



A question of admissibility:

Who has the right to address the broader assemblies?

Position

My position is that broader assemblies are assemblies of the churches and not individuals, and that the agenda should be set by the consistories of those churches. Individual members have access to the broader assemblies only in case of appeal. This is in accordance with our commonly adopted Church Order. Only by following this procedure do we keep a proper perspective as to where the real authority lies in the churches. Finally, only by following this procedure do we avoid chaos at the broader assemblies.

The Church Order

The section of the Church Order that applies in this matter is the section on the Assemblies, in particular articles 29-31. In article 29 it speaks about the Ecclesiastical Assemblies which are *“the consistory, the classis, the regional synod and the general synod.”* As Reformed believers we know that the consistory has the calling to rule over the local congregations. Elders have been appointed by Christ himself through the congregation. The Church federation, where local churches have bonded together, is primarily an arrangement between the governing bodies of the local churches. It is the consistory which has dealings with a classis, regional and general synods.

This principle of the consistories having dealings with the other assemblies is reinforced in article 30. Of significance is what we read in the second and third paragraph:

A major assembly shall deal with those matters only which could not be finished in the minor assembly or which belong to its churches in common.

A new matter which has not previously been presented to that major assembly may be put on the agenda only when the minor assembly has dealt with it.

Notice that a major assembly may only deal with matters that could not be finished in the minor assembly. There is a clear principle here: Nothing comes to the table of a Classis or Synod except via the consistories. Also matters that pertain to the churches in common must come via a consistory. In articles 29 and 30 there is no mention of individual members putting anything on the table of the major assemblies.

Does this mean that individual members are totally shut out from the major assemblies? No, for there is also article 31 where it says:

If anyone complains that he has been wronged by the decision of a minor assembly, he shall have the right to appeal to the major assembly...

From this it is clear that for individual church members the major assemblies are only accessible as a court of appeal, when they feel that they have been personally wronged by the decision of a consistory. After all, the only ecclesiastical assembly a member really has to deal with is the local consistory. The churches in the Church Order have agreed on a process that can be used to address alleged injustices. This would suggest that while an individual might address a broader assembly (eg. Classis) because of a conflict with the local consistory, it cannot address a broader assembly about any issue on his or her mind having bypassed the local consistory.

This of course has implications. Since the broader assemblies are the assemblies of the churches, it is not just the case that only the churches make up the agenda together, but also that only the churches (consistories) are allowed to involve themselves in the matters before a major assembly. We think here of the matter of reports written by various committees. These reports are sent to the consistories for input, not to the membership at large.

Only a General Synod problem

When it comes to individual members addressing broader assemblies about matters on their agenda, then it becomes apparent that this is practically a problem especially at the General Synod level. I don't think it happens that members feel compelled to address matters dealt with at regional synod, or even at the classis level. Individual members put things on the table of classis and regional synod only in case of appeals. An attempt by individual members to have input in classical or regional synod issue would quickly be pushed aside as inadmissible.

Yet, somehow when it comes to a general synod, many think they have right to participate directly, even to make all sorts of comments about various reports sent to the consistories. The Acts of Synods in general even show how individual members at times appeal decisions of Regional Synods that do not pertain to them personally at all. At times members from *eastern* Canada appeal decisions made by regional synods in *western* Canada! But, we never read of anyone in western Canada appealing a decision of Classis ON North or South to Regional Synod East. The mentality appears to be that General Synod is fair game for anyone who wishes to address any issue, even if the person is in no way wronged or involved.

General Synod super-consistory?

It appears to me that the idea that anyone is allowed to address General Synod on any issue that might be before it, or any issue that might come to someone's mind, reflects a view of Synod as the super-consistory of the national church, which has to deal with all the problems and concerns of every individual member. This view, whether understood by those who feel they can address any broader assembly, especially General Synod, goes completely contrary to the basic reformed position on the autonomy of the local congregation and the authority given to the consistory. We are not members in a denomination, but in local churches of Jesus Christ. If someone has a question or concern, he should address his local consistory. A broader assembly is not an address for every church member to write to, but an address for the local churches (consistories) to send their items for the agenda. If a local member is concerned with decisions of broader assemblies, then the proper address is the local consistory, to ask it to take over that concern and work with it.

The local church's task to uphold decisions of broader assemblies

It is necessary to stress the place of the local consistory. It might not seem fair at first to saddle them with the responsibility of hearing the comments and even complaints of the members of various decisions of broader assemblies. But then again, who else can members turn to? The only assembly that carries some degree of continuity is the consistory. Only in a consistory do we see the same brothers meet on a regular basis. The broader assemblies enter into and pass out of existence. Whereas a consistory can be asked to clarify a decision made, because the same members remain, this cannot be done by broader assemblies. There is no address to which one can send a request for clarification, as to what was really meant. All one has is the official written Acts. Oral impressions and recollections do not carry any weight, only the final decision. One cannot ask one General Synod to explain the actions of a previous General Synod. All one can do is ask a Synod to weigh the reasons and judgment of a previous Synod.

Even more to be considered, however, is the promise of the churches to abide by the decisions of major assemblies. This is true in case of an appeal (art. 31 C.O.). It is also true with respect to decisions that apply to the churches in general. At every classis, the president of that classis has to ask the delegates from each church, among other things, "*whether the decisions of the major assemblies are being honoured...*" (C.O. 44). Consistories have the task to scrutinize the Acts of the broader assembly, and work with them. They might not like everything. The only criteria for

rejecting a decision, however, is if it conflicts with God's Word, or with the Church Order (C.O. 31). In that case they are obligated to appeal to see a wrong corrected.

We see here thus the responsibility of the local church with respect to the decisions of major assemblies, namely, to uphold and to defend them. After the Acts have been received and scrutinized, a local church either acquiesces and accepts the decision or pursues the way of appeal. If a particular member is not happy with the way a local consistory acquiesces, he can address the consistory and ask it either to defend itself, or to make efforts to address the broader assemblies. Part of living in a federation is that you accept the decisions of broader assemblies and work with them. The decisions of a General Synod should not be treated like pronouncements of a conference which one can take or leave. We can only live together in federation if we keep our promise to accept decisions as settled and binding.

Good order in the churches

The way the churches have organized themselves truly serves the good order. It is unhealthy to abandon this structure. For, if the position is maintained that everyone may address the broader assemblies, then the potential arises that a Synod has as many submissions on the table as there are members in the churches old enough to read and write. In this way broader assemblies will become unmanageable. In this respect I think the Australian Synod held in Byford in 1994 made a good ruling when it declared submissions by individual members inadmissible giving as ground:

The submission is an attempt to participate in Synod discussions. That is not the prerogative of individual church members but only of the delegates to Synod. Submissions from individual church members should come via their consistories.

(Acts Synod Byford, 1994, art. 36)

It is very important to keep in mind that broader assemblies are assemblies of the churches, not of the individual members of the churches.

Recommendation

Based on the above consideration that the broader assemblies are assemblies of the churches and not individuals, and that the broader assemblies are only open to members in case of appeals, where one complains that one has been wronged, and for the progress of good order in the churches I would thus recommend the following:

1. Consistories should be diligent in keeping up to date with developments in the life of the churches, listening to concerns expressed by the members. Decisions are either accepted and defended, or effort should be made to have decisions changed.
2. Every member who feels compelled to say something about decisions of broader assemblies should address his or her consistory. If the member convinces the consistory, then the consistory can put the matter on the table of the broader assemblies.
3. If a consistory refuses to take up one's cause, there is the route of appeal, although it must be proven that one has been wronged by the consistory's decision not to take up the cause.
4. Broader assemblies should only accept submissions from individual members who complain and can prove that they have been wronged. They should declare inadmissible any submission from individuals about issues with which they personally have nothing to do, and which in effect are nothing but an attempt to participate in Synod discussions.

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