

The Church-Corrupting Character of Hierarchy

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We all, gentlemen, as brothers of Reformed confession, have come together here before the face of the Lord, out of a large number of Dutch Reformed Churches, believing with the heart and confessing with the mouth what has been declared in the Confession of our churches concerning the Church of Christ, in so far as it is visible.

Consequently, we believe and confess, with respect to the principles of church government, this, among other things: “The true church is to be recognized by the following marks: It practices the pure preaching of the gospel. It maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ has instituted them. It exercises church discipline for correcting and punishing sins. In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and regarding Jesus Christ as the only Head... The false church assigns more authority to itself and its ordinances than to the Word of God. It does not want to submit to the yoke of Christ. It does not administer the sacraments as Christ commanded in His Word, but adds to them and subtracts from them as it pleases. It bases itself more on men than on Jesus Christ. It persecutes those who live holy lives according to the Word of God and who rebuke the false church for its sins, greed, and idolatries.”

And with respect to the persons: “...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... 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.”

And again, with respect to the order of the church: “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.”

All of this we believe and confess on the basis of God’s Word, to which also these articles of our Confession continually allude. And it is certainly not a coincidence, nor is it insignificant that precisely with this article of the confession, more than elsewhere, an emphatic appeal is made to God’s Word in such a way that in each article that appeal is emphatically repeated.

For at this point, even more than at other points, the Reformed Churches have had to declare their stand unambiguously, from the very beginning. A testimony was required over against Rome, which had so lamentably lorded it over the churches for centuries. Slowly but certainly, under Rome’s leadership, the principles of God’s Word for church government had been so deformed and corrupted that they had virtually been supplanted by their opposites. Slowly but surely a system had developed in which all who were called to ecclesiastical ministry were considered to be a New Testament priesthood, which precisely therefore was set completely apart as clergy (that is, ‘inheritance’ of God) or as ‘religious’, sharply distinguished from the mass of believers, the laity; in which, moreover, that laity was judged to be unconditionally subject to the ecclesiastical lordship of the clergy; and in which the power that was thus granted the latter was even enhanced and centralized by an ascending order of steps and ranks which eventually culminated in the one Papal see, and thus all cooperated to ensure that the Papal authority would be the highest, yes, the only authority. Slowly but

certainly, the church had come to live with what was called, both by its opponents and its supporters, **hierarchy**, that is 'rule by priests'. And it was this hierarchy, especially, with which the churches, purified according to God's Word, had to take issue.

To break with this, unconditionally and definitely, not only in thoughts or in words, but also in deeds, and then to return to the ordinance which the Lord Himself had instituted for His church, that was **the real issue** in the reformation of the churches in the sixteenth century. Anyone who could not manage that, remained Romanist, despite maintaining, as Erasmus did, that whatever Luther had preached had also been said and taught by them; and such would slip away and sink back by the force of that fatal principle, giving up, bit by bit, what they had already seemed to grasp of the truth. Rome knew this so well that it tolerated very much, even anything, from those who remained subject to its final authority; as also it was ruthless wherever that authority was threatened even for a moment. The Reformation, where it was concerned not with heart or home or life, but with the church, undoubtedly had a deeper motive and a higher purpose than the reorganization of the church; but this does not take away that, as reformation of the church, it consisted of a renewed recognition of the King's ordinance, and therefore in casting off the yoke of hierarchy which had been laid upon it.

Wherever this involved a bitter struggle, the leaven was winnowed out most effectively, much more so than where the Reformation was introduced without much difficulty. Particularly in France, Scotland and the Netherlands, indeed especially here, the hierarchy itself ensured that its principles were extinguished, so to speak, among the Reformed; and that their confession and their church order was permanently imprinted, as by blood and fire, with the permanent reminder: "Here, in our churches, **Christ alone** in Head and King. Here then, there will be no other authority in the churches, and no other

dominion than that of Him and His Word, ministers will be nothing else than His ministers, and therefore equal to one another, and the congregation will be recognized as the gathering of believers, functioning without any uncertainty through the administrations which the Lord granted as organs to His body, and precisely therefore not to be separated from those ministers, but subject to the Lord together with them, and therefore justified, indeed called, themselves to take action against all church government in order to uphold the **Lord's** cause.

This is not to say that, even in the golden age of our churches, all ministers of the churches were equally free of all hierarchical leaven. As far as that is concerned, each person has a little pope in his heart; and especially for ministers of the Word, through various circumstances, including exaggerated elevation on the part of the congregation, the temptation to seek one's own honour and power is greater than with others. Also in earlier days there were those who succumbed to this temptation in practice. But the churches should not be judged by these men. What they meant and wanted is clearly expressed in their confessions and church order; and when it was necessary, this was carried out in practice. **Never again a new hierarchy!** was the watch-word of the consistory at Amsterdam, when it (as may be read in its Acts) removed the name of one of its three preachers shortly after the Reformation, merely because it had been reliably informed that this man had earlier, in Germany, been favourably disposed towards accepting an ecclesiastical superintendency. **Never again a new hierarchy!** remained the watch-word when, a hundred years later, a Leiden professor (Frederik Spanheim) proved to be inclined towards the organization of the Episcopal Church in England, and was compelled, by the weight of the opposition against him, to remove, as much as possible, the suspicions which had arisen against him by means of a further declaration. Furthermore, it is this same serious warning which the most outstanding teachers of our churches repeatedly issued, and which

especially **Voetius** repeated constantly with great emphasis.

And truly, there was every reason to be so watchful and to warn so urgently. History showed, and experience had only recently taught, what the nature and effect of hierarchy is; that when it first arises, it seems so innocent and even commendable, but then gradually and by degrees develops into a power which is destructive to the church and hostile to the Lord; and how, when it has been established, that power indeed becomes an instrument of Satan, subjecting all things to itself with almost irresistible force, seemingly designed to oppress, bind, damage, and snuff out the life of the church.

Certainly, this was not the view that was given in the Romanist church; for this too is a mark of hierarchy, that it conceals its true nature as much as possible, trying to cover itself with a sanctimonious sham. When it was only being established, the notion was invented that it was instituted by the Lord Himself, and that it would make the church on earth correspond in some way with the church triumphant in heaven, where, according to the Romanist church, also God's angels are hierarchically ordered.

Christian *par excellence* its character was supposed to be, and heavenly its origin! Indeed, as if the fantasies conceived for this purpose had any basis in fact! And as if history did not teach the very opposite!

What is its true essence, regardless of the form in which hierarchy appears? In reality, it consists of nothing but the transferral of God's ordinance for the state to the church. Hierarchy replaces service, which the Lord has ordained for His church, by lordship, which has its proper place only in the State. By it old pagan Rome has achieved, once again, and in another form, its ideal. By it the world, which had insinuated its way into the church, had caused that church to conform with itself.

This **world-conformity** is its true principle. This explains why the world and its authorities, as long as their own sphere is not

challenged, are always prepared to ally themselves with the hierarchy. This explains why the hierarchy so often obtains support, also from those who are hostile to any faith, even from those who openly declare that they are anti-clerical. And this explains why one so often hears of 'ecclesiastical authorities', and why Scripture's injunctions concerning civil authorities are even applied to church boards, despite the complete absurdity of such an application.

Moreover, this explains the pernicious influence of all hierarchy. Through it, the church gradually obtains a worldly character; is incapacitated to its calling in the midst of the world; and may still be strong in terms of membership, but is robbed of all **spiritual** strength. Through it, the church is absorbed, as it were, in its highest officebearers; to such a degree, even, that it is considered to stand or to fall according to the measure that its highest dignitaries retain or lose the authority which they have arrogated to themselves. This has the result, moreover, that the believers gradually lose their sense of rights and obligations; that the congregation as a whole falls prey to sectarianism, to unbelief, or to spiritual dullness; and that the officebearers themselves, when their unlawful authority begins to disturb them, stop at nothing and take refuge in means which even a civil dictatorship could hardly allow itself.

Then, to crown all this, those who should be ministers, or servants, are made lords through this **hierarchy**; and thus the replacement of God's Word by human decrees naturally follows, and the denial of the **King** of the church as such, in order that men may take His place; the whole church is required to bow before His usurper; and such obedience finally becomes the only article of faith that may not be doubted, the only article of law which binds at all times and unconditionally.

It has sometimes been claimed that this indeed is a potential threat, but that if these things happen, not the system, but the people who

apply the system are to blame. Exactly because the power of a hierarchy is so great, some say, can it have such beneficial effects, as long as it is concentrated in the hands of those who would apply it properly. For is it not imaginable that it be used, they say, only for good: to preserve the order which God demands, to maintain God's Word, to punish sin, and so on?

Indeed, such a thing might be imagined, if one is willing, for the sake of those good results, to close one's eyes to the greater evil which is inextricably tied to a hierarchy. On the other hand it may also and truly be said that a hierarchical administration means the corruption of the church, even though angels of God descend from heaven in order to act as its rulers. Rather, perhaps: it is unimaginable that an angel would be willing to come down from heaven, where the will of God is done so perfectly that anything but its execution cannot be imagined, for no benefit can be expected outside of the way ordained by God. Only among people can it happen that they are blinded to this truth, and even sincerely consider that foolishness to be wisdom. The disastrous result is always, unless the eyes are opened on time, that the bad principle proves to be much mightier than all good intentions, so that the system does not become serviceable for good, but rather that the person who takes part in it is himself corrupted. No, man cannot reverse God's ordinances without harm, especially not where these ordinances concern the church, and have been given for the service of the Lord in the narrower sense. *Corruptio optimi pessima*. The higher the position, the deeper the fall. Fallen man remains a man; but a fallen angel becomes a devil. How deep must not the fall be if men who are called to be ministers of the Word no longer reckon with that Word, but replace it with their own; if those who are called to be **shepherds** of the flock begin to **rule** over it; if those who are called to be officers of the King of the church set themselves on His throne as sovereign!

The depth of this fall can be partly illustrated by the lack of

appreciation, on the part of those involved, for what they are actually doing. The hierarchical principle enables Satan to blind the eyes of those who accept it, more so than any other.

This was previously demonstrated with respect to the Roman hierarchy. But it can be as clearly seen in what has remained of it in the Protestant churches. And no less clearly can it be noticed where it has again made inroads in our own churches: in the introduction and maintenance of the organization imposed on the churches in 1816.

That this organization was hierarchical - no! that was not seen by the great majority of those who helped to design and introduce it; it was not seen by very many who defended it in later times; and even now, it is not seen by many who still support it, at least in practice. These all intended and still intend to bring about unity and good order and regularity, and so on. But at the same time, they do not have an eye for the true nature of what they promote. They are blinded, to use an expression of our fathers, to **"the beast's claw."**

For a hierarchical principle is most certainly behind the Synodical organization of 1816. True, it is proposed in a camouflaged way, using names and forms borrowed from the older presbyterial church order. There are also many things which it has adopted from former times. It has been laid down in a germinal state, and has certainly not been carried through in all its consequences. In appearance, also, it has been forced somewhat to retreat, since the principle of revolution has been simultaneously adopted. But in essence, however, its correspondence in the ways and means of hierarchy has been completely retained. In Rome, too, the hierarchy was initially quite satisfied with a modest little corner. In Rome, too, it developed very slowly and always in continuity with previous forms. In Rome, too, it colluded with other principles whenever there seemed to be some indication of receiving support in doing so. Germ, shoot, or tree, the difference is only a matter of time: the nature of these three is entirely identical.

Is not this the mark of hierarchy, that ecclesiastical officebearers act in the churches with a kind of spiritual haughtiness, not as servants of Christ, but as church authorities, who impose upon and command their subordinates as such; who institute an order of ranks among each other, so that some are given the management of several churches together, each in complete dependence on yet other persons, of whom the highest rank controls all churches with unrestricted power; that declarations and decisions of those highest rulers must be obeyed unconditionally, which necessarily robs God's Word of its complete authority; and that in the face of all this the congregation itself has no means of defense, but is powerless, without its own will, and without rights in the hands of that compelling power.

If this is the mark of hierarchy, who could deny that it was in fact renewed by the organization of 1816; that it was laid down as a leaven which since that time has been effective? Has not the last year made this so obvious that even the blind are able to perceive it?

Yes, the time that excuses might still be made is past. And it is impossible to convince the congregation that the situation was as bad, or perhaps even worse, before 1816.

It is quite true that previously all preachers were members of the classical assembly; however, and this is the crucial point here, they did not come there in their personal capacity, but as delegates of the churches, never without credentials, and often with instructions or a mandate.

Also previously, larger ecclesiastical gatherings had more preachers than elders; however, and this is the crucial point here, the **consistories** themselves, the only **permanent bodies**, had the actual ecclesiastical power; and the elder could not complain in truth that his hands were tied there.

Also previously classes and synods had committees and deputies; however, and this is the crucial point here, it was never tolerated that

these acted as boards of administration; they were simply to carry out what the **churches** had instructed them to do, with no general or particular power of administration; this remained with the churches themselves, in every way.

For this reason there was no order of rank in the relationship between Consistory, classis, and synod. The broader assembly certainly had some voice with respect to the minor assemblies; however, and this is the crucial point here, the authority implied was in no way unlimited and absolute, but was most explicitly bound to God's Word; and was, moreover, not founded in higher status, but only in greater numbers: with respect to status, it was explicitly stated that the consistory was above the classis, and the classis above the synod.

And finally, if some should claim that now at last the congregation has been granted its proper rights and freedoms, because the right to vote has been made general, this loses sight of the one fact that it is all a matter of appearance, and that everything serves the interests only of the hierarchy. This could not happen before the real congregation had become a minority, as a result of the longstanding protection of liberal teaching. Although here and there the true congregation might be in the majority, this would not help; indeed, even if it were so everywhere, the congregation is bound to preachers who, by their own education and candidates' formula are themselves influenced and bound; and in all sorts of ways, matters have been so arranged that all the congregations together would still be powerless with respect to the preachers. The right to vote, moreover, always remains dependent on those in power themselves; not only because it can be withdrawn quite legally, but also because it can be set aside by way of an ecclesiastical coup d'état: only last year events have demonstrated this in what was accomplished without obstruction in the church of Amsterdam.

If only our churches would begin to see this. If only a general sense and acknowledgment would develop that such a state of affairs is

quite pernicious! If only each believer would be truly offended that our King is challenged in His royal position by His own ministers; that His authority and His Word no longer rules in His own Kingdom; that His body, in so far as that depends on people, is maltreated, mutilated, and murdered.

Yes! it is the synodical hierarchy which is guilty of this abomination. But you too, members all of those churches still bound to that hierarchy, you too are responsible for what is happening: it is done in your name.

And what your calling is with respect to this? Oh! if God has opened your eyes, you really need no further indication. Then you can no longer be **silent bystanders**. Deeply humbled because of your own unfaithfulness and guilt, you cannot make your peace with that sin. Conscience demands that you break with it, in the first place by a public testimony; and wholeheartedly you will adopt the declaration proposed in the First Resolution.

If this is done sincerely, there is a force there which can overcome even the most powerful hierarchy. The latter can stand, if need be, against all the powers of the world; but it is completely powerless before a congregation which judges it in the Name of the Lord.

The judgment stands, because it has already been pronounced by the Lord. That sentence has effect, because He Himself carries it out. That testimony is victorious, because it rests upon His own testimony.

Thus then you who make mention of the LORD, **do not keep silent!**

Appendix

The First Resolution

The brothers of Reformed confession, having come together here before the face of the Lord, out of various Dutch Reformed Churches, agreeing wholeheartedly, on the basis of the Word of God, with the confession which our churches have made, in opposition to Rome, concerning church government, and therefore bound in conscience to maintain that confession presently over against manifest deviation:

testify and declare that the Synodical Hierarchy, imposed upon our churches in 1816, has proven to be incompatible with the recognition of Jesus Christ as the church's Head and King, and because of its inherent principle irresistibly compels the replacement of the gathering of the believers and their seed, which is what the church should be, by a completely foreign admixture; that the authority of God's Word is being replaced by arbitrariness and the authority of human decrees; and that the royal reign of the Son of God is being driven back by an administrative tyranny which is incompatible with it.