

The Scriptural Principles of Church Polity

Mr. J. van Dalen

Introduction

The writer has asked me to write a short word of introduction to his tract, and I am happy to comply -- not out of politeness, but out of love.

Reading this document was truly a pleasure, since in my opinion, it is Scriptural and relevant, shows the writer's discretion, and is clear and succinct. The greatest achievement of the writer, however, is that he does not construct theories or engage in speculation, and does not appeal to ecclesiastical practice as if that would be normative for the church's actions; rather, from beginning to end, he allows Scripture to be his *magistra et norma et iudex*, as it used to be said: teacher, norm, and judge. Everywhere behind the Church Order he sees the Word of the Lord, and constantly he returns to that single, bountiful source.

This tract is relevant, since it speaks a word at the right time, and is of significance for questions which are presently being debated. It is not without reason that the writer is on guard against the constantly erupting power of hierarchy in Christ's church, as is also evident in our day; the writer resists this power with the weapons which the Word provides, and therefore does so in the only effective way.

Furthermore, one is struck again and again by the ability of the author to distinguish clearly: for instance with respect to the boundaries of the special office, the significance of the apostolic conference of Acts 15 (and in relation to the latter, the place of the church at Jerusalem at

the time of the apostles), the character of the broader assembly with the distinction of office and delegation, the equality of treatment in matters of discipline (advice of classis), and so on.

The presentation is never confused; the writer calmly approaches his goal, following an unwavering line, setting out matters so clearly that even the simplest member of the congregation can follow him. We consider it important that this study is the work of someone who does not belong to the guild of scholarly theologians. A new sign that the church has woken up, that it knows its calling and has become a fellow-combatant in the great events of our times.

May the Lord's blessing rest upon this publication, making it serviceable for the upbuilding of the Body of Christ.

Prof. P. Deddens

Preface

The origins of this tract are in the questions which have disturbed the life of our Reformed churches in the last few years, especially those regarding church polity. It has become evident that ideas have arisen among us which deviate radically from the principles of church polity as they were maintained, for instance, during the time of the Doleantie, and confessed, in the footsteps of our fathers, to be Scriptural. It cannot be denied that even a rudimentary knowledge of these principles was completely lost, not only among ordinary church members, but even among their leaders. Church-political questions were not solved in the first place by the principles of God's Word, but almost exclusively by analogous cases from the past, or by ecclesiastical practice.

The Saviour's word "You are not to be called rabbi...neither be called masters, for you have one master, the Christ," (Matthew 23:8, 10) was no longer the basic concept out of which all ecclesiastical affairs were conducted.

Although this brochure originated in a time of struggle, it is not intended to be polemical. It intends only to bring out the Scriptural principles of our church polity, and to have them accepted among us once more. Although it was written at first only to provide information for those within our own circle, we have been persuaded by requests from various quarters to publish this exposition.

Our thanks go to Prof. Dr. S. Greijdanus, who was so good as to read through the original manuscript and give a number of valuable suggestions, and to Prof. P. Deddens, who was willing to write a word of introduction, and also offered several valuable suggestions, which were gratefully followed.

May the King of the church bless this simple labour, and make it work for the wellbeing of His church and the glory of His Name.

The Scriptural Principles of Church Polity

Introduction

The Christian church begins its Confession of Faith with these words: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth." Of this almighty Creator, it also confesses not only that He has created everything, but also that He still upholds and governs all these created things by His eternal counsel and providence, Heidelberg Catechism, question 26.

God the Almighty is sovereign Lord of heaven and earth. He rules over all, He is the highest Lord, also in His church. His kingdom has dominion over all! This almighty God exercises this government through His Son, Jesus Christ, to whom He has given all authority in heaven and on earth, Matthew 28:18; who ascended into heaven to manifest Himself there as Head of His church, through whom the Father governs all things, Heidelberg Catechism, question 50.

God has made Him the head over all things for His church, Ephesians 1:22, and has anointed Him with the Holy Spirit to be our chief Prophet and Teacher, our only High Priest, and our eternal King, Heidelberg Catechism, question 31.

God the Father has put all things in subjection under Christ's feet, for He (namely Christ) must reign until He has destroyed every rule and every authority and power. He must break down all the devil's violence, and return to the Father the creation which had fallen away from God. Having completed this task, He will deliver the kingdom to God the Father and the Son Himself will be subjected to Him who put all things under Him, that God may be everything to everyone, 1 Corinthians 15:24-28. The entire creation will then be led back to its original purpose and God will be all in all.

It is evident from all this that God, as the highest Sovereign, has

appointed the Christ as His Officebearer and has laid on His shoulders the task of carrying out the sovereign counsel of God, having endowed Him thereto with prophetic, priestly, and royal authority. By virtue of that God-given office, Christ is the Head of His church. The government of that church has been assigned to Him. How does He exercise the government of His church? Lord's Day 12 of the Heidelberg Catechism tells us that Christ has been anointed by God to be our eternal King, who governs us by His Word and Spirit.

Christ, then, governs us by His Word and Spirit. Through and in that Word He comes to us personally with His demands and promises; and by His Spirit He convinces us, making us accede to those demands and accept those promises in faith. On the one hand, Christ governs His congregation **immediately**, by working directly in the hearts of His believers by His Word and Spirit. On the other hand, there is also a **mediate** government of Christ, in which He employs people, who become instruments in His hand.

In the first place, He employs His believers, each of them individually. They are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that they may declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called them out of darkness into His marvellous light, 1 Peter 2:9. There is no voiceless laity, but they are endowed with the three-fold office of prophet, priest, and king. In this three-fold office, Christ has laid the task which He received from His Father upon the believers: they have become His fellow-labourers. By virtue of this office of all believers, they also have the task as kings to fight against sin and unrighteousness, as priests, to dedicate themselves and all that they have to God, and as prophets to proclaim God's virtues.

The congregation of Christ is a congregation of officebearers, of anointed prophets, priests, and kings. It is the task of the whole congregation, and of each believer in particular, to build one another up in the faith, to take heed to one another, admonishing and showing

mercy to one another. Thus, as God's fellow-workers, the members will put that three-fold office into practice. In this way, Christ rules His church through His church.

The congregation of Christ is a **living** congregation, forming an organic whole, in which the members are bound to Christ their Head and to each other by faith. Together, they form one mystical body, of which Christ is the Head; and they manifest this mutual connection in an ecclesiastical communion, the visible church.

This ecclesiastical communion, this church institute, just like any other human community, needs instruments which it may use, by which it expresses itself, which give it an address, and which provide leadership to its existence.

It has pleased Christ to grant His church, in its manifestation as an institution, such instruments in the offices, which He Himself has appointed in His church beside the office of all believers. His (that is, Christ's) gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, Ephesians 4:11. These special offices were instituted by Christ in His church for the equipment of the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ, Ephesians 4:12.

These special offices, of which Ephesians 4:11-12 names only a few, belong exclusively to the **instituted** church. For if at a certain place there are believers, but no church has yet been instituted, these believers do share in the **general** office, but there is, as yet, no **special** office. Not until these believers, by virtue of their office, manifest their mutual bond in Christ by forming an ecclesiastical communion, is there room for the special office. The special office, therefore, comes into being mediately, through the activity of the office of believers: Christ calls to the special office, by means of the office of believers, who are His fellow-workers in this matter. According to the *Forms* for the ordination of ministers, elders and deacons, officebearers are called to their holy service by God

Himself, through His congregation. Also in this way Christ governs His church through His church. God calls, through His congregation.

As we continue to speak of the government of the church, we do not mean the government which Christ exercises directly in the hearts of believers through His Word and Spirit; nor do we mean the government which He exercises by means of the office of all believers, but exclusively that government which He exercises in the instituted church by means of the special offices. Church polity is that unified whole of rules of law which are in force in the instituted church, in its outward manifestation as the body of Christ.

These rules of law which are in force in the church have not been codified in the Scriptures; they are not a book of laws which we need only consult to discover what course of action to take in a particular instance. Scripture does contain the principles from which the rules are derived. These principles must be searched out and brought to bear on the practice of church life, in order that all actions may be according to the principles given in God's Word.

Articles 27-32 of our Belgic Confession express these principles. In what follows, that which has been given in Scripture and more explicitly formulated in the Belgic Confession will be brought forward; at the same time, it will be shown, sometimes by examples, how these principles should be realized in church life.

The local church

Christ has given a share of the authority with which He was endowed by the Father to His followers. In Matthew 16:19 Christ says to Peter, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." In Matthew 18:18 we read that this same authority to bind and loose is given to all the apostles, and in

them to the whole church (verse 17). And in John 20:23, Jesus says to His disciples, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

These texts are speaking of authority, and Christ Himself quite explicitly invests His apostles with the authority to bind and to loose, to open and to close the kingdom of heaven. Since it has an exclusively serving character, this authority is often called the power of the keys, in distinction from the power of the magistrates' sword, which has a coercive character.

The keys of the kingdom of heaven are further distinguished in Lord's Day 31 of the Heidelberg Catechism: on the one hand, there is the preaching of the holy gospel, and on the other church discipline or exclusion from the Christian congregation. By both of these keys, the kingdom of heaven is opened to believers and closed to unbelievers. Articles 30, 31, and 32 of the Belgic Confession speak in the same way when they deal with the government, the officers, and the order and discipline of the church. There should be ministers, elders, and deacons to preserve the true religion, to discipline and restrain evil men in a spiritual way, and to help and comfort the poor and all the afflicted (Article 30); these officebearers should be held in special esteem because of their work (Article 31), which means that everyone should submit to their authority; and that, to maintain good order in the church of the Lord, discipline and excommunication ought to be exercised in agreement with the Word of God (Article 32).

In the passages referred to, Holy Scripture and the confessions teach most clearly that Christ has instituted in His church the teaching, ruling, and disciplining office, exercised on the one hand by the preaching of the Word, and on the other, by excommunication and exclusion from the Christian congregation.

The passages from Scripture show that Christ invested His apostles directly with the power of the keys. He is the source of this

authority. He possesses it in the original sense and invests it in the apostles. From this root of apostolic power of the keys the authority to teach and discipline branches out in subsequent officebearers, pastors and teachers and elders.¹ The apostles were invested with an extraordinary and special office. They were personally instructed by Christ, and endowed in a special way with the Holy Spirit. They were given extraordinary powers: they had to function as His witnesses, to plant the church in this world, and to guide it with their teachings. They were necessary at that extraordinary period when the congregation was established on earth. As Ephesians 2:20 says, it was “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets.”

In the apostles all offices were combined; but as the congregation expanded, fulfilling all these offices as individuals soon proved to be too much, and, under the guidance of the apostles the office of deacon was instituted, Acts 6:1-6. The apostles reserved to themselves the administration of the Word and the ministry of prayer; the seven were commissioned to the duty of serving tables.

The office of elder soon appeared in addition to that of deacon. Its institution is not described, but elders are already mentioned in Acts 11:30, where they take receipt of donations, and in Acts 14:23, where it is said that Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in the congregations they had founded. The offices of elder and deacon were soon established in all the congregations, Acts 14:23, 20:28, Ephesians 4:11, Philippians 1:1. The requirements for elders and deacons are indicated by Paul in the letters to Timothy and Titus. The elders of the apostolic age are further distinguished: there are those who rule and others who labour in Word and doctrine.

¹ J. Jansen, *De leertucht over de leden der kerk* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1936),

These are the offices which, under the leadership of the apostles, become permanent in the life of the congregation: those of elder (teaching and ruling) and deacon. The ordinary offices of **pastors and teachers, elders, and deacons** now replace the **extraordinary** offices. The administration of the Word and the ministry of prayer and the government of the church are now exercised by the elders, while the deacons perform the ministry of mercy.

With the transition from the extraordinary office to the ordinary, the exercise of the power of the keys is also transferred from the apostles to the elders. From Christ they have received the office, the task and the special assignment to teach the congregation, to govern it, and to exercise discipline over it; to this end they have been endowed by Him with special authority. The congregation is obliged to respect their authority, 1 Thessalonians 5:12, to obey them and to submit to them: "for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account," Hebrews 13:17.

Now when we speak of authority in Christ's church, we need to take the nature of that authority into account. We must note that the officebearers in the church of Jesus Christ do not have one bit of personal authority. They are to be nothing more than instruments of the one who sends them. "We beseech you on behalf of Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:20). His Word alone has power and authority. Only insofar as the officebearers bring that Word, and act according to that Word, do their words and actions have authority. Only in that case do they come with the authority of God's Word. If they act contrary to that Word, or if they insist on their own opinions not based on that Word, their actions and words have no authority at all. They do not have any coercive power, only a serving power. Not the sword, but the key is symbol of their authority. With that Word they open and close the kingdom of heaven. Their power is to be the power of the Word. Administering that Word is their task, learning it, governing with it and exercising discipline

with it. Their office, then, is entirely spiritual, and entirely of a serving character.

This does not mean to say that all actions and regulations performed and made by officebearers must be literally prescribed in Scripture. There will also be measures for order and management which are necessary for the wellbeing of the church. To name a few: the regulations of the services, the arrangements for seating, the management of church property, and so on. The regulation of such matters is the responsibility of the officebearers, and also in these things the congregation is to be obedient to its officebearers.

However, the management of these matters does not determine the nature of the office. The office has been granted by Christ for the perfecting of the saints, to equip them for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, Ephesians 4:12. Thus it is spiritual in nature and extent. Also those measures for order and management should be aimed at perfecting and building up the congregation.

What then is the extent of this office granted by Christ? Is it universal, or is it local? Here a difference should be noted between the office of the apostles and that of the subsequent officebearers. The apostles had an extraordinary office. They were the ones who laid the foundations of the church. Their activities in their office extended over the whole church, over all the congregations.

This is quite clear from the letters which they write to the churches. They address all the congregations with apostolic authority. John, repeating Christ's words in the book of Revelation, even addresses seven churches at once. This is not so with respect to the pastors and teachers, elders and deacons whom we meet subsequently. We do read of the elders of Jerusalem, of Ephesus, and so on. Paul commands Titus to appoint elders in every town, Titus 1:5. The apostolic office was universal; it was necessary to lay the foundations of the church, and therefore it was also extraordinary and temporary.

With the departure of the apostles their office also ceased; it was replaced by the regular office of pastor and teacher, of elder and of deacon. These are bound to a particular place. Nowhere in Scripture do we read that the elders of Ephesus, for instance, had anything to say over the church of Antioch. Nor that the deacons of Jerusalem, for instance, could manage the financial resources of the church at Ephesus, or anywhere else. They did not have authority to exercise the office they had received in any congregation other than the one in which they had been given a place by Christ. In another congregation other officebearers were called by Christ to govern. In a particular congregation Christ called particular persons to a particular office. To that particular place they were bound, and nowhere else. Their official capacity did not extend beyond their own congregation.

In the first years of the Christian church we observe through the preaching of the apostles and evangelists, the formation of individual churches in diverse places, each with its own independent status and its own officebearers to govern it. The churches are instituted by the apostles and evangelists, but as soon as the institution is a fact, and as soon as a group of believers has been formed, elders are appointed, chosen by the congregation by virtue of the office of all believers, with the guidance of the apostles and evangelists, Acts 14:23, Titus 1:5. The congregation elected their officebearers and these were confirmed in their office by the apostles and evangelists.

In this way, according to Scripture, the first Christian churches came into existence, each one independent from the others. There was not one great world church, nor a collection of separate national churches, but separate local churches were instituted.

Each of these churches is directly under the jurisdiction of Christ its head; and He governs it by means of the instruments, the offices, instituted by Himself. No one and nothing may intrude between these two. The churches are independent with respect to each other. Not one

of the churches has any say over any other church.

In emphasizing the independence of the local churches, do we mean to say that the local churches are entirely separated from each other, or that they have nothing to do with each other, or that they do not need each other? The first Christian congregations show us something quite different! The Thessalonians demonstrate their love for all the brethren throughout Macedonia, 1 Thessalonians 4:10. The congregation in Jerusalem is served by all the other churches in the support of its poor, Romans 15:25, 26. The congregations are urged to pass the letters which they have received on to other churches, Colossians 4:16, 1 Thessalonians 5:27. They rejoice at each others' growth and wellbeing, Acts 15:3; and greet each other, 2 John 1:13, 3 John 1:15, Romans 16:16.

According to these passages of Scripture, there is mutual contact between the congregations, and they offer each other spiritual and material assistance and mutual support. And this leads us to a closer observation of this mutual contact, to the bond of churches.

The bond of churches

a. The calling to form a bond of churches

Holy Scripture does not include a direct command to the local churches to live together in some form of organised relationship. In Christ their Head they are already bound together through one faith, one hope, one baptism, and they are led by one Spirit.

We confess one holy, catholic, Christian church, the communion of saints. A church which, according to Article 27 of the Belgic Confession, is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world; however, joined and united with heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith. This confession is not only to be preached,

but also to be practised. We are called to manifest that one, holy and catholic church as much as possible.

Christ prayed for this in the high-priestly prayer, John 17: "Holy Father, keep them in Thy name, which Thou hast given Me, that they may be one, even as we are one", verse 11. "Sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth", verse 17. The church is one, also in the confession of the truth. "As Thou didst send Me into the world, so I have sent them into the world", verse 18. Here Christ prays for His church, which He sends out into the world as missionary church. "I pray...not for these only, but also for those who believe in Me through their word", verse 20, "that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in us." Here Christ prays for the unity of the church. He prays in the first place for His immediate followers, but also for those who will believe in Him through their word; that is, the churches which come into existence by their preaching. The churches are called and obliged to practice the unity which Christ has obtained for them from the Father by His prayer, to display it "...so that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me", verse 21.

The unity of our shared humanity, broken by sin, has now been restored in principle through Christ. The church is to show this to the world, so that it may believe in Christ as the One sent by God to restore the unity that was broken. A Christian who continues to stand alone, and a church which remains separate detracts from that unity, and falls short in practising and revealing the unity which Christ has commanded and which He has obtained for us in prayer. The formation of a bond of churches, the search for unity with other churches, must be seen as a calling to the churches from Christ Himself.

Each of the churches, every congregation individually with Christ as its Head, placed under the officebearers He has called, now has the calling together with other churches to manifest the unity of the church, to seek each other out, in order to maintain the unity of the true faith

together, to serve one another with gifts of hand, heart and head, to admonish and build one another up, and thus to serve the perfection of the one, holy, catholic, Christian church.

To that end, the churches come together in a bond of churches. This bond of churches is federative; it is a cooperative bond of churches, all of which retain their independence. This cooperation is entirely voluntary. None of the churches can be compelled to this cooperation by the others. On the other hand, Christ does not allow the churches the right to neglect these things: they are called to this cooperation.

b. The order in the bond of churches

If a group of churches is to live together in one federation, there will have to be a certain order, a form of organization. The order which is to be maintained in each local church has been revealed, at least in principle, in the Word of God: it concerns such things as the regulation of official functions, the assemblies, the supervision of doctrine and sacraments, and church discipline. The regulation of official functions has been dealt with above, and we may refer to such passages of Scripture as Matthew 28:18-20, John 20:21, 2 Corinthians 5:20, 1 Corinthians 12:28, Ephesians 4:11-13, Titus 1:5, and so on.

The assemblies of the congregation are discussed in Acts 1:13-26, 3:46, 4:31, 12:26, 14:27, 20:7, 1 Corinthians 12:18, Hebrews 10:25; the supervision of doctrine and sacraments in Acts 20:28-31, Galatians 1:8, 9; church discipline in Matthew 16:19, 18:15-17, Romans 16:17, 1 Corinthians 5:3-5, 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14, Titus 3:10, and so on.

The order which will prevail in the bond of churches may not detract from this Scriptural regulation of the order in the local churches; on the contrary, it must entirely agree with this order, and it must promote and serve this order. It must be remembered that the purpose of

the bond of churches is that the churches help and upbuild each other, promote each other's wellbeing, and thus serve the perfection of the one, holy, catholic, Christian church. This catholic church is perfected by the perfection of its parts, which together form the great whole of the visible church. Just as the instituted churches exist for the perfection of the saints, so also the bond of churches exists for the perfection of the churches.

c. Authority in the bond of churches

The question now arises whether in such a bond of churches there is an authoritative official body, appointed by Christ as the consistory is appointed for the local churches. In our opinion Scripture nowhere speaks of such a body, and gives no example of one that we should then follow. There are indications of the opposite, in fact. One very strong indication in that direction, to my mind, is the fact that the apostles address their letters to local churches individually; as also, in the final book of the Bible, the exalted King of the church does not address the churches as a whole, but each of the churches individually. Philadelphia, Smyrna, Laodicea, and the other churches receive their own admonitions, commands, and promises. He governs them directly, and not by way of a so-called major assembly.

This, as well as the lack of any explicit direction or indication to do so, convincingly demonstrates that the exalted Christ does not wish to see any power intruding between Himself and the local church. The same can be deduced from Matthew 23:8 and 1 Corinthians 4:1-4. No one is to exercise any authority in the church without having been commanded by Christ to do so. Christ says to Pilate, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above." And Paul says in Romans 13, "...there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God." This does not imply that every

authority which sets itself up as such has been instituted by God; but rather, that every authority which is exercised must rest upon divine ordinance, upon His institution which must be given from above.

To exercise authority, whether this relates to doctrine, government, or discipline, divine appointment is necessary; and this cannot be assigned to the major assemblies as we know them in a bond of churches living under the Church Order of Dort.

Now there are many who believe that Scripture gives an example in Acts 15 of an assembly of two churches, namely Jerusalem and Antioch, which makes binding decisions, and which may be seen as a synod in principle. This meeting is seen as a example given by God to the churches and as a model to follow in order to regulate church life. The fact that this assembly took decisions which are binding upon the whole church is taken to imply that later church assemblies which are held according to that model also have the authority to impose binding decisions upon the churches. In principle, then, they hold that here we have the authority of major assemblies with respect to doctrine, government, and discipline.

The history is well known. Several brothers had arrived from Judea in the congregation at Antioch, teaching that Christians who had been converted from heathenism had to be circumcised and had to maintain the ceremonial laws of Moses if they wished to be saved. Paul and Barnabas had opposed this teaching. When great dissension had resulted, the congregation decided to send Paul and Barnabas with several others to discuss the matter with the apostles and elders at Jerusalem.

So, the church at Antioch sends delegates to the church at Jerusalem with specific mandates. These delegates conferred with the apostles and elders there and a binding decision was taken, which restricted itself to this alone: abstention from what was sacrificed to idols, from blood, from what was strangled, and from unchastity. This

was a doctrinal decision which was not only imposed upon Antioch, but upon all the Gentile congregations (see Acts 16:4). Manifestly, it is said, the same as what occurs at our ecclesiastical assemblies! Was that not a synod, in principle?

Let us be careful in our evaluation and calmly examine the facts as recorded in Scripture. In the first place, it should be noted that this incident occurred at a time when Scripture, specifically the New Testament, was not yet completed. The prophetic word, which is indeed firm, had been brought to a close in the Old Testament. The apostolic word, as put into writing by apostles and evangelists, and upon which also the church is founded, was still in the process of becoming. The apostles and the congregation at Jerusalem were at this time still the bearers of the 'not yet written' Word. Their written testimony was not yet public among the congregations, or public only in part. The churches of that time were still without the full enlightenment of the Word of God as we now possess it. This alone makes any comparison between ecclesiastical acts of that time and those of later periods suspect. The source from which the churches were to draw their sustenance was not yet completely available. Let us look at Acts 15 a little closer in that light.

Of the many teachers in the congregation of Antioch, as named in Acts 13, Barnabas and Paul are set apart, by a special instruction from the Holy Spirit, to go to the Gentiles. These men complete their first missionary journey and return to Antioch, Acts 14. After their return, a great commotion occurs in the congregation. Some who had come down from Judea taught the brethren that if they were not circumcised and did not maintain the ceremonial laws of Moses, they could not be saved. Paul and Barnabas strenuously resist this teaching. A bitter conflict ensues. When Paul and Barnabas cannot come to an agreement with the brothers from Judea, the congregation does what is only to be expected: they send a delegation to the apostles and elders at Jerusalem to inquire

about the facts of the matter.

What else could they do? It was from Jerusalem that the gospel had come to them. That is where the bearers of God's Word were, the surviving witnesses of the Christ, those who had received the Word of truth from His own mouth. Where there was difference of opinion, there was nothing else to do but go to the apostles and elders at Jerusalem. They were the bearers of the yet unwritten Word which would later become the possession of each particular congregation in the written canon of the New Testament. At that later time they themselves would have the source from which to draw what they needed. At present, however, they could not yet do so. At this time they still had to go to Jerusalem. Scripture had not yet been completed. Jerusalem and the apostolate had to supplement what was still lacking in the written Word. They had received the Word of God from the missionary church of Jerusalem, first by means of those who had been scattered by persecution, and then by means of Paul and Barnabas.

Still later other brothers come, also from the church at Jerusalem (see Acts 15:24), teaching circumcision and the maintenance of the ceremonial law. Opinions are divided. Both views originate in Jerusalem. Who is to be believed? Which view is correct? It is almost self-evident that the judgment of the church at Jerusalem is requested, the church from which the gospel had come to Antioch. Since the messengers are not unanimous, the ones who sent them, in this case the congregation of Jerusalem, must be asked what is the correct message.

Do the delegates from Antioch go to Jerusalem to convene a synod there? No, they go to Jerusalem to learn from the congregation there, as bearer of the evangelical truth, which of the competing views is the right one, and which one reflects Christ's intention. The church at Antioch does not yet have the complete, written Word. It has not yet been fully weaned from its mother, Jerusalem. That would be impossible. Not until it had the complete, written Word as its

nourishment would it be able to let its mother go.

The image of Jerusalem as mother congregation is a beautiful one. It is not beautiful if we suggest that, as mother, it would rule over other churches. But it is if we see Jerusalem as the first Christian congregation, and so as the mother of all the other churches. All these others have their origin in her. Just as a mother feeds her children with the milk which she has with her, so the congregation of Jerusalem, under the leadership of the apostles, was the bearer of God's Word in the early days of the Christian church, at a time when the Word of God had not yet been completed, and so she made this Word known to the world. With it she nourished the children she had raised, the newly instituted congregations. Acts 15 is the unmistakable proof of this.

The delegates from Antioch went to Jerusalem to learn God's Word there, and they were not disappointed. For they received the message which it had seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to the apostles and elders to give them. The decision of the apostles and elders was declared to them as the Word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit, as all of God's Word is. As such, this decision was binding, not only for Antioch, but also for other congregations (see Acts 16:4).

That the meeting of apostles and elders at Jerusalem was not a synod as we know the term is also evident from what follows. There were congregations at other places besides Antioch, in Syria, Cilicia, and Asia Minor, as Acts 16:4 shows. We read that they went on their way through the cities, and delivered to them for observance the **decisions** which had been reached by the **apostles and elders** who were at Jerusalem.

There is no evidence that these other congregations were represented at the meeting in Jerusalem. Yet the decisions of this meeting are delivered to them for observance. This would suggest that the two largest churches, Jerusalem and Antioch, convene a synod together, unknown to the other churches, and that the decisions were imposed

upon those others with binding authority. It would mean two churches lording it over all the others. This is the logical conclusion of considering the meeting in Jerusalem as in principle a synod.

Moreover, this would also conflict with the words of Acts 16:4, which says that they delivered to them for observance the decisions which had been reached by the **apostles and elders**. The delegates from Antioch are not even mentioned. It seems they are excluded, which would be impossible if they had been members of a synod.

The same is evident from Acts 15:22-25. It reads: "Then it pleased the apostles and the elders, **with the whole church**, to send chosen men from their company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, and write this letter by them, 'The **apostles, the elders, and the brethren**, to the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings. Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, 'You must be circumcised and keep the law' - to whom we gave no such commandment - it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord..." There is explicit mention of **the apostles and the elders**, with the whole church, verse 22, and **the apostles, the elders, and the brethren**, verse 23; these are the brethren of Jerusalem, as distinct from the brethren who are of the Gentiles.

From all this Scriptural data it is clear that the doctrinal differences which had arisen in Antioch were not resolved by a synod-in-principle, but by the congregation at Jerusalem, as temporary bearer of the evangelical New Testament Word, under the leadership of the apostles and by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

A bond of churches as we know it today, and a decision of the churches together, are not in view in all of this; to see in this apostolic convention at Jerusalem a major assembly as we know it today is to do

injustice to Scripture.² We consider it illegitimate to derive doctrinal, ruling, and disciplinary authority for our present major assemblies from the premise of binding decisions made by this meeting at Jerusalem. As far as we can see, Scripture does not give a single example of a major assembly as we know it today under the Church Order of Dort.

We have argued previously that divine commission is required in order to exercise authority in the church of the Lord; that such authority must come from above. We saw that in the local congregation this was so with respect to the officebearers who have been endued with authority by Christ. No such body instituted by Christ is to be found in the bond of churches.

It should be noted that those who promote the doctrinal, ruling, and disciplinary authority of major assemblies do not thereby claim that

² After I had written these lines, my attention was drawn to a comment by Dr. A. Kuyper in *Anti-Revolutionaire Staatskunde*, which shows remarkable affinity to what I had written. Dr. Kuyper says, "It can hardly be said that the Jerusalem Convention had any synodical character at all. An ecclesiastical assembly is synodical only if it is composed of delegates from many churches, and that was not the case here at all. At the Convent in Jerusalem, there were delegates from only one church, not two. Not even from Antioch. There is not the slightest suggestion of deputation. Paul and Barnabas are not included as enfranchised members; rather, they only convey the inquiry and provide clarification by explaining how the question had come up. Advice is given, not by Paul, but only by Peter and James. And when a decision is to be reached and the answer formulated, there is no vote by delegates of the many churches, but the apostles, in virtue of their apostolic authority, as heads in the church at Jerusalem, and with the cooperation with the elders and the brethren of that one church, resolve the matter. The decision, therefore, refers only to *the Apostles and the church of Jerusalem*. These know that they are organs of the Holy Spirit, and therefore they can write, '... it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...' ; therefore, also, they bring their authority to bear on the other churches." (*Anti Revolutionaire Staatskunde*, Chapter 15, #46, 47). Compare the expression which I have italicized above with my characterization of the church at Jerusalem as temporary bearer of the evangelical New Testament Word.

Christ Himself directly gave such authority to these assemblies. This authority is not independent, inherent authority, they acknowledge, but one which is **delegated**, **derived** from that given directly to the local church. It is an authority which, by delegation, is **brought together** in the major assemblies. This is sometimes referred to as a cumulative authority, one which does not take away from the authority of the local churches, but leaves it inviolate. This argument, which derives from Voetius runs as follows: just as the authority of ten men is of a higher degree than that of one, of all apostles together greater than that of each independently, and of all members of consistory together than of each member alone, similarly, the authority of ten churches is of a higher degree than that of one church. In the major assemblies, there is an accumulation of the authority which the minor assemblies bring together.

This thought needs further investigation. In the first place, we should examine the authority which Christ has granted to the officebearers of the local congregation. As we have seen, that authority does not extend beyond the church in which they received their office. In **other** churches, Christ has called **other** officebearers to govern. An officebearer in a local church has no calling to exercise authority in another church. Expressed in figures, his official authority in an other congregation is equal to zero. Should one then, bring not merely ten (as Voetius suggests), but one hundred or more of those officebearers together, even those one hundred or more officebearers together have not the least authority in other churches, for the simple reason that one hundred times zero equals zero, as Prof. Greijdanus pointed out.

The consistory is quite different. Each of its members has received ruling authority from Christ in this particular congregation. The authority which they individually hold, one might say, does indeed accumulate when they come together as consistory. However, where there is no authority, it cannot accumulate. The idea of a derived, a delegated, a cumulative authority over the churches, brought together in

major assemblies, should be rejected; a consistory, which has no authority over other churches, cannot delegate such authority by way of its representatives to a major assembly. Delegation of its competence is impossible, in this instance, for the consistory has no competence to exercise authority over other churches. What it does not have, it cannot hand on through its delegates.

The whole idea that major assemblies should be endowed by Christ with doctrinal, ruling, or disciplinary authority, that is to say that among other things, they too have the authority of excommunication or Christian censure, should be rejected as unscriptural.

The character of major assemblies

The churches live together in a bond or federation. To exercise that bond fully, the entire consistory of every congregation included in the federation would really have to come together. Each of these consistories would then represent its own church. Such assemblies of churches have a character of service: they assist one another. Each consistory serves the interest of its own church, obtains the assistance of the other churches, and in turn assists them. At the official level, they are exercising their rule over their own church, and in doing so, they are providing help to the other churches. With respect to these other churches they have no capacity to rule at this meeting; all they do is offer them assistance. Insofar as they work for the interests of their own church, they are working officially, since this service is part of their task and office; insofar as they provide assistance to other churches, they are not acting officially, since they have no authority, no task or office in those other churches.

With respect to their own church they have power and authority received from Christ to make decisions and take actions; with respect to other churches they do not. This argument holds wherever entire

consistories come to such an ecclesiastical assembly; something which is only possible in a bond of churches consisting of only a few congregations. In a somewhat larger bond of churches it is impractical to have entire consistories meet together. In that case, they meet by means of delegates.

If the number of churches is not prohibitive (a classis, a small group of churches), it will be possible to have an equal number of delegates from each of the churches at the meeting. Since the whole consistory is not present, but only its delegates, these will have to have a mandate, a circumscribed instruction, since without this instruction or mandate they cannot act for or on behalf of their consistory. It would understandably be wrong for two or more officebearers to exercise the rule of their congregation to the exclusion of the officebearers who remained at home. Thus they must have an instruction, by means of which those other officebearers share in the exercise of authority. This instruction is, in part, already prescribed in the mutual accord of the churches, the Church Order, but there may be additional instructions given to the delegates by means of a separate mandate. In this way, the consistory participates, albeit **incompletely**, in the exercise of the bond of churches. Consistories, then, by means of an instruction, send along with their delegates restricted authorization to rule, in order that these may exercise the task of ruling on their behalf with respect to their own congregation, and likewise to offer or accept assistance on their behalf to or from the other churches. There is an official relationship between these delegates and their own church, if they are officebearers; but there is no such relationship to other churches.

By means of the instruction which they hand over to their delegates, it is the consistories themselves who exercise the bond of churches, though incompletely. The delegates are not to exceed the instruction which they have received. Whatever they should decide outside or contrary to their instruction is not binding on the churches that

delegated them.

The delegates have no personal authority; they are only endowed with such authority as their governing body, the consistory, has granted them by way of instruction. This consistory is the body which actually exercises authority by means of its delegates.

In the case of major assemblies of greater extent it is not even possible for each church to send delegates; for practical reasons, the smaller groups of churches which exist within the federation, such as classis or regional synod, must then each be represented by one or more delegates. These delegates, then, represent a whole group of churches. They do not represent their own church in any way. They are present not as representatives of their own church, but of a whole group of churches. They have no official competence in the churches which have delegated them. Therefore, they are not members of the major assembly as officebearers; they are merely delegates, with an instruction or mandate to act on behalf of the churches which have delegated them. Their official capacity is completely out of the picture: all that remains is their capacity as representatives. As delegates, they are completely bound to their instruction or mandate; if they go beyond it, the churches which they represent are not bound by their actions in the least.

We may conclude, then, that :

a. A member of a major assembly who is an officebearer, derives his competence to take part in that assembly **not from his office**, but exclusively **from his being delegated**; his fellow officebearers do not share in his competence, although they share his office, if they have **not** been delegated.

b. If an officebearer represents exclusively his **own** congregation, he serves the interest of his **own** congregation in his being delegated, and thus he is also acting **in his office**; he takes his place with and in his office, although his competence to take part in the assembly is not derived from his office but from his being delegated; he is not there as

officebearer, but as delegate.

c. If an officebearer does not exclusively represent his own congregation at a major assembly, but a group of churches, he is acting on behalf of all of those churches together; he is not an officebearer of those churches together, and thus he is **not acting officially**, although he may be an officebearer in his own congregation.

d. Although according to the rules of the Church Order a major assembly consists of officebearers, is **not an assembly of officebearers**, but of delegates.

e. A major assembly does not change in essence and character if **not** all or **none** of the delegates are officebearers.

f. From (a) to (e) it follows that major ecclesiastical assemblies in essence are not equivalent to consistory meetings; in the latter, the members have their place in virtue of their office, in the former in virtue of their being delegated rather than their office. Consistory meetings have an official character, and make decisions and take actions with official authority; major assemblies do not have that official character and are therefore not able to take actions or make decisions with official authority.

The task and competence of major assemblies

Having decisively rejected any doctrinal, ruling, and disciplinary authority, that is, any **official** authority of the major assemblies, we must now examine what authority these assemblies do have. We have already argued that churches are called to exercise and manifest the unity which Christ has obtained from the Father in prayer; we are to seek each other out in order to maintain the unity of the true faith, serving each other with gifts of hand, head and heart, to admonish and edify each other, to cooperate in the expansion of God's kingdom in mission and evangelism, and thus to be occupied with the completion of the one holy, catholic

Christian church. Churches join together for this purpose in a federation. In this bond of churches, not the individual believers, but the individual churches are the component parts.

The federation, then, is a bond of **churches**, not a bond of church members who have united to form a single church of greater extent and wider distribution. It is, and it remains, a **bond** of churches, not an amalgamation of various separate churches into one larger church. Each church remains independent, and its officebearers retain their direct subordination to Christ, the exclusive and only Head of the church. He rules it through His Word and Spirit, by means of the offices. This remains our presupposition: also in a federation, each church maintains its independence. The bond of churches may not limit this independence; rather, it must promote it.

If a group of churches is to live together in a federation, this will have to take place in an orderly way, by a well-defined accord and in an institutional form prescribed by that accord. God is a God of order: "Let all things be done decently and in good order," 1 Corinthians 14:40. The order under which the churches live is regulatory but does not work by compulsion. It should prescribe matters exactly so that there may be no deviation from the foundation of church life, namely Scripture and the Confession. Yet the application of this principle must leave a great deal of freedom in church life.³

Once the communal accord has been drawn up, and once the order under which church life will be regulated has been adopted, each church is bound by it. By including in the communal accord the provision that the Word of God will always retain the highest authority for each church, and that decisions of major assemblies will not be

³ See J. Jansen, *Korte Verklaring van de Kerkenordening*, (1st. ed., Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1923), 3

considered settled and binding if they are found to be in conflict with that Word, each church is enabled to commit itself to compliance with the decisions of the churches together, and they are indeed required by Christ to do so. If we confess that the churches are required by Christ to seek out each other and to display to the world the unity which He has obtained for them, to serve and to edify each other, then the churches are also obliged to submit to one another, not to do anything which would conflict with an orderly life together. Each decision taken by the churches together is to be complied with conscientiously; any church which does not do so is obstructing the unity which Christ has commanded and is resisting His will. Of course, this is always under the proviso that the decisions do not conflict with the Word of God or with the mutually adopted accord, the Church Order. If the former should be the case, the divine command holds that one should obey God rather than men.

Judgment concerning such conflict rests with the officebearers of each local church, since these are directly responsible to Christ with regard to any decisions which they would carry out in the midst of the churches. The stipulation that the churches are to consider the decisions of major assemblies settled and binding unless it is proven to be in conflict with the Word of God or with the Church Order I would consider to be the central nerve of the Church Order. If one touches or disturbs this nerve, the whole fellowship of churches is shaken and moved; if this nerve loses its sensitivity, the whole fellowship of churches withers. Without such a stipulation, no church would ever be allowed to bind itself to any other. If this stipulation were not made, the officebearers would hand over to others the ruling authority which they had received from Christ, and the responsibility they had towards Him.

This is impossible! If Christ sets us in an office and assigns us a task, we may never hand this task over to others without His permission. We may join with others in order to fulfil this task better.

That is what happens in the bond of churches. The churches help each other in carrying out the task which Christ has laid upon them. The unity which is already made manifest in each church separately is manifested at a higher level in a wider context; the unity of the true faith which is maintained among the believers in each church separately is confessed more richly; mutual service with the gifts of hand, head, and heart bears richer fruit; admonishing one another and building one another up in the most holy faith can be fully realized only in the larger context; obedience to the mission mandate, to proclaim the gospel to all creatures, will be fully achieved only in the bond of churches.

If we act according to the Scriptural principles outlined above, ecclesiastical hierarchy will be excluded, on the one hand, and the independence of the local churches fully maintained on the other; local churches will receive the place they should have within the bond of churches, and the authority which belongs to the major assemblies in that bond of churches is naturally derived. Major assemblies have no doctrinal, ruling, or disciplinary authority. These are the exclusive domain of the local church. There will be a regulatory authority within the bounds of the church federation, limited by the stipulations of the communal accord, the Church Order. This is an authority to which the churches will be subject for Christ's sake. Not submitting to this authority means resisting the will of God -- unless major assemblies take decisions which conflict with the Word of God or the communal accord.

Although major assemblies do not have disciplinary authority and although they have no means to assert their authority and to see that their decisions are carried out, the power which they exercise, also in matters of discipline, is very great. For in every matter of discipline with which they must deal and which has been placed before them for judgment, they give a judgment which is binding upon all the churches, unless it conflicts with the Word of God or the communal accord.

The major assembly gives its judgment and the churches are

bound to submit to this judgment. They have agreed to this by coming to the communal accord; they are also obliged to this by Christ. By doing so they do not hand over the ruling authority which they have received from Christ; rather, they carry it out more effectively, by mutual counsel. In major assemblies, assemblies where a larger number of churches come together, it may be assumed that more experience and more wisdom has been gathered. The churches make use of this greater experience and wisdom. In doing so, they recognize the guidance of the Holy Spirit who wants to lead the church to greater perfection also in this way. However, since every assembly which consists of people can err and sin, this is also true for a major assembly. It too can make decisions which do not agree with the Word or will of God. In such instances the churches are not bound to those decisions. Carrying out those decisions always remains the responsibility of the local churches, being responsible directly to Christ in this respect.

This is true not only for matters of discipline. The same principle applies when it comes to matters of doctrine. The churches are bound to doctrinal decisions as well, as long as they are not found to conflict with the Word of God. This restriction counts for all decisions of a major assembly, whether they concern doctrine or life.

Major assemblies lack any authority to enforce the implementation of their decisions among the churches. This authority rests solely with those who have received ruling authority from Christ Himself, namely the consistories. These have bound themselves, by communal accord, to carry out those decisions, and they are required by Christ to maintain this.

It may be asked whether the application of these principles in the practice of the communal life of the churches will not give rise to conflicts. Then we will acknowledge that this may indeed be the case. This is possible with every form of community. It is not the principle which is at fault, but our darkened understanding and our natural

inclination to evil. The point is not to design a system of church polity which is most profitable, as such, but a church polity which is aimed at the order which Christ has instituted in His churches, and which promotes that order. If we do so, we may expect that it will indeed profit the churches; if we go this way, we may expect the Lord's blessing.

There is no doubt about that order: according to Scripture, Christ has placed the ruling authority in His churches upon the shoulders of the officebearers in the local church. And this may lead to conflict there. On the other hand, conflict may also arise if, contrary to Scripture, one grants the disciplinary authority to the major assemblies, and gives them the power to enforce their resolutions, overriding the judgment of consistories. In this case, regardless of all good intentions, we eventually end up with hierarchy. Then the authority of consistories, granted them by Christ Himself, is taken out of their hands; then the major assemblies set themselves between Christ and the authorities which Christ has appointed.

Christ is the only Head of His church. He governs it directly, by His Word and Spirit, by means of the offices. Anyone who exercises this ruling authority without being officebearer in the church sets himself between Christ and the officebearers He has appointed. Every member of a major assembly should keep this in mind if he takes upon himself the ruling and disciplinary authority in a local church, doing what, according to Christ's command, is the task of consistory.

Application and practice in church life

We will now test these principles built up according to the stipulations of the Church Order by applying them to a number of practical cases. First, we will examine the simplest of disciplinary matters in which the advice of classis must be obtained according to the Church Order.

According to Article 68 of the Church Order of Dort, in case of a refusal to repent the consistory is required to obtain the advice of classis before making a public announcement to the congregation of the sin and the name of the sinner. According to what has been stipulated in Article 31, this advice of classis must be followed, so that whatever may be agreed upon by a majority vote shall be considered settled and binding, unless it be proved to be in conflict with the Word of God or with the Church Order. Is this a limitation of the ruling authority of the local church? Not at all! According to the ruling authority given them by Christ, the local churches have the complete right to exercise disciplinary authority and whatever may be associated with it. However, they have joined together in order to serve each other with counsel and advice, and thus each individually to exercise this rule all the better and all the more soundly.

Now since attestations are mutually acknowledged, the bond of churches requires consistency and equality in matters of discipline, in order that a church member who is censured in one congregation for a particular sin may not freely be admitted to or depart from another congregation. Since there is mutual recognition of each other's attestations, there must also be mutual oversight of discipline, to see to it that it is exercised fairly and according to God's Word. Otherwise the churches could not depend on each other's attestations. This mutual supervision and control of fairness and equality of treatment is performed by the classis. Asking advice is a measure regulated for the common good of the churches, and a measure by which the consistory places itself under the supervision of classis to prevent arbitrary or unjust decisions in so weighty a matter. In other words, this is supervision to enable the consistory to carry out its task better and free of error.

If the consistory objects to the advice of classis and cannot acquiesce with it, the objections can be brought to the regional synod. By this means, a ordinary matter of discipline will generally be resolved by

normal means. As a rule, this will not lead to **ecclesiastical** conflict.

Another situation occurs if the matter of discipline concerns officebearers, particularly if a minister of the Word is involved. Discipline of officebearers is regulated in Articles 71 and 72 of the Church Order. If an officebearer commits a secret sin, which, therefore, has not become public, the same procedure must be followed as when it concerns ordinary members of the church: personal admonition, as in Matthew 18, admonition in the presence of witnesses if this does not bear fruit, and then reporting to consistory. If he does not give heed to the admonition of consistory, exclusion from the Holy Supper follows, and the sin becomes public.

The sin may also immediately have a public character: sins such as those named in Article 72, and those which cause dishonour in the sight of the world. In such a case, Article 71 stipulates that ministers, elders, or deacons who commit a public or otherwise grievous sin, shall be suspended from office (or deposed) by the judgment of their own consistory with the deacons and of the consistory with the deacons of the neighbouring church; ministers shall only be suspended. Classis, with the concurring advice of the deputies of regional synod, shall judge whether the ministers are to be deposed. The deposition of ministers, then, is subject to judgment of classis. Their suspension, and the suspension and deposition of elders and deacons, is subject to the judgment of their own consistory with that of the neighbouring church.

This judgment is decisive. The consistory is bound by it according to the stipulation of Article 31. Is this because the consistory is not, in itself, competent to take such steps? Not at all. When Paul urges Timothy, in 1 Timothy 5:19, 20, "Never admit any charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear," there is no mention of a concurring advice from a neighbouring congregation. No, the consistory has a direct, Christ-given

authority to suspend and depose. Calling upon the neighbouring church or the classis for their judgment is a demand only of the church federation.

Discipline of officebearers is not the same as that of ordinary church members. The point is not whether they are to be placed under censure as church members; rather, it is whether they can remain in their office. This is an office which they have received from Christ and one which He alone can take away from them. He places them in their office by means of the call of the congregation as concentrated in its consistory. Suspension and deposition are highly serious matters. Especially with respect to ministers of the Word, the church federation demands that there be consistency and uniformity in the action which is taken. For the consistory which must decide to suspend or depose it is extremely important that decisions be taken very carefully, partly because of the publicity which such disciplinary cases also cause outside of the church.

The honour of God's Name and that of His church are very much involved in such matters. Those concerned are also most served by a resolution which is as faultless as possible. Their honour is at stake, also because the world pays close attention to the process. Here the honour of God's Name and that of His church is much more crucial than when it concerns an ordinary member. Besides this, when it concerns ministers of the Word, deposition from their office costs them their position in life. They have given themselves completely to their office: it is their life's work and their livelihood. To strengthen their position it has been stipulated that they will not be deposed except with the concurring judgment of the classis. The consistory has committed itself to act according to that judgment, unless it conflicts with the Word of God or the Church Order. The classis, then, has a decisive role.

Does this not limit the disciplinary authority of the consistory? No, for the final decision belongs to consistory. This does not mean to say that the consistory must yet make a decision; the decision has already

been made by accepting what is stipulated in Article 31. The 'unless it is proved' in this article demands that every decision taken by a major assembly must be evaluated by the consistory according to the Word of God and the Church Order. If upon sufficient grounds, the consistory considers that there is conflict with the Word of God, then it must make a decision, if necessary, against the judgment of the major assembly.

Is that judgment of the major assembly a disciplinary action? Does the assembly exercise disciplinary authority? No, with the judgment it serves the consistory concerned, which has **previously** committed itself to accept that judgment, '**unless...**' and so on, (Article 31). The churches consider the institution of major assemblies an instrument which Christ uses to work the perfection of His congregations. For this reason they submit to their judgments and decisions for Christ's sake. This is a voluntary submission, in which the **inherent** authority which the consistories have received from Christ is fully maintained. If ever the churches consider that the decisions conflict with Christ's commands, they will not submit and they may not submit, since they are to obey God rather than men.

In such a case a conflict occurs between the consistory and the major assembly. Who should yield? In fact, neither may yield, since both consider themselves to be acting in accordance with God's Word, and neither is permitted to act contrary to that Word. Does the major assembly possess means by which it may force the church which does not comply with its decisions to do so? No, Christ has set no higher authority above the officebearers of the local church, united in consistory.

In my opinion, there are three ways in which to resolve such a conflict. The first involves attempting to come to greater unity of insight by discussions; attempting to convince each other. We will assume, however, that this has already taken place, and that this road has been followed to its absolute conclusion.

A second option is that the church concerned withdraws from the church federation. By this act of withdrawal the church declares that the other churches with which it lived in communion have become so deformed and have deviated from the Word of God to such an extent that it is impossible, for the sake of truth and justice, to continue living together. Generally, however, this state of affairs does not occur. Usually, the difference concerns only a particular issue concerning which a consistory is convinced that it cannot compromise without conflicting with the Word of God. Breaking with the bond of churches is also in conflict with that Word, since it demands that churches together manifest the unity of the church. Breaking the bond of churches without sufficient cause is a serious sin against the King of the church. No consistory will do so lightly. It also cannot comply with the decision of the major assembly for conscience' sake. The practical result will usually be that the consistory does not comply and yet wishes to remain within the federation.

What should the church federation as constituted in the major assembly then do as the third option? In the first place, it should be decided whether the matter which gave rise to the conflict is of such a serious nature that correspondence with the church concerned cannot be maintained. It can well be imagined that the matter is not so serious that the other churches could justify before God breaking the bond with that church. The demand not to break the bond of unity with one of the churches lightly also applies to the major assembly!

It is possible that in such a case the other churches decide to tolerate such a church in its objection and resistance as an exception. They disapprove of the action of the church concerned, and inform it of this disapproval with the notice that in order not to violate the consciences of the brothers, they resign themselves to the situation, but see it as an incidental occurrence which should not be a precedent. Churches will not have the right later to appeal to this precedent. If the

church concerned acquiesces, the conflict has been ended and correspondence with that church can be maintained.

It may also occur that the difference which led to the conflict is so serious, as for example, a deviation either in doctrine or discipline, that it cannot be tolerated in an orderly communion of churches according to God's Word. The other churches then have no other means of power than to **state** that the church concerned, in not submitting to the decisions of the major assembly, has *de facto*, by that very fact, withdrawn itself from the bond of churches. The churches do not withdraw from it, but they state that this church, **by not maintaining the ecclesiastical accord**, has set itself outside of the bond of churches. The full responsibility of breaking the bond of churches is thus laid upon the church which does not comply. As a matter of course, correspondence with that church then ceases.

The statement by the churches is not an exclusion, and not an act of discipline, since major assemblies have no such competence, but a measure for good order within the federation. Major assemblies do not need disciplinary measures to maintain the purity of the bond of churches. Also without this disciplinary authority they can fully live up to their calling as we have outlined above.

In the above I have attempted to provide an introduction into the Scriptural principles upon which Reformed church polity is to be founded; I have briefly indicated how these principles should be brought into practice. It happens too often in the practice of ecclesiastical life that analogous cases in the past are sought, and that these then become the standard for the present. It happens too rarely that actions are based on principles. Many, also leaders in matters of church polity, are more familiar with its history than with its foundational principles. It seems to me that this is one of the reasons that the church-political cart constantly veers into the wrong, hierarchical direction. May this introduction

contribute to the revival of study of the principles of our church polity, and may these principles themselves be revived among us. Then this will also become evident in our major assemblies, and that will keep us from following the paths of hierarchy.