call up great experts to grasp how our churches govern themselves. It is mostly all there, short and clear.

The accountability factor

The fourth factor is the accountability factor. In many mission situations the reality is that the church is not ruled by principles but by one person. What emerges is the cult of the strong man, and then the strong man who is accountable to no one.

We have met this repeatedly in China. A certain man goes out, evangelizes, calls people together, and sets up a church. In the process he controls everything. He teaches whatever he likes. He excommunicates those who ask too many questions. He uses the offerings and tithes collected from the members as his own personal assets buying luxury cars and fancy houses.

What is forgotten or not known is that church leadership is never a one man thing but always a group matter. It is not for nothing that Paul instructs Titus to "*appoint elders in every town*" (Tit 1:5). Paul specifically tells him to appoint more than one. There needs to be a body of elders. There needs to be joint leadership. Leaders too are sinful men who need to be answerable to others.

The biblical factor

Still, when all is said and done what attracts so many believers elsewhere to the Church Order is what may be called the *biblical* factor. In other words, they recognize almost immediately that here we have the outworking of various biblical principles and precepts. The Bible speaks about the offices of pastor, elder, and deacon, and so does the Church Order. The Bible speaks about churches coming together to consult with one another and to help one another, and so does the CO. The Bible deals with worship and sacraments, and so does this document. The Bible also dares to give direction when it comes to discipline, and so does this publication. Whatever the Bible says about the basics of church government can be found back in the Church Order.

Now, it needs to be admitted too that there is not necessarily a Bible verse to support each and every church orderly stipulation. There is such a thing as the practical working out of biblical principle. Take the matter of confessional subscription. There is no Bible text which says that the church should have a special form for this and that the special office-bearers should sign it; however, the need for the church to promote sound doctrine is clear (1 Tim 1:10; 6:3; 2 Tim 1:13; 4:3; Tit 1:9; 2:1).

Suffice it to say then that for various reasons our Church Order has attracted a new following in China and elsewhere. At the same time it should create in us the awareness that something that we have long taken for granted is really something that needs to be highly prized. Our gracious God gives us more treasures than we realize. In the Church Order he gives us a gem!

Barnabas

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