

LESSON 23

Belgic Confession Articles 30-32 (1) Church Government

General:

In this lesson we examine the various systems of Church government, and note which system meets the requirements of Scripture.

1. The Organization of the Church

There have been those who taught that the exact organization and government of the Church is merely a result of historical development and that the Scripture is indifferent in these matters. Our confession states, however, that "this true Church must be governed according to the Spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in His Word" (Article 30). The Lord has not left the manner of government of His Church to the preferences and discretions of men, but given clear directives. We clearly note this in the following:

- a) the rules concerning the appointment and task of office-bearers (1 Timothy 3)
- b) regulations concerning the worship services and the use of the sacraments (1 Corinthians 11)
- c) stipulations concerning those who are delinquent in conduct (Matthew 18).

Especially in the so-called "Pastoral Letters" (to Timothy and Titus) do we find various rules for the practical regulation of congregational life.

2. Forms of Church Government

Through the ages various theories concerning Church government have been formulated and diverse systems have been put into practice. We mention the following:

- a) the *papal* (or Roman Catholic system): believes an ongoing apostolic succession, evident in the Primacy of Peter, whose successors (Popes) are the official representatives (Vicars) of Christ on earth and therefore may claim for themselves a specific papal infallibility. This system is dominated by the unscriptural distinction: clergy-laity
- b) the *territorial system*: believes that the secular head of state has decisive powers in the Church and promotes the "state or national Church." This system, preferred by the Lutherans, is also called the Erastian system, and was advocated by the Arminians in the Netherlands. In this system, "church" and "state" are not clearly separated as entities on their own

- c) the *independentistic* (Congregationalistic) system: does not accept any binding federative form, but promotes the full independence of local congregations. The authority lies in the congregation, and only "teaching elders" are permitted
- d) the *collegiate* system: believes that the Church is formed (according to the "natural law" principle) by a free act of men who unite in a "collegium" (a society) of which the local churches are departments
- e) the *reformed* (or Presbyterian) system: believes that Christ is the sole Head of the Church, and that He has entrusted certain authority to elders (presbyters) to govern in His Name and by His Word. The various local churches are free and independent, yet also united in one Lord and one faith, therefore also mutually responsible (Revelation 1).

The real difference between the various systems becomes clear in the answer to the question: where does "the power" ("exousia" = the authority) lie?

- a) papal system: in the pope or collegium of cardinals and their decrees
- b) territorial system: in the Head of State and his directives
- c) independentist: in the members of the congregation and their decisions
- d) reformed: in Jesus Christ and His scriptural rule as exercised by the office-bearers.

3. Reformed Church Government: Anti-Hierarchical

The Reformed system of Church government is very strongly antihierarchical. Hierarchy is any overruling of the prime authority of Christ and His Word in the Church; dominion in the Church by a person or a group of persons. This hierarchy can be attempted and realized by any particular group:

- a) by a Synod or council: synodocracy
- b) by a local consistory: consistoriocracy
- c) by individual office-bearers: dominocracy
- d) by the members of the church: democracy.

The Confession states positively that the government of Christ, the One Master, be not violated (Articles 30 and 32). If anything, the Church of Christ is a "Theocracy" (= God-ruled), i.e. governed by Christ, through the service of appointed office-bearers, according to His Word alone. These office-bearers may not subject the members or one another to themselves, but only to Christ and His expressly revealed command, as to the "Chief Shepherd" (1 Peter 5:4).

Acts 20:28, ". . . care for the Church of God, which He obtained with the blood of His own Son."

1 Peter 5:3, "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."

4. Church Government: A Spiritual Matter

The Confession stresses that the government of the Church is "spiritual." Spiritual order = spiritual system of government (Article 30).

This means that the Church may never make use of physical force or apply corporal punishment, for such measures belong to the realm of the State to which the "sword" has been purposefully given (Romans 13:4). The Church is to work only with the "Sword of the Spirit," the Word of God, presenting its comfort and admonitions.

Zechariah 4:6, "Not by might, not by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord of hosts."

The spiritual means entrusted to the Church are: teaching, reproof, correction, training, and excommunication. (See: 2 Timothy 3:16; 1 Corinthians 5:3-5.)

QUESTIONS (Lesson 23):

1. Show from Scripture that the government of the Church is determined by Christ in His Word and not decided by the insights of men.
2. What various forms of Church government have been defended?
3. What is the main characteristic of the Reformed system of Church government?
4. Why do we call the government of the Church a "spiritual" matter?