

LESSON 24

Belgic Confession Articles 30-32 (II) The Offices

General:

In this lesson we examine the institution of the offices in the Christian Church and note their significance for the life of the Church.

1. The Institution of the Offices

From the beginning the Lord has instituted offices and appointed office-bearers in His Church. An office is a specific task or mandate given by God, a position of great responsibility, authority and honour.

We distinguish between:

- a) the office of all believers: every child of God has a specific calling to walk in faith and to serve God according to His Word. This office was given already to Adam and belongs to all God's children. Micah 6:8, "He has showed you, o man, what is good and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?"

(compare: Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 12, Question and Answer 32, "But why are you called a Christian?")

- b) the special offices: a specific task, given to certain persons who have a special calling with respect to the upbuilding of the Church of Christ.

Ephesians 4:12, "... to equip the saints for the work of the ministry, for building up of the body of Christ"

We can say that the special offices are "rooted" in the office of all believers. One simply cannot fulfill a special ministry in the Church if he does not live in faith and walk in love towards God and his neighbour.

2. The Offices in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament dispensation, certain people (e.g. Moses, Samuel) received a special calling to serve God in ministry unto Israel. This office was given by particular appointment and often indicated by "anointing" with holy oil (also as a sign of the assistance of the Holy Spirit).

Generally, we distinguish between three offices in the Old Testament:

- a) prophet: called to reveal God's will and to instruct the congregation in the service of God. Often the prophets were called in times of deformation to bring the people of Israel back to the true covenant worship and warn against impending divine judgment
- b) priests/Levites: called to maintain the ministry of reconciliation in the tabernacle and the temple. The priests were "mediators,"

those who would approach the Lord on behalf of the people and convey to the people the blessing of the Lord. This was a hereditary office, a ministry given to the tribe of Levi

- c) king: an office which was later "permitted" upon the urgent request of the people (1 Samuel 8). Actually the Lord alone has this position over Israel, but He granted this office to the house of Saul and later to the house of David. The duties and privileges of this office had already (in anticipation) been determined in the Law of Moses, especially that this king was to subject himself always to the King of kings (Deuteronomy 17:14-20).

These offices were generally kept separate and were not to be combined. King Uzziah, e.g., was punished with leprosy when he attempted "to burn incense on the altar of incense," an act belonging to the priestly office (2 Chronicles 26:16). In various cases, however, we do see a combination of official activities, e.g., the ministry of David (foreshadowing the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ) shows royal, priestly, and prophetic characteristics. These offices definitely and conclusively unite in the great Shepherd, Jesus Christ (see: Lesson 12).

3. The Offices in the New Testament

In the Articles 30 and 31 the Confession mentions three offices in the New Testament Church: ministers (or pastors), elders and deacons.

The following distinctions have been made:

- a) extra-ordinary offices: the office of the *apostles*, who were called as witnesses of Christ's work, suffering, and resurrection; the office of the *evangelists*, as helpers to the Apostles in the instituting of the Churches; and the office of the *prophets*, who brought the Word of God in the time that the Revelation was not (yet) completed. These offices have, as such, ceased to exist in the Church
- b) the ordinary offices: actually the Scriptures speak only of *two* of such offices: the office of elder (presbyter) and the office of deacon (see: Philippians 1:1). In the office of elder there arose a further distinction or definition: those who govern, and those who take upon themselves the (added) work of "preaching and teaching." (1 Timothy 5:17).

We therefore list and describe the offices in the Christian Church as follows:

- a) the ministers: to preach the Word of God in the worship services (and to bring the same Word in the homes through visitation), to administer the sacraments (as sign of and seal on the Word), and to teach the doctrine of salvation (catechetical instruction). This office would reflect the prophetic office of the Old Testament
- b) the elders: to rule the Church according to the Word of God, to see that all things are done properly ("take the oversight of the

flock" as "overseers" – episcopos = bishop) and to exercise discipline over the members of the Church (Acts 20:28). This office would reflect the "royal" office of the Old Testament

- c) the deacons: to see to the support of the needy so that all can serve the Lord without undue care in joy and gratitude. To this end, the deacons must gather and distribute the gifts of the congregation (Acts 6:1-6). This office would reflect the priestly office of the Old Testament.

In the offices, we then see a continuity and progression so that the Church of all times is well cared for in the service of God. Together these office-bearers "form the Council of the Church" = the body responsible for the growth, progress and well-being of the Church of Christ (Article 30). The office-bearers may not "lord it" over one another, but must equally share the burden of their office.

Note: For all practical purposes the Church Order has made the further distinction that matters of discipline belong solely to the minister(s) and the elders, who form the *consistory*.

4. The Election of Office-bearers

In Article 31 the Confession warns against two dangers:

- a) that office-bearers are appointed by some "higher" governing body or "curatorium" in hierarchical fashion (Roman Catholicism)
- b) that certain people upon some hidden, inward calling present themselves to the congregation as office-bearers and demand subjection to their authority (Anabaptists). See: Hebrews 5:4.

Scripture teaches that office-bearers are elected through the cooperation of the congregation, after preceding prayers, and are then appointed and ordained by existing office-bearers.

Acts 6:3, "Therefore, brethren, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty."

It is in this way, through the cooperation of the congregation and the subsequent appointment by ordained office-bearers that the Holy Spirit calls men to serve in Christ's Church. This has a two-fold significance:

- a) those lawfully elected and appointed have assurance that they are called *by the Lord* to do this work
- b) the congregation must esteem the office-bearers very highly "for their work's sake, and be at peace with them without murmuring, strife, or contention, as much as possible," Hebrews 13:7.

It is important to note that this manner of "election" does not make the office-bearers into "executives" (servants) of the congregation, for they are responsible only to the Lord Who called them and always give account to Him (see: 1 Corinthians 4:1-5).

In order to be *eligible* for office in Christ's Church, one must be well-established in the Church (not "recent converts," 1 Timothy 3:6 and 7) and of good reputation outside the Church. The Scriptural list of requirements can be found in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. In the election one must set aside "personal preferences" and seek those characteristics which the Lord has required in His Word.

The Church Order makes room for the use of "local regulations" to determine the exact procedure of the election of office-bearers. The subsequent ordination shall take place according to the accepted liturgical form.

QUESTIONS (Lesson 24):

1. What is an "office"? Which general distinction do we make in this respect?
2. Which offices were functional in the Old Testament? Which in the New Testament?
3. How shall office-bearers be chosen and to whom are they responsible?
4. What are the requirements for office in the Church of Christ?