

Concerning the Government of Christ's Church

Prof. C. Veenhof

It is our intention to give some attention to the government of the church, as Christ wants it to be, according to Scripture, and as it is practiced from day to day. We do not plan to discuss all sorts of minor details and technical problems. These can better be left for another occasion, as may be appropriate. Besides, most of these problems tend to solve themselves once the basic principles, the spirit and the style of Christ's rule over His church has been understood. On the other hand, unless one sees, knows, and honours Jesus Christ from the heart, as King of the church and therefore in His church government, one invariably approaches even the 'minor' points incorrectly.

Before we can speak of Christ's government of the church, we must first obtain a clear picture of the church itself. Therefore, we will begin by speaking of the church, as it exists in the world, and as the Scriptures portray it.

Christ's church

I must immediately point out that many make a serious, even fatal error, when speaking or writing about the church, an error which has its most harmful effects when such people are called to serve their Lord and Saviour in a church office or ministry.

The church is often discussed and dealt with as a community of people, and no more. According to the confession, the church is described as the "assembly of believers", but in practical terms this is

understood as no more than the believers in their particular ecclesiastical communion. Those ecclesiastical communions (of which there are many) become the subject of all kinds of assertions. Their attributes and characteristics are summed up. All sorts of distinctions are made. Because many ‘churches’ may be found in one’s own surroundings, one’s country, and the world, these are then compared and ranked according to what one discovers about them. However, it is far too often forgotten that the church does not and cannot exist for a moment without Christ. This knowledge does not dominate faith and life, and is not a primary factor in observations and thoughts about the church. One cannot see the church properly, one cannot do anything well in the church, if one does not before all things, above all things and in all things see Jesus Christ, the Head, the King, the Foundation, the Heart of His church. Too often we neglect that we can see the church only insofar as we have discovered Christ in faith; as well as the corollary: insofar as we have beheld His true church have we seen Christ. In short, we have made the fine Scriptural instruction of the Heidelberg Catechism concerning the church too little a part of our hearts, souls and minds.

For in speaking of the church the Heidelberg Catechism starts with this beautiful question, “What do you believe concerning the holy catholic church of Christ?” This is, incidentally, a magnificent beginning. The question is not “What do you think, consider, claim, suppose, judge, or say concerning the church?” The Catechism has no time for opinions or suppositions! It asks, “What do you believe?” That is, “What have you heard and accepted with all your heart from God’s own Word as the absolute truth concerning Christ’s church? And what do you now **confess**, as solemnly as with an oath before God’s countenance, concerning that church?” That is what the Catechism means. Whoever does not have this kind of faith concerning the church would do better to keep silent. Even repeating the Catechism’s words he would be lying.

To the question, “What do you believe concerning the holy catholic church of Christ?” the Catechism’s answer first of all, and above all, points to the Son of God, seen here, of course, as the **Mediator**, the **Christ**. The Catechism points out: before you speak of the church, you must see the Christ. Or rather, seeing the church is in the first place seeing the **Christ**, who is **Head**, **King**, **Gatherer**, **Defender**, and **Preserver** of the church. For Christ belongs with the church, just as the head belongs with the body. Should Christ be separated from His church even for a moment, there would no longer be a church. The church is nothing, and can do nothing, without its Head. Thankfully, however, also the Head, Christ, cannot be and does not wish to be without His church! Christ would not even be the Christ without His church! The bond between these two is so intimate that Paul once even refers to Christ-with-His-church simply as Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12).

First, then, we must see Christ; however, and this we may never forget, we must see Him as the Christ of the present, the Christ who works from heaven, busy from day to day, also in our time, in gathering, defending, and preserving His church.

This work of Christ, this gathering, defending, and preserving, is the focal point and the core of the church’s existence. This is the means by which the church is called into being, led through all times, and brought to glory. By this triune work Christ tears His own out of the grip of Satan, sin, and death, He protects them against all dangers and grants them Himself as food and drink to eternal life.

If we see Him thus, we will also discover in faith those whom He has gathered and whom He continues to gather. We discover the members of the church, the believers in the church community. Once taken hold of by Christ, they are now daily held fast, preserved, and maintained by Him; He causes them to be ever more intimately rooted into His church. We also discover, beholding all this in faith, **how** Christ accomplishes His many-sided work of church gathering, namely, by the

preaching of the Word, which He accomplishes through the officebearers He Himself has called. The true preaching, in which the Spirit poured out by Christ Himself always comes to the congregation and works in it is the means which He Himself has chosen to gather, defend, and preserve His church -- as long as the Scriptures are truly opened. "And how are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?" (Romans 10:14).

If this has become a living truth to us, there is something else to which we must pay attention in order to see more clearly the reality of the church. Christ gathers His church, and He does this solely and completely. However, in His work of church gathering He immediately involves the members of His church. Those who are gathered must also gather with Him. Those who are built must also build with Him. The church is the goal of His gathering, but also its means. All the members of the church are officebearers, called to be the Lord's fellow workers in His age-long church gathering work.

Observing all of this in faith, we have obtained a clear view of Christ's church, as it exists in the world, and as it is led to glory through the centuries.

Visible and invisible church

Various distinctions are often made with respect to this living church of the living Christ; distinctions which are generally known, but which have often been misunderstood and have therefore caused much confusion. These must be discussed first in order to make room for a clear treatment of church government.

The first distinction is that of the **visible** and the **invisible** church. Anyone who reads up on this pair of words will be astounded at the confusion which is associated with them. What one person understands by these words may be quite different from what another

does. Some, for instance, use the term 'invisible' for the church **universal**, that is the church as it has been, is, and will be throughout all ages and at every place. The term is used, of course, because no one can observe this church. Others use it to denote the totality of the elect, since no one can say just who is elect and who is not.

Still others use the name 'invisible church' for the **true believers**, who may be found in any one of a number of churches; those who are enrolled as members of such a church constitute the 'visible church'. In this way, of course, the distinction creates a church within a church. Once this point has been reached, it comes as no surprise that many imagine the visible and the invisible church to be two quite **different** churches, which to some degree even stand in contrast to each other. The invisible church becomes the communion of all true believers. The visible church (or rather, the visible **churches**, for there are very many) consists of the particular ecclesiastical organizations, with their boards, addresses, membership lists, and so on.

In this way of thinking, the actual church, the ideal, the 'spiritual' church, is the invisible church. As long as one belongs to that everything is all right. The visible churches are of far lesser significance. Certainly, they may be necessary. There must be a certain organization to make regular preaching possible, to allow for the administration of baptism and Holy Supper. But in reality, the visible church is the work of men. How much division, bickering, and small-mindedness is there not among those many smaller or larger churches! 'Discerning souls' can usually not be satisfied there, or if they do remain, they keep aloof from what is attempted and practiced there. These are at home only in the serene atmosphere of the invisible church.

Those who think like this about the visible and invisible church will, of course, disparage church polity and church government. These belong to the lower, visible church. These are only all too human efforts. In the invisible church there is no 'polity', no 'government'. There 'love'

reigns.

Scripture knows nothing of this false dilemma about two churches. Indeed, this fantasy about two churches, of which one is **higher**, the other **lower**; one is **essence**, the other **appearance**; the one **spiritual**, the other **earthly** - this fantasy is nothing but deceptive philosophy. According to Scripture and confession the church is the communion of believers gathered and continually being gathered by Christ. This communion is one of real, live, visible people, who work and struggle in the midst of the world; who expect their entire salvation from God's grace, and who now (albeit in much weakness) live out of faith, according to God's law, and to His glory.

Certainly, this church communion has many **invisible** aspects. The bond between Christ and the believers, and among the believers together is not visible. The Holy Spirit achieves much in secret, so that no one can observe it. But this church of Christ is most definitely **visible**! Indeed, it must be visible! Visible in all of life, in labour, conversation, attitudes: in short, in confession and conduct. It must be visible also in its institutional aspect.

We agree wholeheartedly with Dr. H. Bavinck when he writes, "Visible and invisible church are... two sides of one and the same church; it comprises the same believers, first seen from the aspect of faith, which dwells in the heart, and which is known with certainty only to God, and then from the aspect of confession and conduct [and this includes for Bavinck, as he shows elsewhere, the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments: that is, the ecclesiastical institute], which is open to us and which we can observe."¹

Of course, this does not diminish the Scriptural truth that the

¹ H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* IV, (3rd. ed. J.H. Kok, Kampen, 1928), 333

natural man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God for they are folly to him. The church as church of Christ, as temple of the Spirit, can be seen and known **only by faith**. An unbeliever may see an organization, a gathering of people in a church building; if he enters, he may hear a sermon, but he does not see and hear the living Christ in all of this, and thus he does not see His church!

However, this does not alter what has been said above: Christ's church in this world is essentially invisible in one aspect, but is and must be visible in another. Any division of the church into a visible and an invisible church is to be rejected.

As we begin to speak of the government of the church, we mean the government of that church which is one and indivisible, though it has a visible and an invisible aspect.

Institute and organism

We will now examine a second distinction which is made with respect to Christ's church. We mean that which is expressed by the terms **institutional** and **organic** church. Or, more commonly, the **church as institute** and the **church as organism**.

Those who use these terms often presuppose the existence of an 'invisible church', which is described as 'all those who are elect,' both those who are in heaven, and those who are on earth or are still to be born.

This 'invisible church' then, is the complete, new, regenerate human race, having its unity in Christ as Head, in which fully unfolded human life exists in its full splendour, and full, organic coherence among all its members mutually and with the entire cosmos. This church is the 'ideal church', the real hidden 'essence' of the church. The 'mystical body' of Christ. Of this church we find only a particular 'manifestation' in this earthly dispensation. This 'manifestation' of the 'ideal church' is

the 'visible church'. This 'visible church', in turn, appears in twofold form, in twofold shape: as **organism** and as **institute**. Organism and institute, then, both belong to the 'invisible church'.

The **organism** of the church is said to comprise first of all brotherly love and communion of faith, which mutually binds Christians together, and which they show forth automatically. Secondly, it includes the life of Christ's congregation as it penetrates and is worked out in family life, associations, school, nation, science, in short, everywhere. In all of these, we find, insofar as they are 'Christian', the organism of the church.

The **institute** of the church, on the other hand, is that particular organizational form which comes into being through the exercise of the offices, the administration of word and sacrament, the maintenance of doctrine, and the government of the church, as Christ considered these necessary for His church on earth.

This church institute is often assigned a far lesser value than the church organism. The institute is but the work of man! It may be compared to the scaffolding which is constructed when a house is to be built, but which is taken away as a matter of course when the building is complete. What we have seen above may be represented schematically as follows:

Ideal, invisible church

Visible church

(the "manifestation" of the ideal, invisible church)

church as organism

church as institute

With respect to this construction we would like to make a number of comments. In the first place, the 'ideal', 'invisible' church sketched above does not exist in reality. The church as assembly of all

the elect, graced with fully mature life, will not be there until the last day. Christ is at work, every day, with great energy, so that one day He will be able thus to present it to the Father. But that time has not yet come!

Since this 'invisible' church does not yet exist, it cannot yet, of course, be 'manifested' upon earth. What does not exist cannot become visible. Although much is already present on earth, and something is visible of what Christ has already accomplished in His one great work of being able to present that fully completed church to His Father, this cannot be called the earthly 'manifestation' of the ideal, invisible church.

Here God's **counsel** and its **realization** are confused, that is, that which only exists in God's purposes for the world as **plan**, and that which has already been actually **accomplished** by God in the world according to that purpose. God has eternally purposed to create the world. As **plan of God**, then, the world exists eternally; but in reality, the world came into being only "in the beginning". Similarly, the fully completed church of all the elect exists **eternally** in God's plan; but in Christ, God is present still busy to **realize** that plan. That perfected church, then, is not there yet. If we do speak of that perfected church as something which already really exists, our thoughts have left the firm ground of reality, and are lost in the contemplation of a speculative entity.

In the second place, the same applies to this construction as does to the idea of an invisible and a visible church. There is no question that the church of Christ has, just as any human association does, an invisible and a visible aspect. But an aspect of the church is never itself a church. Although a certain Mr. Jansen may have invisible and visible aspects, no one would ever distinguish two Mr. Jansens, an invisible one and a visible one, of which the second is the 'manifestation' of the first.

If we wish to avoid empty speculations and unrealistic

constructions also with respect to these matters, we will strictly have to observe the **facts**, as God lays them out before us in His Word.

What is real and factual? Before anything else, it is the glorified Christ. As the **coming** Christ He was busy gathering His church from the beginning. As the Christ **who had come** He obtained the right, in His humiliation, through His suffering and obedience, to snatch those whom the Father had given Him out of Satan's power, and subsequently gather them into His congregation. And as the **glorified** Christ, having received all power in heaven and on earth, He now is completing His gathering work, both in heaven and on earth.

There are other facts: a large part of the church, which, after having been initially gathered here on earth, is now with Christ in glory, waiting for the complete gathering of all the elect to God, in order that, having achieved full glory in body and soul, they may glorify God eternally in the communion of all the saints. Also, a small part of the one, all-encompassing coming church is still on earth, and is initially being gathered by Christ. This is Christ's church insofar as it is now on earth, or more simply, **Christ's church on earth**.

Christ Himself is present in the church on earth through His Word and Spirit. He dwells in the hearts of those who are His and works in them. He works and upholds new life there. He daily nourishes, protects, and comforts those who were bought with His blood. In this church on earth Christ provides the preaching. Through the preaching He increasingly desires to give His work its intended effect. He wants love to grow stronger, in order that the communion may continue to be more powerful, and the gathering together of believers in Him may become more intimate. The church, which thus is the gathering of believers, must daily increase in strength, both quantitatively (with respect to the number of its members) and qualitatively (with respect to the communion with Christ and with each other).

At the same time, this church on earth has been given the task

of preaching the word. The preaching is directed **to** the church, but also **by** the church. The church is to call out God's Name to the world, and thus call others to faith in Christ. Through the church's preaching, Christ intends to work faith in the hearts of those who are still outside, in order thus to increase His church. The church, which is the **gathering of believers**, is to be, at the same time, the **means** by which Christ regenerates those who are His, and the **means** by which He makes them His own possession. In other words, the church must be, at the same time, the **mother** of all believers.

To achieve this, Christ makes use of officebearers called by Him. In His name, and according to His ordinance, they administer God's Word and the sacraments, exercise church discipline, formulate the church's confession and maintain it, and govern Christ's church. They do this in His name, and according to His word. In short, Christ's church on earth has an organization desired and given by Christ, or as we say with respect to the church: an **institute**.

The influence of this church which is instituted, or rather, this continually, actively instituted church, living and being governed thus, may be traced everywhere in the lives and in the mutual communion of its members. Its influence is everywhere, also in the organizations and associations and foundations which those members form and maintain. In other words, this church is also an **organism**.

If this be established, it is immediately clear that one cannot speak of the church as institute and the church as organism as two separate entities. One cannot find only the church as institute at one place, and only the church as organism elsewhere.

The church of Christ on earth has always been organized in some particular way. It has always had a particular organizational form, and it still does. To put it differently, it has always had an **institutional character** and still does through the offices and ministries given to it and

working in it. The church on earth cannot and does not exist without the institute. Now then, it is impossible to isolate its institutional character, setting it apart and speaking of it as the 'church as institute'. An '**aspect**', an **organizational form**, a peculiarity of the church can never be the church itself.

This same church which has never existed other than as institute, is also always an 'organism'; for it is a 'body', which has 'members' and evidences 'growth', and which, therefore, has an influence everywhere as a matter of course. The church, then, is the organic communion of believers. It is an **organic faith communion**. Indeed, it shows an **organic structure**; it has an **organic effect**, wherever it lives and works, wherever its members act as members, wherever it is present and active in its members.

This organic structure is not something which belongs only to the church, or which is part of its essence. On the contrary, this organic aspect may be seen in all human communities, whether nations, clans, families, or companies. The organic is but one of the characteristics that each of these, without exception, displays; although its nuances may be different in the church.

It is in the organic aspect that we discover a new distinctive of the church; however, one may never isolate this 'distinctive', this '**aspect**', this '**structure**', this organic nature and influence, setting it apart as 'church as organism'. An '**aspect**', a '**characteristic**', a '**structure**', an '**influence**' of the church can never be the church itself, can it?

A particular mode of expression from another field may clarify this. One may hear, for instance, of Kuyper as a scholar, an organizer, and an orator. Would we conclude that the person speaking this way means to suggest that there was more than one Kuyper, or more than one '**manifestation**' of an '**invisible**' Kuyper? Indeed, all such expressions intend to say is that the one, indivisible, well known Kuyper was a

learned man, had highly developed organizational skills, and had great oratory gifts.

In the same way, when speaking of the institute and the organism of the church, one must keep in mind that these expressions should not be taken to mean more than this: the one, indivisible church of Christ on earth, which has always, everywhere, and entirely been institutional, and will always be so, is also always an organism. And the church, which has always, everywhere, and entirely lived and worked organically, is also always an institute. The church as institute is organic in structure; and the church as organism is institutionally organized.

To illustrate and prove the above, we would like to quote Bavinck once again. He makes two points when speaking of the government of the church. First of all, he says that God has appointed Christ as King of His church. From the time of paradise on, that Christ has exercised His prophetic, priestly, and royal office, continuing it throughout the Old Testament and during His time on earth, and now bringing it to completion in heaven. "This activity of Christ does not presuppose the congregation... but precedes it and produces it; the congregation, as temple is built on Christ the rock, as body is born out of Him the head: in this instance, the king comes before His people."²

Further, Bavinck points out that it has pleased Christ always to employ the service of men in the exercise of His office for the church. Not that this was necessary; only because it was His will. "It was His good pleasure, without in any way handing over His sovereignty to men, still to make use of their service in its exercise, and to preach the gospel to all creatures through them."

Bavinck's conclusion is that the church was constantly ruled in these two ways, and that, therefore, it was "always (!!) in some way

² Bavinck, IV, 355

organized and institutionally arranged.”³

In addition, concerning the church on earth, the church **in becoming**, he writes, “it is not only charismatically, but also institutionally arranged. It is not only itself the property of Christ, but also serves to win others for Christ. It is *coetus*, but also *mater fidelium*; organism, but also institute; purpose and means at the same time.”⁴ Also, “the church as assembly of believers is itself used by Christ as an instrument to bring others to His congregation; through it, Christ administers His mediatorial office in the midst of the world. Thus the church manifests itself, from the very beginning, in two ways: it is an assembly of God’s people in both a passive and active sense; it is both a *coetus* (an assembly which is being assembled), and a *mater fidelium* (mother of the believers, an assembly which in turn itself assembles), or, to use different terms, at the same time **organism** and **institute**.”⁵

In reading these expressions, one should note that Bavinck restricts the organic aspect of the church completely to the fact that the church is the mother of all believers; and that by ‘organic’ he understands something quite different from what was noted above. We only wish to point out that Bavinck also rejects the notion that the organic and the institutional aspects of the church could each stand alone or that the organic has priority over the institutional, or vice versa.

³ Bavinck, IV, 355

⁴ Bavinck, IV, 329

⁵ Bavinck, IV, 329. Note Bavinck’s use, here and in the preceding citation of the word *coetus* for the church as assembly in passive sense, that is, an assembly that is being assembled. The confession speaks of the church as *congregatio seu [=or] coetus* in Article 27; and as *coetus et [=and] congregatio* in Article 28, where *congregatio* denotes the church insofar as it is gathered at *coetus* the church insofar as it gathers.

Any such distinction is evidence of “one-sidedness”, according to him. For “both are given together, and they continually act upon each other.” With respect to those who say that the difference between Rome and the Reformation is this, that Rome elevates the institute above the organism, while the Reformation elevates the organism above the institute, Bavinck replies, “The difference between Rome and the Reformation at this point does not concern the priority...of institute or organism...but lies in this, that Rome ties salvation to priest and sacrament and the Reformation to the preaching of the Word.”⁶

In speaking of the government of the church, we will be referring to the church of Christ insofar as it is on earth; the church which is on the one hand visible and on the other invisible; the church which always manifests an organic structure, but at the same time in an institutional form.

Essential principles of church government

Having attempted to sketch the church as it lives and struggles on earth according to the Scriptures, we now come to the actual discussion of the government of that church. If we begin that discussion with the question who ultimately governs the church, there will be no one who hesitates before giving the right answer. In the end, only God Almighty rules the church. For God is the **Sovereign**; that is, He is the **Creator** who called all things into existence; the absolute **Owner**, who alone has the right to dispose over all that exists; and the **Lawgiver**, who rules all creation absolutely in accordance with the ordinances He Himself has set.

Where God is thus **Sovereign** over all things, He must also be

⁶ Bavinck, IV, 354

this of His church. He has elected that church, called it according to His great mercy, renewed, justified and sanctified it. This church is now His possession, and He governs it completely and for all eternity. The LORD is the Judge, the Lawgiver, the King of Zion (Isaiah 33:22).

Although the Scriptures are very emphatic in their proclamation of the absolute sovereignty of the triune God, also over His church, they stress equally the fact that Jesus Christ is the king of the Church and is its absolute Lord. For we read that God has set His king on Zion, His holy hill (Psalm 2:6), and that Christ must reign as king until He has put all His enemies under His feet (1 Corinthians 15:25). Christ Himself says that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given unto Him (Matthew 28:18), and the Revelation to John depicts the Son of Man standing as glorious King in the midst of His church (Revelation 1: 12ff).

It is of great importance to obtain a clear insight into this royal authority of Jesus Christ. Clearly, it must be distinguished from the sovereign almighty dominion of God Himself! For Christ has **received** this authority, and eventually He will **return** it. However, realizing this, we will ask, **in what aspects can this two-fold authority be distinguished?**

The point of departure for obtaining a correct insight into Jesus Christ's power and dominion over His church can best be taken in His name 'Christ'. It is generally known that this name is related to His office; for it means 'anointed', and one is 'anointed' only to an 'office'. In this sense, the word 'Christ' can be compared to terms such as '**king**', '**minister**', and so on, which also indicate an office. As we speak of **King George**, and of **Prime Minister Smith**, so also Scripture speaks of **Christ Jesus**. It would be well if all of us always spoke of **the Christ** just as we always speak of **the king**, or **the prime minister**. If we did, the particular sense of the name Christ as a name of office would become more transparent to us.

In speaking of Jesus as the Christ, therefore, He is described as

the bearer of an office; or rather, of the office, the **all-encompassing office**, of the office **in the absolute sense**.

What, then, is an **office**? It was especially Kuyper who thoroughly considered and discussed the idea of office. We would like to give the main elements of his conception here. According to Kuyper, the office is “administration of God’s authority by creatures, whether angels or humans”⁷. It has pleased God to exercise His sovereignty on earth, making use of human service. Naturally, in doing so, God never relinquishes the least part of His sovereignty. This is simply impossible. No, in exercising His power and dominion, He engages men, through whose service He makes effectual His divine rule. Those who are called to this function receive an **office**, they are **officebearers**.

When we read that Jesus is ‘Christ’ and therefore holds an office, or is an **officebearer**, we should keep the primary characteristic of an office firmly in view. As Scripture clearly teaches, Jesus is God’s own Son, the Second Person of the Divine Being, God of God, who assumed our human nature and is now God and man in a single Person. In everything that Jesus does, we stand before the Son of God, the one who actually performs all Jesus’ deeds. Keeping this in mind, we are not to forget for a moment that, in living and working as the great Officebearer, our Saviour stands before us as the incarnate Word. Jesus cannot bear the office, “unless He comes into God’s presence as man, either eternally in His counsel, or actually after His incarnation”⁸. God caused “the man Christ Jesus” to enter into “the threefold office of Prophet, Priest, and King, in order that the same sovereign power of the Lord might still be exercised by Him, just as it had once been (namely, before the Fall); but now not directly, now through a Mediator, through

⁷ A. Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1892), I 282

⁸ *E Voto*, I 282

the service of a man, through an organ, by an office”⁹. In the officebearer, the Christ Jesus, “not the Eternal Word, but the Incarnate Word stands before you; not the Son of God, but the Son of Man; not the Divine Person, but the man Christ Jesus”¹⁰.

This is evident from the Scripture’s statements concerning Christ’s **ordination** and **anointing** as prophet, priest, and king. That is to say: **appointed** by God to that triune office and endowed with the spiritual gifts necessary for the fulfilment of that office.

“Not the Second Person of the Holy Trinity was anointed as King over Zion, for this One is the LORD of all peoples by His Divine right as Creator, and therefore also of Zion. The Second Person is God Himself, and God can never be ordained or anointed to anything. However, when the Second Person, the Word, became flesh; when the Mediator appeared and the man Christ Jesus stood before the Almighty’s eye - that man Christ Jesus could indeed be anointed, that man Christ Jesus could indeed be ordained, and by the grace of God and through God, that Mediator could receive the Royal rule of Zion. And that is what happened”¹¹.

Speaking of the government of the church, then, we should first see God, the one Triune God, who exercises absolute authority over the Church. However, under Him we should discover the great Officebearer the Christ, Jesus, who, by virtue of His office exercises great, though not absolute, power over His church. To put it differently, God is the One who governs His church absolutely, but in His government He involves the Christ. Through this Christ, through His official service

⁹ *E Voto*, I 288, 289

¹⁰ *E Voto*, I 289

¹¹ *E Voto*, I 326

God rules truly and completely.

Christ is “no original Sovereign of the church, no Sovereign on account of Himself. He too is under the Lord of Hosts. He too has been appointed. He too governs by grace of God. He too has been installed in His office and has been anointed to that office. In fact, there will come a time when He will deliver the Kingdom to the actual and original Sovereign, that God may be all in all”¹².

Another point concerning Christ’s power must be added to what has been said above. From the time of His birth - we restrict ourselves to the Christ as He is after and through His incarnation - Jesus is the Christ, and therefore immediately in possession of the power of His office. Throughout His time on earth, He made use of his official powers. However, Christ used them to fulfil the **first** part of His great task, namely to satisfy God’s justice in the place of sinful humanity. To achieve this, Christ fulfilled the law and suffered eternal death as God’s punishment for the sins of the world.

Having completed that great, fundamental part of His labour, Christ is **exalted** by God. That is to say, He receives an immense increase of power and achieves much higher glory. For Christ receives “All authority in heaven and on earth” (Matthew 28:18). As reward upon what He had accomplished by His resurrection, He receives a “name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth” (Philippians 2:8-10). In His resurrection and ascension, God has placed Him “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in that which is to come” (Ephesians 1:20, 21).

This increase of power regards the authority which had been

¹² A. Kuyper, *Van het kerkelijk Ambt*, (1898), 15

conferred on Christ; thus it is **derived, official** authority, which was given to Him as Mediator between God and man, as the man Christ Jesus. The Son of God as such could not be given **exousia**, that is ‘power’, ‘authority’, ‘competence.’ He was, and is, and remains **almighty**. Nothing can be added to His **almighty**, that is, His **absolute, complete, divine** power any more than that something might be subtracted from it.

However, although this “all authority” of which Christ spoke before His ascension, and which He said had been given Him by His Father, is not divine omnipotence, it is unimaginably great, and truly universal, that is, encompassing the whole universe.

Jesus Christ rules absolutely over believers and unbelievers, over angels and demons. Nowhere in Scripture is this authority restricted in any way at all. It concerns all powers and forces which are present in creation. It cannot be restricted to a “spiritual sphere” - which, in any case, proves to be very difficult to describe. No, it indeed is “**all authority**”.

With this authority Christ governs His church. He wants this authority to be recognized and obeyed by the people of the church -- not under duress, but by free submission in love. Therefore, Christ has His Word preached and seals that Word by His Spirit. Through the operation of His Spirit, Christ leads those who are His to loving acceptance of His Word. That is, to loving acceptance of Himself as the absolute Ruler and the great King. All of the ecclesiastical organizations, all regulations and stipulations for church life, as fixed by the Church Order, must serve only to allow full play to Christ’s royal dominion. Before anything else, they are to remove whatever would hinder or conflict with His actual kingship. This obedience to the King of the church, to Jesus Christ, is the glory and the honour of the exalted Christ and the highest good, true peace, and full salvation of His church.

With the great authority given Him, Christ governs earth and

even heaven. Indeed, in order to be able to be King of His church, in order truly to guide it and effectively to preserve it, He must have all things in His hands. The King of the church can have complete dominion over His church and adequately protect it only if all powers outside of the church and directed against it are under His control. That is why God has set Jesus Christ at the summit of the universe. Above Him is only the eternal God, Sovereign of all that exists. Beneath Him is everything that was created. Certainly, God was and is and remains the eternal King of the Universe, but in the direction of church and peoples, in the realization of His counsel in the history of the world, in moving world events to the Last Day, God does nothing except through the Mediator, the man Christ Jesus.

“It is and always remains only God, that eternal Being, from whom originates all force and power and might; however, it pleases Him to effectuate this might and power through the Mediator”¹³. “All operations of God the Triune, both in pouring out gifts, as well as in leading and directing the life of church and peoples, occur only through the Mediator”¹⁴.

Christ governs His church through His church

Having seen that the Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus, rules His church in name of His Father, one will immediately ask: but how, and in what manner, does Christ do this? For Christ is in heaven: how can He, and how will He in fact govern His church on earth?

Scripture gives a clear answer to this question. In the first place,

¹³ *E Voto* II, 36

¹⁴ *E Voto*, II 34, 35

that in whatever manner Christ governs His church, whatever organs, instruments, powers, or means He might use in this government, **only** He rules, and that **by Himself** He exercises His full authority. He never relinquishes even the least particle of His authority. Anyone who is involved in the government of the church in some way, and who wishes **himself** to have something to say, to stipulate, to impose, violates Christ's honour and power. Anyone who is involved in the government of the church must know well that every word he says, and every action, must be fully covered by Christ's authority; he can be nothing more than the instrument by which Christ effectuates **His** right and **His** power. This is a first Scriptural principle.

However, hearing and understanding this, we will still ask, **in what manner** does Christ alone exercise His dominion over the church? Looking for an answer to this extremely important question in the Scriptures, we soon discover that the living Christ controls His church from heaven by His Word and Spirit. Christ governs His church through **His Word**. In earlier times, He spoke that Word by His prophets; later, in person, having been born from Mary; and finally, by His apostles. Subsequently, He had that Word inscripturated, and by means of that inscripturated Word He still speaks today, vividly and powerfully. In that Word, He brings men His grace and His gifts. With that Word, He penetrates the hearts of His own in order to control and lead them according to His will.

This government of the church through the Word of Christ is, at the same time, its government **through His Spirit!** For in this dispensation, Christ always speaks His Word through His Spirit. His Word is always at the same time the Word of God's Spirit. Those who listen to Christ's Word, at the same time hear the Spirit addressing them. Therefore and in this way the Holy Spirit is continuously present and active in Christ's Word. Every person who is penetrated by the Word of

Christ is therefore and in this way taken hold of by the Holy Spirit Himself. The place where Christ's Word is brought becomes the workshop of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, it is exclusively the work of the Holy Spirit when Christ's Word penetrates the hearts, regenerating, bringing to repentance, and renewing. It is also only the work of the Holy Spirit when the church is so conquered and dominated by Christ that it allows itself to be led by its Lord and Saviour in all its activities. Thus Christ rules His church by His Word and Spirit.

Indeed, Christ **alone** rules His church; and He does so **completely**. He accomplishes it, also, by leading and directing this church through His **Word** and **Spirit**. But that is not the whole story. For it has pleased Christ to involve **men** in the government of the church, as He exercises it by Word and Spirit. To put it differently, Christ rules His church, thereby making use of the **service of men**.

With Christ's appearance on earth, we are immediately struck by His choosing of apostles, whom He gives a mighty task in the building and thus in the government of the church which He has founded. The apostles receive a very important place in the government of the church.

There is an important and clear report of this in Matthew 16. After Christ has spent a number of years with the disciples, He at last asks them the important question, "Who do you say that I am?" On behalf of all, Peter answers, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!" The disciples acknowledge and accept Jesus of Nazareth as the promised Messiah, God's own Son. When Peter has spoken these words, Christ pronounces him, and in him all the apostles, blessed, for God Himself has revealed to them whom Jesus was. Since God has thus acted in him, and has thus shown mercy to him, Simon Bar-Jonah becomes Peter, man of rock.

Then, after this word of blessing Jesus speaks the familiar but remarkable words: "On this rock I will build my church." Let us take special note of a small, fine, meaningful distinction here: to Simon, after

his confession, Christ says, “You are Peter!” Then, however, He does not say, “and on **you**” or, “on this **Peter** [*petros*] I will build my church.” Rather, Christ says, “on this *petra*, this rock, I will build my church.” The shift in meaning is obvious.

In speaking thus, Christ shifts the accent from the personal to the objective, from the man of rock to the rock, from the person to his office! Not Peter the person, but Peter the officebearer is the object of Christ’s declaration. The apostle, called and equipped by God, enabled by a special revelation to make a confession of the Christ, becomes the foundation of the church. On these apostles, these bearers of the one apostolic office, who will speak by special revelations from God, Christ will found His church. Christ is the only actual foundation of the church (1 Corinthians 3:11). But in Christ, and by their confession and proclamation of Christ as the Son of God, the apostles become a secondary foundation, as it were, built on the one foundation (Christ Himself) of Christ’s great world church (Ephesians 2:20).

Immediately after having said this, Christ gives His apostles a mighty authority; or better, Christ says that through their service, He will exercise a mighty authority. For from Him they receive the **keys of the kingdom of heaven**. With these words, Christ compares the kingdom of heaven to a palace, in which a high dignitary - in the past such a man would be called a ‘majordomo’ - was in charge. This man would be entrusted with ‘the keys’. He would be the officebearer who could allow or refuse entry. He would have access to and the management of whatever was in the warehouses and storage chambers. It would be his task to distribute all that these contained according to the needs of each. Of course, he would be fully responsible to his Master for all that he did. Of course he would be fully impressed by the fact that whatever he had access to, and whatever he could distribute, was the exclusive property of the King. With this in mind, however, such a man would still have the ‘authority’ described above.

Such authority as was once exercised by a 'majordomo' in royal households Christ here grants His apostles. They become the managers and distributors of the treasures of the kingdom of heaven. They receive the ministry of reconciliation. That is to say, they are permitted, in Christ's name, to distribute this reconciliation and all the treasures which Christ has obtained: righteousness, salvation, and eternal life. It is their task, moreover, to ensure that whatever happens in Christ's church occurs in good order, and in a manner befitting the kingdom of God. To that end, they may, and must, prescribe all sorts of ordinances and regulations. If they do so in accordance with Christ's will, Christ Himself stands behind them, and anyone who despises the apostolic word offends Christ Himself. They are especially given the task of binding and loosing; that is to say, of exercising discipline. This means excluding some from the Kingdom, or including others in it; declaring, in Christ's name that sins are forgiven or continue to be accounted. After Christ's resurrection, He again confirms emphatically that He has given them this task. On the very day of His resurrection, He comes to His disciples, breathes on them, and then says, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (John 20:22, 23).

Having been granted this authority, the apostles laid the foundation of the church. For all ages, they established the laws and ordinances, the regulations and arrangements of the church. That which they thus established, they recorded in the New Testament. It is there that we now find the constitution of the church! Enacted at Christ's commands, by His power, and under the special guidance of His Spirit, through the apostles! It is to this constitution that the church remains completely bound, until the last day.

When the apostles passed away, the manner in which Christ governs His church was drastically altered. The apostolic office was unique! It was, by its nature, intended to disappear. For the apostles

were special in that they had known Christ during His sojourn on earth, and that, by the special operation of the Holy Spirit, they were enabled to recall infallibly what Christ had said, in order subsequently to record this for the church of all ages. This could not, of course, be continued. The foundation of the church could be laid but once. And those who lay the foundation, once their work is complete, must be replaced by those who erect the walls.

Scripture is unmistakable in its rejection of the Romanist view that the apostolic office and the apostolic authority still operates today. Rome teaches that the clergy, concentrated in the Pope, still have the competence to establish dogma with divine authority, and may still forgive or retain the sins of any in the same way that the apostles were empowered and authorized to do.

How did church government change after the apostles departed? Again, also after the apostolic age, it pleased Christ to use **men** to exercise His dominion over the church. Of course, these men have a much more restricted authority than that which the apostles possessed. They do not receive new revelations from God. Authoritatively forgiving sins is also beyond their competence. Moreover, in their service of governing the church, they are fully bound by the word of the apostles. Nevertheless, however restricted the authority of these men who are called to auxiliary service in Christ's government of the church may be, they do have certain **authority**.

It is superfluous to say that also this power is fully subordinate to Christ. It is not independent, autonomous, or sovereign. It is bound to the Word of Christ, once given and later inscripturated. It is **derived**, **dependent**, and intended for **service**. It consists of no more, as a matter of fact, than the administration of Christ's Word.

It has become customary to subdivide this authority, distinguishing between the power of **doctrine**, of **discipline**, and of **government**. The **power of doctrine** consists of establishing the doctrine

of Holy Scripture in order to lay this upon the consciences and to apply it to the people; and this sealed by the sacraments. The **power of discipline** includes both the exercise of censure, if necessary with exclusion from the congregation, and also the readmittance into the bosom of the church of those excluded when they give evidence of repentance. The **power of government** covers on the one hand the establishment of regulations and provisions for the arrangement of the ecclesiastical household, and on the other, the management of this household according to these regulations and provisions.

However, regardless of the validity of these distinctions in ecclesiastical authority, one should never forget that in the end, this power is nothing but the administration of the Word. "All authority in the church is directly or indirectly the administration of the Word," Bavinck writes. The focal point of the church's **life**, and therefore of the church's **authority** is the preaching. The sacrament underlines, or attaches a seal to the preaching. Exercising discipline is a very personal preaching to a hardened or repentant sinner. And all regulations made and carried out by the church are subordinate to and in service of the administration of the Word.

The **administration of the Word**, then, is the ecclesiastical authority which Christ grants those whom He now wishes to use in His government of the church. Who are these people, in the first place? The Reformation answers, "the believers, the whole church, the church as such." Christ rules His church through His church. The whole church is to **preach**, to **exercise discipline**, to **govern**. The ecclesiastical office is, first and foremost, the **congregation's office**, or, to put it differently, the **office of all believers**.

This thesis was emphatically driven home by Dr. A. Kuyper. "It can hardly be doubted," he wrote in 1881, "that the **authority to act** on Christ's behalf rests in principle not at all with the officebearers, but

with the **congregation**”. “The authority of the church,” we read in 1889, “was given by the King of the church not to its leaders, but originally to the believers.” “Let us never forget,” a warning from 1892 reads, “that according to Reformed ecclesiastical principles, the authority from Christ (the *potestas ecclesiae*) rests not with the consistory, but with the congregation.” The Reformed confession, he notes in 1895, is “that the *potestas ecclesiae*, that is the ecclesiastical competence to exercise authority, was invested by Christ our King not in the consistory, but in the **congregation**. This is, indeed, a first principle of Reformed church polity.”

To obtain good insight into the Reformed view of church government, this is of prime importance. All authority which Christ wishes to exercise by means of men in the government of His church is granted to the believers, that is, to the **congregation**. This is a foundational truth in church government.

The “office of all believers” and the “special office”

We concluded that the authority which Christ would have exercised in His church by **men** was in the first place entrusted to the believers, to **all** believers. Not to those believers individually, but to those believers as they form a community. To put it differently, Christ grants ecclesiastical authority to the **church itself**, in the first place. This truth is one of the foundational principles of Scriptural church government.

Having been convinced of this truth, and wishing to accept it wholeheartedly in order to live by its light, we are immediately struck by another question: in the church of Christ, which has been entrusted with the exercise of ecclesiastical authority, how should we see the place, the task, the authority of those who bear special offices, the pastors and

teachers, the elders and the deacons? And what is the relationship between the authority which the officebearers have received and that entrusted to the congregation, the 'believers'?

For those who live from the Scriptures, it is an immutable fact that, according to Christ's command, pastors and teachers, elders, and deacons are to take action in Christ's church, and have a momentous task to fulfil there. The New Testament speaks of them everywhere. Paul explicitly insists that the Christ who had first been humiliated and then exalted gave some to be pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11, 12, see 1 Corinthians 12:28). We also read that wherever congregations had been gathered by the power of the Gospel, elders were immediately chosen (Acts 14:23, see Acts 20:17, 18). Paul explicitly charges Titus to appoint elders in every town (Titus 1:5). The institution of the diaconate is emphatically and clearly indicated in the history of Acts 6. In Philippians 1:1 the deacons are specifically mentioned and distinguished from the elders. Finally, in the last letters which Paul wrote he gives a precise description of the qualifications which these officebearers must possess.

Given the fact that these special officebearers act in the church at Christ's command and thus exercise authority as appointed and called by Him, the question must follow, What is the relation between the authority of the **congregation**, the authority of the 'believers' and that of the **special officebearers**? In the course of time, as can be imagined, a number of answers have been given to this question. We will be taking note of two, in order to highlight the contrast between these two incorrect answers and that of Scripture.

First the answer that Rome gives. According to the Romanist view, all ecclesiastical authority, indeed, everything in religion which bears relation to authority, is concentrated in the clergy, and especially in its head, the Pope. In fact, the clergy forms the essential church. The

laity are simply to obey the commands of the clergy, and to accept whatever these provide. The laity have no authority at all. In his well known *Catechism*, for instance, Dr. F. van der Meer writes, "The first bishop has the same authority to act in the whole church as each of the others has in his own diocese. He stands in the place of Christ, is teacher of the Church and Father of the faith, and is therefore called papa or Pope, that is father. He shares the fullness of the priesthood with the bishops; in this he is but the first among equals, and therefore he addresses them as reverend brothers. Only he, however, has the fullness of the teaching office, the authority to dictate."

The Independents flatly contradict this Romanist position. They judge that each arbitrary group of believers may form a church. Thus they speak of a 'society' or 'congregation', and insist that in such a congregation there can be no directing power. All authority in such a group of believers rests with the congregation itself. This body must judge all things, must make decisions concerning all things - confession, worship, discipline - by majority vote. Neither elders nor the consistory have any real authority: the consistory must simply carry out the will of the congregation. It does not govern.

At first glance, Rome and the Independents are diametrically opposed, when it comes to the government of the church. But upon looking more closely, one may see that in one important respect, indeed, in the root of the matter, they correspond very closely! Both errors rob Christ of His authority over the church, and transfer it to men. The only difference is that in the Roman system, this authority is concentrated in one person, and thus creates a dictatorial regime beyond comparison with anything that has ever existed in world history; while in the independentist or congregational scheme the sovereignty of the people prevails.

The Reformed view is principally distinct from either error. It consistently maintains its starting-point in the fact that Christ and Christ

alone has and exercises authority over and in His church. In addition, it confesses that Christ entrusts the administration of the authority which He wishes to be effective in His church through human service primarily to the church as it institutes itself in various places, and secondarily to that church as a whole. That authority proceeds from Him to the believers as they are gathered in their particular church formation or institute. In this way the "office of believers" comes into being, or, as it could also be called, the "office of the congregation." In this regard the believers must be seen as a unity or as a community.

In this exercise of authority by the whole congregation and over the whole congregation, nonetheless, the special officebearers appointed and instructed by Christ have a very particular place. They have received their own, irreplaceable position and authority in the congregation.

This state of affairs may best be seen and distinguished when we observe what happens at the institution of a church at a particular place. When a number of believers live at such a place, it is their calling to manifest the church of the Lord there as soon as possible by instituting a church, that is, by instituting the offices and the various ministries. They must establish there the special offices of minister, elder and deacon. They must elect such officebearers to form the consistory of that place, and then call a minister as soon as possible.

Normally, such institution occurs under the guidance of and in cooperation with neighbouring churches. Nevertheless, in such a situation, the believers act very independently. Having come together and having decided, in the Lord's name and at His command, to function as church in that place, by that very decision the church of Christ has become manifest in that place, and the community of believers has full ecclesiastical authority. In principle, the entire ecclesiastical authority, that of administering word and sacraments, of exercising discipline, and of governing and doing works of mercy, all rests fully with the church which is thus instituting itself.

What, then, of this self-manifesting, instituting church? What is it to do next? It elects elders and deacons and does so quite independently. Even without any form of nomination or presentation. Once those elders and deacons are elected and ordained, the distinction exists in that church: there are 'believers' and 'special officebearers'. Or to put it differently, there is the 'congregation' and the 'consistory'.

Once this has occurred, what has actually happened? At Christ's command and in His name, the believers of that place, as a whole, as a unity, have appointed certain brothers to be deacons or elders, and in Christ's name, they have charged these brothers with the exercise of a portion of the authority of the church; that portion, namely, which rightfully belongs to the special offices of elder and deacon, according to the Scriptures. No, they do not 'give' them all ecclesiastical authority which Christ would have exercised through men. They 'keep' for their own exercise a great deal of authority, namely, that which pertains to the 'office of believers'. But they do indeed 'give' a great deal of authority to the newly elected officebearers.

It is self-evident, and need be mentioned only to avoid any possible misunderstanding, that the church which is thus instituting itself does not grant the elected officebearers this special authority by virtue of its own inherent fullness of authority. This is impossible, simply because believers have no inherent authority of their own. No, the flow of authority which issues from Christ into His church, in order to be exercised there by men, is in part, according to his ordinances, to be channelled in and through His church to the special officebearers. Thus these receive - by way of the congregation - special authority from Christ Himself, and they are to exercise it faithfully as bearers of the special office.

The duality which has thus been established of special officebearers and believers, of consistory and congregation, though maintaining the distinct position and calling and authority of each, is now

to administer the complete, multicolored ecclesiastical office, and to exercise the complete ecclesiastical authority. Special officebearers and congregation are to work **together**, each in their own role. There is no task of the office, no official exercise of authority from which either the consistory or the congregation is entirely excluded. The relationship between consistory and congregation will be very intimate, if the life of the church develops according to God's Word. Wherever possible, the consistory will wish to involve the whole congregation in its work. The congregation, on the other hand, will want to share in the work of the consistory and of the special officebearers as much as is legitimate and possible. A cooperation which penetrates all church life and encompasses all church work, each with his own place and task, will naturally come about.

Once we have seen this development, we will also see the dual aspect of the relationship between consistory and congregation. On the one hand, the consistory represents the congregation. The congregation is concentrated in the consistory. The congregation, the church, speaks, acts, and exercises authority through the consistory. In the minister of the Word, and through him, it is the entire church that preaches and administers the sacraments; in the elders, and through them, it is the entire church which exercises discipline and governs; in the deacons, and through them, it is the entire church which performs acts of mercy. On the other hand, however, in the special offices - because the special office which they administer, and the special authority which they exercise is Christ's - Christ Himself acts among His own. It is true, indeed, that the ministers, elders, and deacons are chosen and installed in their office by the members of the church, by the believers, by **men**, in other words; by way of these men and their believing ecclesiastical activity, they receive their calling, office, and authority. But in the final analysis they are chosen and appointed exclusively by Christ alone. For this reason they are exclusively preachers of His Word, distributors of

His sacraments, ministers of His authority!

On the one hand, then, the **church** ‘comes up’ in the special officebearers. By them, it works, speaks, witnesses, blesses and curses in the world. On the other hand, Christ ‘comes down’ in the special officebearers. He works, speaks, witnesses, blesses and **curses** through them and their faithful service in world and church.

The Reformers had a clear and beautiful image of the mutual relationship between the congregation and the special officebearers. Expanding on Paul’s words of 1 Corinthians 12, they compared Christ’s church, as instituted and continuing at a particular place, to a **person**. In a person we may distinguish various organs, and with each, the various operations for which it is responsible. A person can look, hear, walk, and so on. When he does so, making use of his various organs, we say, “That **person** looks, hears, walks,” - although we know quite well that he sees with his organ of sight, hears with his organ of hearing, walks with his organ of walking, his legs. Without question, it is the whole person who performs the various actions; however, he does so by means of those organs responsible for each function.

The church of Christ at any particular place may be compared to this. That church, that entire church, is to preach the word. That church that entire church, is to administer the sacraments and to govern itself. It must perform all the necessary functions itself. However, it does so particularly; it does so concretely and systematically by means of the organs especially granted it by Christ for those purposes. It preaches and administers the sacraments by means of the organ of the pastoral and teaching office. It governs and exercises discipline by means of the organ of the office of elder. It practices works of mercy by means of the organ of the office of deacon.

This is a clear illustration of the aspect of the church just indicated; that the church functions in and through the offices, in the special organs which Christ has granted it. Of course, when we use thi

image, we should not forget that each member also has personally received the office, and must now administer it in the assembly of Christ's church; we must especially remember that in the faithful officebearers, in the first place our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ Himself works and speaks in His church and in the world.

It has been Christ's pleasure to organize His church in the glorious manner shown above. He is king of His church, and demands recognition and obedience as such. He does not permit any intrusion upon His royal authority. He Himself organises His church in such a way that His royal dominion has its greatest possible effect -- to put it in human terms. He has given His church a structure, an organizational form, a government which tempers, as much as possible, the ungodly and corrupting influence of human sin. For there is always such influence in the church and its government! Christ has been pleased to use **people** in His government of the church, for example, His disciples, the faithful, His little children. He has made them into a people of prophets, priests, and kings. In whatever He does, He involves the believers. They are to be His co-workers. He chooses not to complete His work without them. Neither His work in and with the church, nor His work in and with the government of the church. By this very fact, however, there is a great danger to the church: for in those people sin still reigns so extensively. Sin, which is always **pride**: wanting to be something oneself, wanting to do something oneself. Sin, which is always lust for power; lust for power in the Lord's church! Each person's heart shelters a pope! Not even the most pious is immune to the temptation. In sincere conviction of serving the wellbeing of the church, one can become guilty of the most reprehensible abuse of authority, or of the greatest injustice.

This is why Christ has so ordained that in His church He granted the office to govern to the whole assembly of 'believers', and in the narrower and special sense, to the leaders: ministers, elders, and

deacons. Organised in this way, there can be mutual supervision on the part of the two bearers of authority. Both are to be diligent in their own position and calling, in dedication and faithfulness to the King of the church!

If official authority had been granted exclusively to the leaders, this 'class' would certainly develop pretensions to Christ's place, and would call into being a hierarchy of Pope, bishop, or synod. Wherever it was thought that Christ allowed His authority to be exercised only, or largely, by the leaders, such a hierarchy indeed developed. All of church history shows such a sorry spectacle: a restless urge to hierarchy, appearing in all sorts of destructive guises. By far the greatest part of what calls itself Christianity has been thus enslaved.

On the other hand, if all official authority had been granted only to the 'believers', the demon of the 'sovereignty of the people' would have slain its thousands. As has indeed happened in all sorts of independentist movements! Wherever there was no appreciation for the particular unique position and authority of the special office, popular arrogance and popular dictatorship obscured and displaced the majesty of the Lord, which should have filled His church.

Christ, however, has given the authority both to the circle of 'believers' and to the officebearers. In a marvellous way this two-fold authority is interconnected and mutually effective. Both are applications of Christ's authority; both are completely bound to His Word. Both are to recognize each other and make room for each other. The two are to cooperate; they are also to pay close attention to each other; for in both Christ actualizes His authority over His church and leads it to glory.

It is now necessary to spend some time on the exercise of this authority by **consistory** and **congregation**. The importance of a clear insight into the official competence of **consistory** and **congregation**, each in its own peculiarities and together in their relation and cooperation, car-

never be overestimated.

To obtain a clear insight into the government of the church by means of the official service of congregation and consistory, it would be best to make a comparison with civil government. There is a sharp contrast between the two; and by observing this contrast, the particular characteristics of **church** government will be most effectively clarified.

The distinction between the authority of the government in civil life and the authority which we see operating in Christ's church is indeed both sharp and fundamental. "In the civil State, the people have certain **freedoms** and **rights**," says Dr. Kuyper, "but never the slightest authority to govern."

It is the curse of democracy, or 'government by the people' in the true sense of the word, that it ascribes authority to the people, indeed, considers the people to be the source of all authority. This is the lie of the sovereignty of the people.

The Reformed, that is, the Scriptural view, sees the civil government quite differently. It maintains that, in the civil arena, God gives all authority to rule, insofar as He desires it to be exercised by men, to the **government**. This authority, moreover, is **power of the sword**. In other words, it is authority which, if necessary, may use the sword to kill! This authority is wholly the government's; the people have not received even the smallest measure of it.

The people - that is the subjects within the state - do possess certain inviolable **rights** and **freedoms**. God has given these to the people, and the people possess them and may **exercise** and **enjoy** them quite independently from the will or approval of the government. We are thinking, especially, of the freedom of conscience and worship. "In civil life, then, the people do have *libertas*, but no *potestas*. They do have liberty, but may never be Potentate," as Kuyper puts it clearly and succinctly.

In response to the government's ruling authority, the subjects of the State are to show heartfelt obedience. Only insofar as the government does not require disobedience to the expressed will of God, of course. If the government respects the clearly marked boundaries of its authority, God's Word indeed requires heartfelt obedience to its laws. In turn, the government is to respect the rights and freedoms of its subjects, and, if necessary, to defend them. This is not the least of the purposes for which it has received its extensive authority. The government's authority is to be a wall of protection for the freedoms and rights of its citizens.

In civil life, then, all authority, all competence to rule is exclusively reserved to the **government**; the role of the **people**, on the other hand, is to be subject, to obey. The 'people' is the community of **subjects** of the governing authority. In the church, the situation is radically different. In the church, Christ alone is Sovereign. He has been given "all authority". The government is on His shoulders. The church, then, is an **absolute monarchy**. It is to this monarch Christ that the church as a whole and all believers individually owe obedience. All members of the church are subjects of Christ, as absolutely as could be imagined. More absolutely than would ever be possible or permissible with respect to the State!

This subject relationship of all members of the church with the Christ absolutely dominates the structure of church government. It is true, in the government of His church, the Lord Jesus Christ makes use of people who perform a certain function in that government, who are given a particular office. However, this function, this office, never gives its bearers any **dominion**. Dominion belongs to Jesus Christ alone and fully. Those above whom this function, this office is set, moreover, never become **subjects** of those who function as officebearers. Within the church, then, one is never magistrate. Nor is anyone in the church ever **subject** to another person. An elder, minister, consistory, classis or synod may never start to act as governing authority; for when this

happens, Christ as the only Sovereign of His church is rejected. Nor may members of the church ever act as subjects of consistory, classis, or synod. If they do, they become disloyal to Christ. They are granting people the reverence and obedience which belongs only to Christ.

Scripture is abundantly clear on this matter. Christ forbids His disciples to allow anyone to call them **rabbi**, **father** (Pope) or **master!** “But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brethren. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called masters, for you have one master, the Christ” (Matthew 23:8-10). “The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them,” Christ also says, “and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave” (Matthew 20:25-27). The apostle Peter also impresses upon the ministers that they are to “tend the flock of God that is your charge. ..not as domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:2, 3).

In the life of the state, then, those who have been entrusted with authority to rule are **authorities**, **rulers**. In the church, officebearers are never such. The government in the state has the right and the authority to command, to order, to demand obedience to a command or order and if necessary to enforce compliance, since citizens are **subjects!** However, in the church, officebearers can do no such thing! All they are able and permitted to do is, in Christ's name, to present and impose Christ's Word, His gospel, and His command. The extreme sanction may be the expulsion of unfaithful members from the communion of the church.

In short, officebearers in the State are the **government**, and they have **dominion**, the authority of the **magistracy**; officebearers in the church are a ‘**consistory**’, a ‘**church council**’, and they have a **ministry**, the authority of **service**.

The exercise of ministerial authority is a tremendously difficult

task! It can only be performed with a constant struggle against and a suppression of one's arrogant and domineering heart. The best often prove to be unable to withstand the temptations in this respect. With the sincere intention to serve the wellbeing of the churches, things are often done, demands are made, decisions are taken which do not derive from and are incompatible with true service in the fulfilment of the office; but which are born from a desire to have dominion, a desire of those who are able to achieve their ends by personal stature, by force, by cunning, or by the acquiescence of a willing majority, and who thus succumb to the temptation to be prince of the church.

No assurances to the contrary, no fine words will help if this occurs. Does not even the sovereign ruler, the mighty dictator of Rome's church sincerely call himself *servus servorum Dei*, that is, servant of the servants of God? Prof. F.L. Rutgers repeatedly writes, "Each man's heart shelters a Pope." Reformed church government is first of all: daily binding this incredibly resilient violator of Christ's kingship.

There is another aspect of the church's government by means of the 'congregation' and the special officebearers which must have our attention. It is closely related to what we have just discussed. In the state, there is the government on the one side, with sole ruling authority. On the other side there are the subjects, who have only to obey. In the church, however, all members are equally subject to Christ, all are equally bound to His Word. At the same time, all have equal 'ruling authority', for all members of the church are officebearers. All are prophets, priests, and kings. All have been given the authority to preach, to govern, and to exercise discipline. All have, in this way, authority over all others. We could put it thus: all 'rule' over all. At the same time, all are ruled by all. While Christ keeps them all under His authority by His Word and Spirit, guides them, calls and leads them to unconditional obedience, all those members are both **rulers** and **ruled** with respect to each other. By means of this rule of all over all and this

being ruled of all by all, Christ fully and definitively effectuates His dominion over the Lord's flock.

Now, within this flock there are those men whom Christ has called to be ministers, elders, and deacons. Like all other members of the church, these men are, in the first place, bearers of the general office. Besides that, however, they have also been entrusted with the special office of minister, elder, and deacon. What of their authority? No, they are not placed **above** the congregation. They are in every respect **fellow brothers** with all the members of the church. Their authority is not higher than that of the other members of the church. Just as the other members of the church, they are restricted in their action to speaking the **Word**. Their authority is exactly that of the other members of Christ, no different, no more than that which is inherent in the **Word** which they administer. The essential task of special officebearers is, just as that of the other members of the church, bowing under and passing on the Word of Jesus Christ. And yet there is a difference. We all sense that. Realizing that, we ask, immediately, what comprises the difference in office and authority? In what respect is the authority to rule of the special officebearers to be distinguished from that of the general officebearers?

In short, the answer is this: the special officebearers have received another, a more special task than those who bear the general office. They are respectively to proclaim the Word of the Lord in the assemblies of the congregation, administer the **sacraments** there, exercise particular discipline, establish and preserve order in the church and its work, and do the work of mercy among the poor of the whole congregation. Pastors and teachers, elders, and deacons have been called to these special tasks. Again, these special offices and the authority inherent to them are not 'higher' or 'lower' than the office of believers. The bearers of each have complete equality, and the authority that they all possesses is none other than that of the Word which they bear forth and impose. The special offices are no more (but no less, either), than

special official tasks which Christ has entrusted to them, and not to the entire congregation. It is an urgent matter that we realize these things. For the view of believers concerning the nature and exercise of the office is still highly charged with sin.

All special officebearers are constantly to remember that they are **nothing**, that they have but one task, namely speaking the Word which Jesus Christ wants to have spoken in a given situation - which He Himself thus speaks; performing the action which Jesus Christ wants to have done there and then - which He Himself thus performs! They are constantly to remember that their authority is none other than that which is inherent to the Word spoken in Jesus' name, the action performed at Jesus' command. At the same time, they are to be well aware of the fact that if they do **not** speak God's Word, and do **not** act at Christ's command, they stumble out of their office and must be resisted in God's name.

The congregation must also understand and experience that Jesus Christ wishes to perform His great and glorious work in the church and by the church by means of special officebearers. He wishes to have the labour of preaching in the assembly of the congregation, the administration of the sacraments, the exercise of censure - which leads to a withholding from the Lord's Supper and eventually to excommunication - the government of the church, and the works of mercy performed by the special officebearers, and does not tolerate anything else in His congregation. Certainly, if all ministers should be removed, an elder or deacon or even a regular member of the church could administer baptism and likewise the Lord's Supper. However, if these officebearers are present, or could come, Christ demands that the order which He desires and realizes be acknowledged and reverenced in strong faith and with great joy! Only if the ecclesiastical order which He desires is acknowledged and obeyed; only if the ministries which He desires and has appointed are faithfully fulfilled and reverenced may the

church count on His blessing.

After what has been stated above, it will be evident that the administration of the church is quite different from that of the state. For this reason, it will be important, in speaking of and characterizing phenomena in the life and government of the church, to avoid all sorts of concepts and terms which are derived from civil life and civil administration. Democracy and aristocracy; representation; legislative, executive, and judicial authority; restricted or universal suffrage; women's suffrage, and so on: these do not apply at all to their analogies in church life! Things in the church are simply not the same as things in the state. No more than a minister of the Word, a consistory, or a deacon could or should occur in the structure of the state; no more may we have, in Christ's church, a cabinet, popular representation, a police force, democratic government, and so on. Unfortunately, the confusion which comes from the use of civil terms to denote ecclesiastical relationships and phenomena is widespread, affecting many people's concept of the church.

It will not be necessary to elaborate on the difference between the administration of a private, voluntary association set up at the initiative of people and the church which Christ Himself continues to gather and upon which He bestows His Word and Spirit. Such an association has an executive which merely carries out the will and decisions of the members. In it, the majority decides. If the executive disagrees with the decisions which have been taken, it can simply resign! If the executive does not perform its functions to the satisfaction of the members, they can simply dismiss it.

From this, the profound difference between such an association and the church, between the administration of such an association and the government of the church, and between the executive of such an association and the consistory of the church becomes immediately apparent. The church is and lives quite uniquely as the body of Jesus

Christ in the midst of society; it is quite unique also in its government.

No dominion of one over another!

We have tried up to this point to show what the relationship is between the **general** and the **special office**; or, to put it differently, between the **office of believers** and that of **pastor and teacher, elder, and deacon**; or, again, between **congregation** and **consistory**. Again and again this proves to be necessary. Whenever something goes wrong in the government of the church this point is where the deviation begins. With all sorts of motives - often quite respectable! - the special officebearers arrogate an authority which they do not have. No longer do they live in the attitude of faith which tells them in no uncertain terms that they have no dominion themselves. No longer do they understand that their labour is merely service. No longer do they see that, whatever the situation, their only task is holding up the Word of Christ, explaining it, and demanding obedience to it. No longer, then, does Jesus Christ truly reign in all parts and expressions of church life, and in all its members.

If this attitude of faith is lacking, hierarchy is inevitable. The church may still be 'presbyterial' in name, its formal structure may be ever so anti-hierarchical, its official confession and church order may be fully Scriptural, but it is to no avail! If spiritual, faithful, Scriptural administration of the offices is lacking in the church, hierarchy, that is, the **rule of men**, human tyranny, has become a fact.

We have experienced it in all its terrible effects: after the First World War this church-destroying poison gradually and subtly entered all of church life, eating its way like cancer. Now here, then there; now in this deputy position, then in that church assembly: the boundaries which the Lord's command sets for ministers of the church and ecclesiastical assemblies were transgressed. Corruption set in and the

destruction continued. Anyone who is aware of what occurs within the churches still bound by synodocracy is amazed at the contrast with what was preached and practised at the time of the Doleantie! The hierarchical theory that a synodical decision is always and without exception to be obeyed by every consistory, and that a consistory can be deposed by a synod at any time has been elevated to the status of a divine law. Inextricably tied to that, church work is increasingly concentrated in the powerful and experienced hands of the few, while the many remain completely unaware and uninvolved.

To illustrate the difference between today's almost universally triumphant hierarchy and the life of the church in earlier times, and as an example of the warnings then issued against this hierarchy, I would like to quote Rev. J. Sikkel of Amsterdam.

If there was anyone who hated hierarchy, it was he! He would seek out any symptoms of it immediately; and in order to struggle against this form of deviation, he would always try to involve all members of the church in all matters of the church. With great vigour he would agitate against the slogan, "Leave the people out of it!" "We think," he once wrote, "that this maxim is a dangerous one, though it continues to attract some."

The adherence to this rule is an example of a human inclination which one may meet in many contexts. All governing authorities resist the influence of their subjects. All heads and leaders keep as much as possible to themselves. All boards prefer to do their work with as little interference from their associations as possible. The electorate is necessary to have their representatives elected, but beyond that they are best kept at a distance.

Also those who take on a church office are not free from the temptation to regulate all church affairs together with their fellow officebearers. The consistory is the only one who needs to be informed; the congregation needs merely to follow. Classes and synods, in turn,

demonstrate a natural inclination to exalt themselves over consistories, and publish only just so much that one is kept outside of things, and that the secret of the history, the actual events, are known only by those who have been members of synod. Committees and deputies, in their turn, have the same attitude towards the classes and synods. They must pass through the portals of those assemblies; but otherwise they would rather conduct affairs by themselves. One or two people could easily handle them; you need only observe and approve - and the less you know and understand, the better it is.

In the same way, officebearers have a reserved attitude towards each other. Everyone knows of the sensitive relations between elders and deacons. Deacons prefer to keep the elders out of the diaconate: this is their own business. Elders often have little use for meetings where deacons appear, or protest against the intruders in their hearts. Ministers of the Word, also, find it difficult to escape the general inclination indicated. The ministry of the Word and sacraments is their business; elders who wish to comment on the ministry of the Word often encounter resistance or a haughty attitude, although it must be said that this is often because the elder gives the impression that he is actually the one responsible, while the minister is no more than his subordinate, his delegate. No officebearer enjoys the consistory's evaluation of his service in the office. Even with respect to fellow officebearers in the same office one's attitude can easily be, 'Let my fellow officebearer mind his own business; I am quite capable of handling my own work.'

One would almost say that this spirit, which denies communion, is even more prevalent in church life than it is in regular life. Indeed, especially in ecclesiastical affairs an unscriptural, and therefore unspiritual secrecy often prevails. There especially 'closed doors' are treasured. Sikkel says: "Nowhere do more whispered secrets abound than in church life. The inclination to an official wink, a private little walk, to keep folks in the dark develops nowhere so well as at the ecclesiastical

court. In a very short while conventions develop, unwritten rules which arriving officebearers impress upon each other, and in which old hands with their clever little eyes which are so commonly and strategically closed have a well-deserved reputation."

The result of this attitude is a powerful aversion to an independent church press, which discusses church affairs openly and in the hearing of the 'ordinary people'.

"Everyone knows," Rev. J. Sikkel continues, "of the official blacklisting, especially by ministers, of papers which discussed church affairs in the language of the common people and for the people...No government ministry would dream of placing the press under the ministers, no popular representative would ever dare to suggest that journalists should really be subordinate to them; yet, the editors of the old *Kerkelijke Courant* are appointed and dismissed by the Synod of the Reformed (*Hervormde*) Church in The Hague, and this example is followed even on Reformed (*Gereformeerde*) ground. A church paper should not be more than a bird on the official perch."

"One who does not ride out through the official gate can be sure that in the realm of the press he will face opposition from ecclesiastical officebearers. Especially if he openly publicizes and discusses church matters, the service of the church, and church life."

"It is only natural that officebearers do not see the need of this, and make no bones about the fact that they do not read such a publication. That such material is recommended is an exception. Indeed, an officebearer needs a fresh mind, a determined character, and maturity in one's life in the church to be an example in this respect, to promote the reading of an independent and principled church paper which truly examines matters. Sympathy and support primarily come from those who stand outside of the church offices, insofar as they have come to love the affairs of God's church and to understand something of their calling through the anointing of the saints to understand and promote the things

of God's congregation."

Sikkel calls the negative tendency retribution, an attempt to return to the Old Testament. It means resisting the Holy Spirit. "In the Old Testament, matters were taken care of by the office. Christ's refusal to be cloistered in Jerusalem, His refusal to be led by the leaders; His going through the land, teaching everywhere from Galilee to Jerusalem, and bringing the crowds into action; His concern for the sheep, for the congregation out of all generations, despite Jewish self-exaltation: by these things did the decision to have Him killed come to fruition."

"Paul's struggle in the apostolic church had the same characteristics. Rome too applied Old Testament rules in the church, secluding the people behind a barricade and allowing the clergy to take care of everything. And even today, the character of the New Testament church is being violated and resisted by clerical inclinations and aspirations. This is what we are attacking. Despite the well known and repeated warning, 'Leave the people out of it!'"

Sikkel concludes his fiery discourse as follows: "In our judgment, the church's affairs are the affairs of the believers; we know no church than the communion of believers. Church life is the life of that communion, and the development of the church is the development of that communion. The offices belong to that communion. The communion is nothing without the offices; in it they have their own place and task. Nevertheless, the offices belong to the communion, not vice versa. The development of the offices is part of the development of the communion. The task and service of the offices are subject to the judgment and responsibility of the communion. The offices and ministries are to serve and upbuild the communion of the church. '**Bring the people into it!**' must therefore be our rule. Of course, this must take place in order to teach the believers to know, to judge, and to serve the affairs of the Lord's church, in the light of God's Word and under its discipline. We call on those who confess the Name of the Lord to accept their obligation

to seek clear insight into the affairs of the church, into all those affairs, and thus also of the offices; in order that they may be fellow-workers, that the congregation, the whole communion, in or outside of the office, may serve the Lord in accordance with His Word."

Reformation of the church always includes this aspect: that the people of God again come to know their place and calling, and that the special officebearers, gripped by God's Word, again come to know what it means to serve! It means that all come to the renewed spiritual insight that Jesus Christ wishes to have sole and complete dominion over His church, and that all have only the task which belongs to the sphere where their Master has placed them, the task which He has assigned them and the competence which He has granted them. There they are to obey Him and be one another's servants.

It was in this manner that the sixteenth century reformers lived, that the chains of slavery of the Romanist hierarchy were broken by the power of a reviving office of all believers. In the days of the Secession and the Doleantie the same things occurred with respect to the fetters of the board hierarchy of the Netherlands Reformed Church. "Our fathers in the days of the Reformation," Kuyper writes, "knew full well that the restoration of the ecclesiastical task, responsibility, and authority of the members, that which we call the 'office of believers', had to be the primary objective."

"In one of the first writings with which Luther initiated the Reformation, namely, *The Freedom of a Christian*, he emphatically pleads for the defense of the 'office of believers' as opposed to the alleged absolute office of teachers. The 'universal priesthood of believers', which Rome had so carefully embalmed and enshrouded, Luther powerfully snatched out of the bands of death, preaching once again to the ears of an astounded Europe the glorious golden truth that believers did not possess the Word of God in Scripture only through the channel or funnel of their priest or teacher; but that they themselves had

the calling and official obligation to defend the rights of that Word even against their priest or teacher, to break with a priest or teacher who did not reckon with that Word, also with respect to the government of the church; and that they themselves had to act in accordance with the burden which God had laid on them.

This was not a **side issue** to the sixteenth century Reformation; it was the **main issue**. The tone set by Luther in this and subsequent writings remained basic to not only the Lutheran, but also the Calvinist and Zwinglian Reformation. Theologian after theologian has laboured to confirm especially this good right of the believers. Not only that, they did not merely uphold this principle in **theory**, but at every point in the battle line, in every country and in every form it was put into **practice**¹⁵.

Kuyper himself has described, in a clear and Scriptural manner, the riches and beauty of the office of believers. It is due, in part, to his labour that the office has again begun to function to the honour of God and the flourishing of Christ's church. We would like to explain Kuyper's view of the function of this office with respect to the church. Before we do so, one remark should be made.

No one should think that this office's sphere of activity is to be limited to the church! This is sometimes claimed, even by those who are Reformed. Any who do so, should realize that this is a denial of the classic Reformed standpoint, and a departure specifically from an essential part of Kuyper's teaching. In accordance with God's purposes, the office of believers encompasses and penetrates all of human life! **Being a human is being an officebearer.** Working in God's world, and according to God's command, is nothing less than fulfilling an office. Having been called and enabled by the redemption in Christ to the

¹⁵ *De Heraut*, February 17, 1889

service of God, our service is official service, the fulfilling of the office of prophet, priest, and king. **Being a Christian is being an officebearer.**

“The spiritual offices of prophet, priest and king are founded,” Kuyper writes, “in our creation after God’s image. Being prophet, priest and king is man’s original calling. Man fell from this office when he fell into sin. Only a weak trace was left to work in Melchizedek. In the ministry of shadows this office was symbolized, but not realized. Then, finally, the Christ appeared, and in Him the true man, who would be prophet, priest and king after the order of Melchizedek returned; but now, by anointing, as head of the new humanity, He shared this threefold office with all who were His”¹⁶.

Speaking of the office of believers, then, in relation to the government of the church, we are most definitely referring to this all-encompassing office; however, we are observing it only insofar as it operates in relation to the institute of the church.

If we wish to overview the field of activity of the office of believers in relation to the church, it is useful to create a certain subdivision. In the normally instituted church we distinguish three sorts of official activity: the ministry of the Word and sacraments; the government of the church; the ministry of mercy.

It seems obvious that one should examine the relation of the office of believers to each of these official functions. In addition, we may observe the relationship in which the office of believers functions with respect to the special office. There are three possibilities: 1. The office of believers operates independently, with no relation to the special office; 2. The office of believers functions in relation with the special office; 3. the office of believers takes the place of the special office. Taking the

¹⁶ *De Heraut*, January 27, 1889

second division as our main one, we will note how in each case, the ministry of the Word, government, and the ministry of mercy is exercised by the office of believers.

Independent operation of the office of believers

Before anything else, we must mention the calling of the office of believers at places where special offices have not yet been instituted. In this situation, it is the task of believers to establish those special offices as soon as possible. Where this can be done, the believers at that place should seek the leadership and cooperation of neighbouring churches. If this is impossible, they must act completely independently.

If the believers at a certain place desire that institution of the special offices, and come together for that purpose, they are acting as people who realize that they have been elected and called not only to salvation, but also to Christ's service, especially in His church. By coming **together**, by working for that purpose **together**, by assembling **together**, they recognize each other in the official quality of believers who must work **together** in Christ's name, and who will now do so. By thus working for the goal which they have set, and by their assembling for that purpose, Christ's church at that place is institutionally manifested. In obedience to God's Word, the believers do what that Word imposes on them in their official quality.

Kuyper continues: "After thus having formed the church of Christ in their location, they proceed with the establishment of the special offices which the King has ordained for His church, and appoint overseers and deacons whom they invest, in Christ's name and according to His Word, with the authority that is theirs in virtue of their special office; with the provision that they will remove these special offices from them should they prove not to be servants of the King, but servants of themselves or of some power hostile to Christ...This primordial calling

of the office of believers, though only rarely exercised, is and remains the powerful starting-point of which we may never be lose sight.”¹⁷

If this is the task of the office of believers with respect to the **institution** of the special office, the office of believers retains its own independent task once the special offices are present. In the first place, wherever there are opportunities, it must call those who are still unbelievers to Christ and to the confession of His Name. Furthermore, within the circle of the church, it is to make use of the gifts God has granted in order to edify others. In the third place, by virtue of their office, believers must superintend the doctrine of the special officebearers, applying the *jus discretionis* (the right to judge independently).

“Also in this threefold activity, believers are not acting in a private or particular capacity, but in name of their King, by virtue of the calling which they accepted as members of the church, and in their capacity as participants in the assembly of believers.” In addition, believers have the calling to mutual supervision of each other’s conduct, if necessary admonishing each other (also their leaders), “not in a Pelagian spirit of goodwill, nor in a diabolical spirit of petty criticism, but in the office and calling which they have received from their King”. Finally, as members of the household of faith they are to do works of mercy where that may be necessary, in name of Christ, and seeing Christ Himself in their fellow-believers.

The office of believers in relation with the special offices

With respect to the ministry of the Word believers, by virtue of their office, are to: 1. maintain the service of the church through their

¹⁷ *De Heraut*, March 10, 1889

financial offerings; 2. similarly to maintain the college for the training of ministers; 3. whenever there is a holy convocation, constitute the assembly of believers, in order that there might be the ministry of the Word; 4. pray together before the Lord's face, in order that the ministry of prayer might take place; 5. bring their children to be baptized, in order that the first covenant seal of the congregation may be administered; 6. gather around the table of the New Covenant, in order that the death of the Lord may be proclaimed, not by the priest alone (as in the Romanist church), but in the assembly of believers.

With respect to the government of the church, the believers must fulfil their office by: 1. officially cooperating in the appointment of special officebearers; 2. informing these special officebearers of gross transgressions against the Word within the assembly of believers; 3. taking heed that the government of the church be practiced according to the Word of God; 4. if necessary, taking in hand the reformation of church government, rejecting special officebearers who prove to be disloyal to the majesty of the King of the church, and replacing them with others.

Elsewhere, Kuyper follows Voetius and elaborates on this competence to govern which is inherent to the office of believers. He says that Christ has given believers the charge and the authority to: 1. take part in the appointment of leaders; 2. take part in decisions concerning the acceptance of members and their being allowed to depart with an attestation; 3. take note of what has happened or is occurring in other churches; 4. have some right of say in the decisions of ecclesiastical assemblies concerning doctrinal controversies; 5. take part in sending out delegates and missionaries; 6. perform acts of communion with other churches even outside of the leaders.¹⁸

¹⁸ *De Heraut*, February 3, 1889

Kuyper further distinguishes between judicial authority and governing authority. There too believers have great power in their capacity as believers: 1. not only in matters of private injury, but also at public offenses, to take action as a public ministry; 2. to withdraw from communion with those who live undisciplined lives and to pass such judgment on them; 3. if necessary, to pass similar judgment upon leaders; 4. to readmit into their fellowship those who have fallen but show repentance; 5. if leaders neglect their duty, to take over their directing authority, in the first place by withdrawing from such leaders, their churches, and believers who continue to follow them; and as a second stage by breaking with them definitively, no longer acknowledging communion with them as brothers; 6. in emergency situations, if the consistory is wholly unwilling to do what is right, and if classes and synods do not or cannot offer support, to appoint other leaders in the place of the unfaithful ones, to invest them with the necessary authority to come to the help of the suffering church, if not wholly, then at least in part.

Finally, with respect to the ministry of mercy, the official task of all believers is: 1. to give Christian alms in the Lord's name, in the assembly of believers with whatever money and property of which they are stewards; 2. to inform the consistory of any inequities in the diaconal service; 3. to assist the deacons whenever sickness, pestilence, or other reasons limit their ability to perform their task.

The task of the office of believers in the absence of the special office

Kuyper's view of this function of the office of believers is remarkable! If the special office is lacking, the believers, in their capacity as 'believers', are to act as substitute. This is possible, for the office of believers is primary to the special office.

"If the special office is lacking, believers should come together

for the **ministry of the Word** in order to edify each other; to exercise the ministry of prayer; and if the absence of special officebearers is prolonged, to remember the Lord's death together; and, if necessary, as some suggest, to appoint someone who, by exception, may administer holy baptism. With respect to the government of the church, where the special officebearers are utterly lacking, believers are to employ the key of censure, and also seek federation with other churches. And with respect to the **ministry of mercy**, as long as there are no deacons, to provide for every lack".

Kuyper is very strong in bringing every ecclesiastical activity of believers under the force of official service! Whatever believers do in church life becomes the fulfilment of their office, a deed which occurs at God's command and in virtue of the competence God has granted.

It is well to consider these views of Kuyper's seriously. For we live in a time in which the consciousness of office has worn very thin, and when many who are uninformed think that the accentuation of the office is merely the hobby of some young modernists.

Conflict between consistory and congregation

We have sketched the function of the office of believers in the government of the church. One possibility was, however, deliberately kept out of the picture: the possibility, namely, that a conflict arises between the **consistory** in the exercise of its special official authority and the **believers**, the congregation, in the exercise of their office.

When we consider what can happen and what should happen if such a conflict occurs, we are again struck by the uniqueness of the life of the church. In such a situation, the fundamental difference between the church and all other relations of life becomes especially clear.

For instance, if the consistory is convinced that it has made decisions in accordance with God's Word, it may not shrink back. Even

if the whole congregation should rise up against it: the consistory must maintain and persist in what it has determined. Even if the congregation should dismiss all the officebearers, they may not give way. Though the congregation should reject them, they remain officebearers. They have been lawfully elected and subsequently charged in the name of the Lord with the government of the church according to God's commands. Well, if they do so, they remain officebearers though the whole congregation leave them! They would lose their office, however, if they were unfaithful to the Word of God, even though the congregation should follow them, remaining faithful to them in their unfaithfulness.

On the other hand, if the consistory becomes unfaithful, performing actions and making decisions which conflict with God's Word, the congregation is not allowed to obey them, but is obliged to resist. Then it has the task of attempting to have the consistory turn back from the disastrous course which it has taken; and it must do so with every means at its disposal. When those means fail, furthermore, it is to let the consistory go, to reject it, fully convinced that the officebearers which form the consistory have become unfaithful to their office, and have thus in fact thrown it away.

Especially in the time of the Doleantie this task of the believers in their office was emphatically pointed out; for then this official calling had to be carried out on many occasions. We would like to relate something of this, in order to shed light on this function of the office of believers.

Dr. Kuyper and the other leading figures of the Doleantie saw the situation in the Netherlands Reformed Church around 1886 in the following way. In the Netherlands, the sixteenth century Reformation from the Romanist, episcopal church had led to the formation of many free, independent churches. These churches were complete, and with respect to each other, totally independent churches. They were not a part, a section, a parish of a provincial or national church. Although

they lived together as a bond of churches, and although they periodically came together in classical or synodical assemblies, they recognized no higher authority other than Jesus Christ alone. All church administrative bodies above the consistories were, in their view, an evil invention.

In 1816 these free Reformed churches were subjugated by the strait jacket of a synodical administrative organization. A thoroughly ungodly, un-ecclesiastical administrative apparatus took possession of the authority over the church which is Christ's alone. Consistories became administrative boards of the local 'chapters' of a newfangled, synodical church corporation. Above these local boards stood classical boards. Above these provincial boards held sway. At the apex of the hierarchy a General Board sat enthroned, daring to call itself Synod, and holding, as the regulatory articles decreed, all legislative, executive and judicial authority over the whole church! With and by this synodical organization, which had been absolutely unlawfully put into place, a tidal wave of ecclesiastical decay forced its way into the old Reformed churches! It was especially by this revolutionary organization that the most modernistic preachers could freely propagate their godless teachings; and the abolishment of church discipline allowed all sorts of poisons to multiply unhindered.

Despite this church decay - according to Kuyper and his adherents - many churches had remained **Reformed**. The Word of God continued to be preached in purity - though this might only be enforced by the moral persuasion of minister and consistory - and the sacraments were kept relatively pure. In other churches, however, the degeneration had penetrated much more deeply. At the same time, many other churches had truly become false churches or pseudo-churches.

Kuyper and his supporters wanted separation from all church-corrupting boards and all people who had a function in them. In demanding this, Kuyper appealed to Voetius. This great authority on Reformed church polity maintains that believers have the right and the

freedom to separate (*separandi libertas*) both from such teachers whom they have judged to be unfaithful, and from their public assemblies; at least if the matter in dispute is of sufficient importance, and if it cannot be temporarily put aside in any other way.

“Such a **separation** or **secession** may have a varying character, depending on whether the **whole assembly** of the believers is involved, or only a **majority** of the believers, or finally the **minority**, since the majority has either been misled by the unfaithful leaders, is unconcerned and uncaring, or hesitates too long before coming to a courageous decision (*nimirum tardantibus*).”

“Furthermore, such a **separation** may have either a temporary or a definitive and permanent character; while those involved cope with their situation either by joining neighbouring churches, or by forming a new church body, whether publicly or in secret, doing and offering up everything that may be necessary for this.”

“The separation of the Waldenses was such a definitive separation, as was that of the Bohemian Brethren, and even the great Reformation of the sixteenth century. Provisional or temporary separations were, for instance, those of our Reformed churches in the days of the Remonstrants: the former first contented themselves with the help of neighbouring churches, but soon they established their own church formations, called schismatic churches by the Remonstrants, but *Doleerende*¹⁹ churches by the Reformed; some were also called churches under the cross (*kruiskercken*), as long as they were persecuted

¹⁹ Translator's note: The verb '*doleren*' and the noun '*doleantie*' are derived from the Latin *dolere*, 'to suffer pain, to grieve'. They have come to denote 'objecting', 'dissenting' in a general sense; but more commonly are applied in a narrower sense to the process of reformation which led to the 1886 Doleantie in which Kuyper took such a leading role. One Dutch/English dictionary renders '*doleerende*' as referring to 'the Dutch Nonconformist Church' and to 'dissenting ministers'.

by the Remonstrant authorities".²⁰

This separation from illegitimate church boards and administrators, and from the ungodly, church-destroying bond of churches can occur in two ways: by *doleantie* and by the establishment of **new churches**. One should not make an opposition between *doleantie* and secession! If a church can no longer be reformed from within, a reformation must always occur, and it does always occur, through secession. A separation then takes place from ungodly church boards, from unfaithful officebearers, or, in the worst possible case, from what has become a false church. This secession can be either a *doleantie* or the establishment of a new church. *Doleantie* must always be preferred; however, if this cannot be achieved, refuge must be sought in the formation of a new church.

What is the hallmark of church reformation by means of *doleantie*? To discover the answer, we must be fully cognizant of the fact that if a church has degenerated, it is in the first place the responsibility of those who govern it to work for reformation. It is first of all their calling to struggle against the sins and shortcomings of the church, and to recognize and cause to be recognized in every sector of His church the complete dominion of the King, Christ Jesus.

It is quite possible that those who govern the church are slow or unwilling to take up this task of reformation. If so, the believers are to admonish and urge them to take action, to demand reformation, and in the end, to convict them of guilt. If none of this avails, many believe that believers - that is, the congregation - can do no more than continue their pleas for reformation; propagating it through associations, periodicals, and pamphlets which explain and spread the idea of reformation. They think that when those who govern the church are unwilling, the **believers**

²⁰ *De Heraut*, June 2, 1889

can never press on with a reformation.

The men of the *Doleantie* thought quite differently! They considered it to be the duty of believers themselves to act, if those who governed the churches remain disobedient in spite of every warning. No longer may they follow their leaders, lest they themselves be found to have disobeyed the King Jesus. They must act in a way which maintains the honour of the King Jesus Christ.

When believers thus take action, they are not acting **individually**, in a **private capacity**, not extra-ecclesiastically or un-ecclesiastically, but they are speaking and acting as 'believers', as 'congregation', in virtue of the ecclesiastical office of believers.

The 'believers' are not necessarily **all members** of the church! There will always be many who remain unwilling to exercise their office. Nevertheless, those who take a leading role in such reformational action will have to allow all members the opportunity to participate. They should summon **all members**, but if all do not attend, those who have come together are indeed 'the believers', who can decide and act in name of the **whole church**.

'The believers', then do not act as individual confessors, but as those who belong to a local church and therefore represent that church. They are the continuation of the old church! They do not **plant a new church**, therefore, but **reform the existing one**. Behind this procedure, of course, lies the conviction that the existing church is still church, regardless of its state of degeneration; that it is still the formation of the church of Christ at that place; that 'the believers' belong to that formation and that they now reform by virtue of the rights that this formation gives them.

When the church thus reforms by means of *doleantie*, three possibilities may be distinguished. In the first place, there was a *doleantie* of churches which had wholly remained reformed. Led by their

whole consistory, they simply set themselves free from the ungodly administrative organization, reasserting their original freedom and independence, and thus returned, as a whole, to the doctrine, the discipline, and the service of the old and truly Reformed church. In this way, the *doleantie* was a reformation **of** the church **by** the church. It was an essential **church-restoration** of both head (consistory) and members (congregation). This was the way of the Doleantie at such places as Voorthuizen, Kootwijk, Reitsum, Bunschoten, and so on.

In most cases, the local church's consistory was unwilling to set itself free from the unscriptural church boards. In such cases, the faithful consistory members had to do all they could to convince the unwilling consistory to take the step. If they did not succeed, they had to take action against the unwilling consistory. In this way, the faithful consistory **members** became the **true, legitimate** consistory of the local church. The unfaithful consistory became a revolutionary counter-consistory. The faithful consistory (or perhaps the three, two, or one faithful consistory members) summoned the congregation and thus brought about reformation. With the congregation, it separated itself from the revolutionary, un-ecclesiastical administrative organization, and the church thus liberated was and remained the old, free, and independent church at that place.

There was a third possibility; this one displays the office of believer in full splendour. It often happened, namely, that the consistory unanimously refused to take the reformation in hand. In this case, 'the believers' had to act in complete independence, in confrontation with the existing consistory. One of the brothers who knew himself called by the Lord to do so, took action. Or, even better, several brothers together took the initiative and began the reformation of the church in the name of God. Naturally, they summoned all believers together. They demanded that those who had come together express their agreement with the confession: those who were unwilling set themselves outside of the

church by their refusal. If this had been done, those who had come together indeed represented the church and acted as the local church. They rejected the unfaithful consistory, and chose a new one; the thus reformed church thenceforth acted as the true, lawful church of that place, which had already originated in the time of the great Reformation, and which had now awoke to new life.

In the time of the Doleantie, hundreds and thousands acted according to these guidelines. Certainly, then too there was much chaff among the wheat, there was calculation, tactics, cunning: the extraordinarily serious sin of conformity to the world on ecclesiastical terrain. Nevertheless, faith in Christ who gathers, defends, and preserves His church still dominated. Because they believed, men acted; therefore also they dared to reject, in God's name, anyone who withstood Christ's work. When the question was raised at the synodical convention of 1887 what the attitude of believers should be towards a consistory which stubbornly refused to come to reformation, the assembly decided that believers could "no longer acknowledge" such an obstinate assembly "as consistory"; therefore they should no longer recognize lectures (!) organized by such as administration of the Word, and they should not be found there; they should naturally not seek the administration of the sacraments there either; they should rigorously maintain their non-recognition, and therefore neither accept or issue attestations with respect to it, nor request to be deleted from any membership rolls, since these things would imply the right of that assembly to do this. "As a general principle in this and similar relations, one must maintain that there can be no communion with the sins of these men, lest in His own house the King of the church be denied the honour which is His due."²¹

Finally, one way in which the office of believers may function

²¹ *Acts of the Provisional Synod of 1887*, 52, 53

against those who govern the church should still be observed. It is possible, namely, and all too often it has really happened, that a church of Christ at a certain place becomes completely false. The Word of God has then been totally displaced from the pulpit. In the congregation, true faith has become non-existent, or virtually so. The church has become a kind of association for the advancement of moral life; for the propagation of a particular religious persuasion; or for the cultivation of some religious feeling. It would be a fiction to consider such a 'church' as Christ's church at that place and to derive any official competence of believers from such a 'church'- formation. In such a case, the remnant of believers should individually separate themselves from that synagogue of Satan and organize an entirely **new** ecclesiastical formation, to which no one can be admitted but by **new** confession.

Doleantie presupposes the existence of a church of Christ, though degenerated, in that place, up to the moment that it is reformed, one whose existence continues in that re-formed church. In this case, however, the church which had once existed at a certain place has been completely extinguished. Those few believers who had survived in this hopelessly destroyed church eventually left its shelter and by virtue of the calling of their office once again bring about the manifestation of the church of Christ.

The first method is that of **restoration** of the existing church, or **reformation**. The second is the **replacement** of what has been ruined by a new church, or **church planting**. In both cases, the office of believers operates in full force.

We will now conclude our discussion of the government of the local church, as it is exercised by the exalted Christ by means of the special officebearers, with several remarks. First, a remark concerning the election of officebearers by the congregation. After what has been said above, it will be clear immediately that this election is of great

significance. Whoever maintains, as the Reformed do, that Christ grants the believers communally the authority which He wishes to be exercised by people, must acknowledge that the right to appoint officebearers is fully the due of those believers.

Kuyper says: “In the best periods of Calvinism all authoritative writers agree that the power to appoint the people whom Christ will invest with the office belongs to **the church as a whole**. It does not belong to the civil authorities, or to a lord of some principality, or in the church, to some bishop or pope. It belongs to **the church itself**, meaning the instituted body of believers, or, where this body has not yet been instituted, to the gathering of believers in that place. Whoever one consults, this is always their starting point, which they vigorously defend against Rome, against the Remonstrants, and against the Erastians. Not the national sovereign, nor the local lord, and not the man in Rome, but the local church itself has authority and calling, not to grant the **office**, nor to invest with **authority**, but to appoint the persons who will be given the office.”

“These persons, once appointed, receive the office from Christ, and Christ grants them the official authority by means of His officebearers, whether those of that place or officebearers from elsewhere, if there are none yet. A sharp distinction, then, is always made. The **appointment** of persons to the office is only appointment. The office comes from the King of the church. Article 31 of our confession agrees with this when it says that ‘ministers of God's Word, elders, and deacons ought to be chosen to their offices by lawful election of the Church.’ Similarly, the *Form for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons* asks ‘before God and His holy Church’ whether the brothers ‘feel in your hearts that God Himself, through His congregation, has called you to these offices.’ The correspondence of **church** and **congregation** in this expression shows clearly that what is meant is not

a call of the church through one of its organs, but by the congregation itself. This concept was so well established that not only Calvin and Voetius, but also Turretin, Brakel, Spanheim, De Moor, and others express themselves similarly”²².

“Reformed writers point to four things in order to explain and prove this right of the congregation to elect officebearers: 1. The usage of apostolic times, as familiar to us from places such as Acts 1:23, 6:3, 5, 6; 14:23, 15:22, 25; 1 Corinthians 16:3; 2 Corinthians 8:19, and so on. 2. The nature of the office, which exists for the congregation, not the congregation for the office. If the office exists for the benefit and in service of the whole congregation, it follows that the whole congregation has the right and the authority to call to the office (1 Corinthians 3:22; 2 Corinthians 4:5). 3. The duty of the whole congregation to distinguish between true and false teachers (Galatians 1:8; 1 John 4:1; 2 John 8, 10). This could never take place effectively unless the whole congregation had the right to call those officebearers. 4. The practice of the ancient church. Even in the second and third centuries this principle was upheld in the life and operation of ancient church.”

This is indeed a principle. The congregation has received from Christ the right, and therefore also the duty to appoint the persons who will subsequently, in Christ’s name, be granted the office. The Reformed churches are to take heed, therefore, that by their regulations for elections “the congregation itself, in whose bosom Christ Himself has deposited ecclesiastical authority, appoint its overseers and care-givers for the poor, in order that these may subsequently be installed in their office by the consistory in name of Christ, and be officially bound to the congregation.”²³

²² *De Heraut*, March 21, 1897

²³ *De Heraut*, May 9, 1897

Our next remark concerns the contact between consistory and congregation. From what has been said above, it will also be clear that, in the Reformed view, this contact should be as intimate, as lively, and as extensive as possible. A consistory which performs its work as quietly and as secretly as possible is not Reformed. A congregation which is not intensely concerned and interested in the actions of consistory is not Reformed either! A consistory is unable to do its work, nor is it permitted to do so, without a living, critical, constructive, and supportive interest on the part of the congregation. The congregation is to be called to participate whenever the consistory occupies itself with questions which concern the life of the church. These are matters of the church's King, and therefore must concern it. In all truly great periods of the church's life, the congregation was indeed involved.

Kuyper says: "The congregation was called in when circumcision was foisted upon the Gentiles, Acts 15. The congregation was called in when our Lord's divinity had to be maintained over against Arius. The congregation was called in when the papal yoke had to be cast off in the days of the Reformation. The congregation was called in when God's sovereign grace had to be defended against the Arminians. The congregation was called in when our elder brothers went out to do battle with the neo-Arianism of the '*Groningers*'. Indeed, the congregation was called in, and that **by the irenists themselves**, when the struggle against modernism was fought. And who was against this involvement of the congregation? First, the scribes in the days of Jesus, scornful of the people that did not know the law. Second, the Roman priests in the days of the Reformation. Third, the modernists in their first period, who then demanded exactly what the irenists do now."²⁴

No wonder that those who recognize this plead for as far-

²⁴ *De Heraut*, December 10, 1882

reaching openness as possible, with respect to plans, deliberations, and decisions of the consistory. The consistory of a truly Christian church must deliberately, and always as completely as possible, involve the congregation in its work. The congregation, in turn, must show interest and support with regard to the consistory and its work.

Kuyper, who was heavily criticized for publicizing all kinds of details of the meeting of the Amsterdam Reformed consistory before the Doleantie, wrote: "We are convinced that on principle we may **not** yield to these sharp comments. The gentlemen who made them consider the consistory to be some sort of **secret** council, which deliberates in seclusion, and informs the congregation only as much as seems good to it; or perhaps they might desire the kind of stenographic report published by the House of Commons, which would give a word-for-word rendition of their addresses. Since the latter is impossible, given the great expense, and the former is principally objectionable, we will maintain our due right, by this new and deliberately more detailed information, to meet the demands of Reformed church polity: the consistory is not to be isolated from the congregation, but the congregation is rather to be involved in whatever weighty matters the consistory deals with."

"The consistory is not a secret meeting. Sometimes secrecy may be imposed. If this does not occur, each member of the meeting is free to give information. Since the present writer is member of this council, and also loves his brothers in the congregation, he hopes to acquit himself of his duty to inform others as the opportunity presents itself."²⁵ Much later, when the Doleantie had long since occurred, Kuyper maintains the principle that "the whole congregation may know, and must know, what is decided (by the consistory) in its interest."

In the application of this principle, one must keep in mind that

²⁵ *De Heraut*, June 17, 1883

most of the actions of the consistory are concerned with oversight and discipline, that is, with matters relating to individuals. Such matters must remain secret, of course. With this proviso, the principle described above must be maintained with all vigour.

“A consistory which isolates itself from the congregation severs a vital artery. Its calling is rather to promote as much contact as possible with its congregation. Therefore we applaud a consistory which publishes a report of its activities as well as of all its financial affairs. Especially on ecclesiastical terrain we have an aversion to a policy of silence.”²⁶

With this truly Reformed statement we conclude our discussion of the government of the local church.

Romanists and collegialists

We have concluded our sketch of the government of a local church. However, this does not exhaust the subject of church government. For we know that Christ's church did not remain limited to a local church! On the contrary, slowly but certainly, it expanded until it spread out over the entire world, as it does today. Indeed, there is a great **world church**. The question arises: how is this world church governed? Or rather: how **should** it be governed according to God's Word? In answering this question, we assume, of course, that Christ is the absolute King of His world church, that He governs all churches, spread out across the earth at any given time, by His Word and Spirit. With this view firmly before us, we will examine just how and in what manner Christ realizes His rule over all those churches; which persons, ministries, offices, and organs He chooses to use; or, to put it differently, what Christ demands of the organization of His world

²⁶ *De Heraut*, February 5, 1893

church, in order that His royal dominion be effective also over it.

The church of Rome has its own answer to this question. It is convinced that Peter was appointed by Christ as the visible head of the world church. Christ called him the **rock** upon which He would found His church. Thus Peter was appointed, according to Rome, as the **foundation** of the church. This foundation supports the whole church, gives it coherence, and circumscribes its extent. Just as no building may lack a foundation, so also the church; and Christ appointed Peter to be that foundation, solemnly promising him that this is what he would be. Furthermore, Christ granted Peter the keys of the kingdom of heaven. With those words Christ appointed him as the **steward**, the **master**, the highest **manager** of His house of God on earth.

Christ's further statement that whatever he binds on earth is to be bound in heaven, and whatever he looses on earth is to be loosed in heaven means, according to Rome, that Peter will be the highest **legislator** in Christ's kingdom. Finally, Peter is also appointed by Christ as **chief shepherd** of all His sheep. Did Christ not say to him, "Feed my sheep"? After Christ's departure from earth, Peter is said to have taken up these functions, exercising this authority. Indeed, Rome says, Peter became the **foundation** of Christ's church, the **bearer of the keys** in Christ's house, the **legislator** in Christ's kingdom, the **chief shepherd** of Christ's flock. And in the popes, the bishops of Rome, this mighty authority is fully continued. They have constantly been the **authoritative head** of Christ's church on earth.

The argument which Rome uses to defend this doctrine is curious. To quote a section from a Roman Catholic work of theology: "Was it logical that Peter had a successor in the **visible church**? It is so logical, that one can hardly imagine the visible church without such a successor. For Christ, using the figures of the rock, the bearer of keys, the legislator, the shepherd, does not at all suggest that this is something

particular to the first Christian era; Christ speaks principally and quite generally; therefore there is no conceivable reason why the church, after Peter's departure, should need no foundation; the house, no bearer of keys; the kingdom, no legislator; the flock, no chief shepherd. On the contrary, the **foundation** would have to be the more solid, the keeper of the keys even more indispensable, the **legislator** more necessary, as the house was enlarged, as the kingdom spread over the whole earth; the chief shepherd became the more essential with the prodigious growth of the flock. After Peter's death, Peter became even more **indispensable**, in principle, than when Christ appointed him."

To prove that Peter lives on in the Pope, one author asks: "Is it normal for the church to have a head?" The writer refers to what has just been said, and continues, "It is quite evident that, humanly speaking, to settle disputes, to heal rifts, and to prevent schisms: that is, **to preserve unity**, there could be no better remedy than a recognized, divinely authorized Head of the Church. This is something we know; it would be incomprehensible if the **Son of God** did not."²⁷

This argument is a typical example of the rationalism which is characteristic of the whole Romanist system. At this time, we simply relate the view without offering any criticism, since we have already given the correct explanation of the texts on which Rome erroneously bases its arguments.

Let no one forget that Bavinck has demonstrated extensively that there is no evidence either in Scripture or in history of a primacy of Peter essentially different from the apostolate of the others; of Peter's alleged twenty to twenty-five years as bishop and primate in Rome; or of his handing over these two offices to another, namely Linus. "The primacy of the bishop of Rome, the ecclesiastical dignity of the pope,

²⁷ F. Hendrichs, *De Gouden Keten der Waarheid*, 34-35

and therefore the truth of the Roman church and the salvation of its members is based on an historical probability which could be demolished at any time by new testimonies. Here eternity hangs on a cobweb.”²⁸

Another view of the government of Christ’s church, extremely dangerous yet constantly threatening, sees the church as nothing more than a corporation. In this collegialistic system (*collegium* = corporation) the church of Christ, as it exists in a particular country is seen as a large, indivisible corporation, originating in the free choice of its members. At its head there is a board - illegitimately called a General Synod - which has the highest legislative, judicial, and executive authority. Whether this High Board, this falsely so-called Synod, is appointed by the King or by “lower boards” is really immaterial. It is sovereign in the church corporation and its will is to be obeyed unconditionally. Therefore it demands of all officebearers that they will carry out all the stipulations of its regulations, without leaving an opening for an appeal upon God’s Word. Thus it robs them all of the option, should decisions of a church board conflict with God’s Word, to disobey. This is an intolerable demand in the Protestant church. The great Reformation was born, in fact, from the right and duty of all men to evaluate and if necessary reject decisions for the Lord’s sake.

Under this General Synod are the lower, that is, the provincial and the classical ‘boards’. The lowest board is the consistory, the ‘board’ of the local chapter of the one national church. This collegialist church government is that instituted as the administration of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands during the reign of King William I. In 1816 this administrative coat of mail was imposed upon the church, unasked for and against the will of many of its members. Although the king did gradually withdraw from church affairs, the administrative system which

²⁸ Bavinck, IV, 399.

he had imposed remained. The church remained prisoner to this essentially foreign apparatus. As Groen van Prinsterer said, the synodical, anti-ecclesiastical, coercive yoke which had been a state **creature** became the **heir** of the state.

Prof. Dr. Gerretson once called the administrative organization of the Dutch Reformed Church "that amazing colossus which was erected over and around the national church and its organization; that outmoded structure which is indicated departmentally as 'the Reformed Church Administration'."²⁹

Incisively and accurately he shows the impossibility of liberating the old Reformed Church from the fatal embrace of synodical administrative apparatus: "By this organization the boards came to be turned away from the churches, rather than towards them. And at bottom, this is still true. The church administration rules over the church, rather than that the church governs itself by its administration. This is no reproach of the administration, for it has been **placed** in this position. Thus a contrast came into being between the *corpus* of the church, as we have used the term, and the *corpus* of the church administration. The anti-corporation member of the former, who takes a seat in the latter in order to work reformation suffers the same fate as the anti-parliamentary who takes a seat in the Commons for the same purpose: both quickly absorb the collegial spirit which extinguishes their reformist ideals. This especially makes the situation virtually hopeless."³⁰

The Reformed (*Hervormde*) church administration is fully convicted by what Dr. A. Kuyper once said:

²⁹ W.A. Zeydner, *De Hervormde Kerk op den Tweesprong*, (Introduction by C. Gerretson), 1

³⁰ Zeydner, 11

“1. In any context, ‘highest legislative, judicial, and executive authority’ means sovereignty.

2. Whoever arrogates to himself this highest legislative, judicial, and executive authority in the church of Christ, sets himself up as its Sovereign.

3. The Synod of The Hague does just this, as is literally expressed by Article 61 of the General Regulation: ‘the highest legislative, judicial, and executive authority belongs to the Synod.’

4. God, on the other hand, has set as only Sovereign of and in the church ‘the Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.’

5. This Sovereignty in and over the church is the Mediator’s, but not as God; for as such, original sovereignty over the church, as over everything else, belongs to Almighty God, that is, to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

6. The Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus has therefore been **commissioned** with this sovereignty in and over the church by the Triune God! ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me.’

7. Whoever, therefore, under whatever name, assumes this sovereignty in or over Christ’s Church, commits *lese-majesté* against the Mediator.

8. The Synod of The Hague arrogates to itself, both in form and in substance, this sovereignty. Therefore this Synod is, in its plan as in its existence, is one continual and principal violation of the majesty of Jesus Christ.”³¹

³¹ *De Heraut*, June 10, 1883

Christ's government of the world church

Having rejected the Romanist and the collegialist view of the government of Christ's universal church, we will now see how Christ wants this government to be, and how He has realized it. There is no better way of achieving this than by investigating how in the new dispensation, after the great day of Pentecost, this church-government almost automatically came into being, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The church of Jerusalem existed as the very first congregation. Originally, it was led by the apostles, but not for long, for the apostles were called to the task of proclaiming the gospel throughout the whole world. They had a world-encompassing calling. We notice that soon the apostles have disappeared from Jerusalem, or at least are no longer involved in the day-to-day leadership of the local church at Jerusalem. For instance, when the congregation of Antioch gathered money to assist the church at Jerusalem, they sent it to the 'elders' of Jerusalem (Acts 11: 30). These are apparently the leaders at that time. Among those elders, James (not the **apostle**, for he was beheaded by Herod, but the **brother** of the Lord) takes the first place. When Peter is freed from the prison, he requests that this James be informed (Acts 12:17). At the famous council at Jerusalem, assembled to deal with the problems of the relationship between Jewish and Gentile Christians, James the elder plays an important part (Acts 15:13).

In this way, the church at Jerusalem became a completely independent church. Certainly, it was built on the foundation of the apostles, and - as long as there were apostles - it remained under direct apostolic authority, but otherwise it was a completely

independent church, performing all the work which Christ had assigned His church under the leadership of the office of elder.

As is well known, the direct exercise of the apostolic office soon ceased. It was universal, unique, and therefore transient. According to God's will, it would only live on in the apostolic writings, from which the New Testament grew, and which now, as the inspired apostolic word constitute the law for the life of the whole church of all centuries.

Whenever Christians - apostles, prophets, but also simple believers without a special office or task - preached the gospel at any given place, and a church could be planted, the same thing happened. Each time again, a wholly independent church came into being, besides the churches which already existed, a church which exercised fully the ecclesiastical task of preaching, the administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of discipline. Apparently, each new church had the full authority to do this.

This is very clear, for instance, in the church of Antioch. Because of the persecution which arose after the death of Stephen, believers spread out through the whole land, speaking everywhere of Jesus Christ. A number of those believers - belonging to the Jews who spoke Greek, the so-called Hellenists, and hailing from Cyprus and Cyrene - did this in Antioch. They preached not only to Jews, but also to pagan Greeks. God blessed their work richly. A large number of Antiochenes come to faith and repentance. Thus a church comes into being in Antioch. Of course, preaching occurs there, as does baptism and the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

When this is reported in Jerusalem, the congregation delegates Barnabas to visit that newly planted church in the metropolis on the Orontes. It is worth noting just how he arrives, and what he does there. He does not come as a kind of inspector from the 'mother-church' to inspect and regulate everything. "Jerusalem does not make any demands, does not impose anything. Sending Barnabas is merely a proof of interest

and recognition... there is certainly no evidence of supremacy on the part of Jerusalem.”³² The church of Antioch is thus recognized as a wholly independent church, complete in everything that pertains to a church, in possession of full ecclesiastical authority insofar as Christ gives it to men in order to exercise this everywhere in loyalty and obedience to Him.

That which occurs in Antioch is repeated all over the world of the ancient Christian church. Through the service of Paul, Christ plants His churches everywhere, sets over them elders chosen by the congregation itself, and allows them to do whatever belongs to the work of Christ's church.

The consistent doctrine of Scripture, then, is that wherever the gospel is proclaimed, independent local churches are formed. Kuyper says: “Scripture does know a national church with central authority, under the Old Testament, when the whole nation was included in the church by circumcision; when there was but one temple with one high priest; when the Sanhedrin, with the high priest as chairman, formed the highest ecclesiastical court. But Scripture also teaches us that with the new dispensation this national church has been done away with; that there is no spiritual centre of gravity in Jerusalem, Rome, or anywhere else; and that the central authority in the church is no longer on earth, but in heaven, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.”

“When the apostles go out to establish Christ's church on earth, they do not institute national churches in Asia Minor, Greece, or Italy; rather, under their leadership local churches come into being in Ephesus, Antioch, Thessalonica, Corinth, and Rome. The letters of the apostle Paul are all directed to these local churches. On Patmos, when Christ Himself has John write letters to the seven churches which are in Asia

³² F.W. Grosheide, *De Handelingen der Apostolen* (Amsterdam: H.A. van Bottenburg, 1942), I 371

Minor, this is done to each of these churches individually, by means of the angel or officebearer at the head of each. Write to the angel of the church at Ephesus..."

"Not only does Scripture maintain the independence of the local church to such an extent that it does not know of a national church; it also teaches quite clearly that each of these churches is fully autonomous, and is governed only by its own officebearers. Although the apostles had an extraordinary office which was not limited to one church but applied to all churches, there is no indication that they ever violated or set aside the rights of the local church. In their letters to the various churches they do proclaim God's Word, give advice in difficult cases, and condemn wrongs. But they never encroach upon the rights of the officebearers."

"The clearest example of this may be found in Paul's writing to the congregation at Corinth. There was a man there who lived in an incestuous relationship, having married his stepmother, his father's second wife, probably after his father's death. Although the apostle denounces this, calling it an abomination not even known among pagans, he does not even consider using his own authority to cut the man off from the church, but declares that this must happen "when you are assembled, and my spirit is present" (1 Corinthians 5:4), that is, when the overseers of the church of Corinth agree with Paul on this."³³

In giving this Scriptural picture, we do not lose sight for a moment of the fact that the church of Christ, spread out everywhere, still forms a strong, unbroken unity. For Jesus Christ is its Head and King. In Him all believers have an unbreakable unity. They are bound together in one faith, one baptism. Together they wage one battle and hope for the one and the same salvation. Altogether, they form one body, of which Christ is the head, and all believers members.

³³ *De Heraut*, December 8, 1901

One may not lose sight of this unity for a moment. At the same time, however, we must see that this body of Christ, this one indivisible church, with regard to its institutional form, its organization, and its government through divinely appointed officebearers, exists in the world, lives, and struggles as a **local church** which is complete, independent, and performs all ecclesiastical labour.

Whoever has taken note of the official service by which Christ has His church governed sees this immediately. Certainly, at the beginning of church history in the New Testament, after the great day of Pentecost, we find officebearers whose field of labour was not limited to one local church. These are the apostles, evangelists and prophets. However, when these disappear, only the elders remain, both those who teach and those who govern. These elders have strictly **local** offices. The extent of their labour and authority is strictly limited to one church, to one place. Never do we find, after the period of those temporary and more general offices, any officebearers whose authority goes further than that of a single congregation. There can, therefore, also never be any authority to govern which is **above** that exercised in the local church.

Kuyper writes: "Our fathers, with Calvin at their head, have therefore always taken their starting point in the local church when it concerns the organization and the government of Christ's church. They said that the local church, and it alone, is the **church** on earth. The province does not have a church, nor does the nation or people; indeed, even all churches on earth are only a part of the great body of Christ. For there is also the church triumphant above, and the church which is still hidden in the future. One can never say of whatever there may be on earth: this is the whole church. The church can only be the whole body of Christ. Locally, however, there is a church. For every **manifestation** of the body of Christ is a **church**."

"This is why our fathers emphasized so strongly that one should never lose sight of the fact that each church in a city or town is an

ecclesia completa, that is, an institution, an organization, or a phenomenon which contains in itself everything that belongs to the concept of the church. Therefore, every local assembly has received from Christ the authority and competence which is necessary for life as a church. Where more local churches were manifested, these were one in Christ, belonged together as to one body, and were therefore obliged to live together, but never could they be absorbed into a provincial or national church. They always remained an assembly of churches, as each church is an assembly of believers”³⁴.

When the great Reformation broke through in the Netherlands, the anti-Christian power embodied in bishops, cardinals and popes was rejected for God’s sake, and everywhere local churches reappeared, free and mutually independent, bound together by the one faith in the one Word of God. In those churches, the one ecclesiastical administration which may exist in Christ’s church according to God’s Word, the consistory, once again began to function. This is the body of officebearers elected by the congregation itself, but invested with ecclesiastical authority by God Himself. It exercises spiritual authority over the members, and ensures purity of doctrine.

Above this consistory there can be no other administration, least of all some ‘higher board’. For the instituted church exists only locally; “only Rome knows of an instituted world church; and a nationally instituted church is the error against which we agitate as men of the free church. We do recognize assemblies of instituted churches in Classes and Synods, but the instituted church can never be anything but local, simply because there can be none other than a local church. A consistory is an ecclesiastical administration, but a classical board, a provincial board, a synodical board is unknown to God’s Word, in conflict with the

³⁴ *De Heraut*, May 17, 1892.

Reformed confession, and an invention of the synodical hierarchy.”³⁵

“According to God’s Word, there is only one administration of the church, that is the consistory, for the simple reason that the administration must consist of the offices, and only local offices were instituted by Christ: teachers, elders, and deacons.”³⁶

This truth, that each local church is a complete, independent church, and that the consistory is the only ecclesiastical administration in Christ’s church, is a fundamental doctrine of Reformed church polity, a first principle of Reformed church government. To reinforce this truth, we will offer a few more citations from Kuyper.

“Reformed church polity does not recognize one church encompassing the whole land, subdivided into local chapters which may be called ‘congregations’, inseparable from the whole body. It recognizes only **local** churches, which each form a complete and wholly autonomous church, that is, which each govern themselves and have no other authority above them than that of Jesus Christ their King. We point this out emphatically because the erroneous notion of a single national church keeps intruding into our churches. In all kinds of documents, even official ones, one finds expressions which do suit the corporate church model, but not our Reformed churches... It is almost as if our churches just cannot get used to the end of the ‘corporation’, its elimination from our midst with root and branch, and our restored situation of only local churches, each with complete sovereignty in their own sphere.”³⁷

We conclude this section with a classically Reformed statement from Prof. H. H. Kuyper: “Each local church forms... a completely

³⁵ *De Heraut*, February 19, 1893

³⁶ *De Heraut*, June 16, 1889

³⁷ *De Heraut*, December 1, 1901

independent unity, is church in the full sense of the word. The believers do not belong to the one national church, but are members of the **local** church. This church is fully autonomous, is governed by its own consistory, which administers the church in dependence upon Christ's sovereign authority, passes judgment in Christ's name, and is bound only by God's Word in doing so. Above this consistory there is no authority other than the authority of Christ alone.”³⁸

The character of major assemblies

As we saw the men of the Doleantie taught clearly and unambiguously that the consistory of the **local** church has the **highest** authority in the government of Christ's church. This was, to them, a basic principle of Reformed church government. This principle dominated all of their ecclesiastical actions. They were convinced that classes and synods had a **lower** and **lesser** authority than consistories. The consistories had an **inherent** and **original** authority, the major assemblies had **derived** and **assigned** authority. To establish this beyond any doubt, we offer a series of unambiguous quotations.

This is how Dr. A. Kuyper, for instance, characterizes a classical assembly:

“1. The church of Christ is the church of all ages, and thus is a church of which seventeen-eighteenth is already in heaven; only one-eighteenth is still on this earth, reckoning according to what is known, and not including that part which is still included in ‘the seed of the church’.

2. This one-eighteenth part of the church of Christ manifests itself to the ends of the earth, also in what is **visible**, here more and

³⁸ *De Heraut*, December 1, 1901

there less, both in number and in purity.

3. In our fatherland there can be, therefore, no more than a very small, a minuscule segment of that one-eighteenth part of the church of Christ.

4. This very small segment of the one-eighteenth part of the church of Christ is manifest in various cities and towns, but wherever it does so, it is always **the** church of Christ, which manifests itself from behind the screen of visible things and reveals itself to our observation.

5. All these local manifestations of the church of Christ seek each other out because of their common unity in the invisible realm; according to the demand of the communion of love; at Jesus' command; by historical tradition; and because of necessity.

6. Because it would not be possible for all local manifestations of the church of Christ to come together regularly, it follows from the ordinance of Him who created distance that this regular coming together will limit itself to churches which lie close together.

7. This association of neighbouring churches can have a shorter or longer radius, depending on whether churches of a **district**, a **region**, or a **country** come together.

8. Churches of a district which come together form a **classis**.

9. Since not all the members of these churches can come together, it is their **representatives** who do so, the royal officials of the King Jesus Christ in the presbyterate, both teaching and governing.

10. These churches, having thus come together in their representatives, do so as complete **equals**. No church shall lord it over another church.

11. These churches which have come together as equals are not free, but are bound by the Word of God.

12. The assembly of these equal churches, bound by God's Word, has **no authority** on earth **above itself** other than the consistories which have delegated its members.

13. They are not bound to major assemblies to any greater extent than they bind themselves.

14. These assemblies of churches, having gathered in the freedom of Christ, should be conducted in an **orderly and regulated** manner; therefore, they must have a presiding officer. However, this presiding officer ceases to be such as soon as his hammer indicates the closing of the meeting, as soon as the Amen of his prayer of thanksgiving sounds.

15. Deputies may be appointed by such an assembly, but only as **servants carrying out a charge**; they may never take on any task beyond or other than the charge they have received.

16. At a classis, voting may only take place in accordance with the delegates' mandates.

17. The convening of a subsequent assembly should not be the function of a permanent secretary (an office which is inconceivable and intolerable on Reformed terrain), but of a consistory who is charged with that function only for that one subsequent occasion."

Kuyper concludes these theses with a final sentence: "Whatever goes beyond or outside of this is not of God, but of the anti-Christian spirit; without at all judging whether the officebearers which would lend themselves to this are enemies or friends of the Lord Jesus."³⁹

Speaking of the character of major assemblies, Kuyper says: "As often as officials of King Jesus act in concert in an assembly of the churches of a classis, province, or country, authority always extends from below to above, and not vice versa. The higher (never the highest) authority over the Synodical assembly rests with that of the **province**; of the provincial assembly with that of the **classis**; of the classical assembly with the **consistories**; consistories being the only assembly which is

³⁹ *De Heraut*, June 25, 1882

constituted directly by the office. Whoever reverses this order, uproots the foundation of the church, does not recognize the office, and principally accepts the church polity of Rome, rather than that of the Reformation.”⁴⁰

At another place, he argues that a classical and a synodical assembly do, of course, have authority; however, the question is how they obtain this. “Would this synod or classis have received authority over the churches directly from Christ? No, and again, no! That is the episcopal system. On the contrary, the classis obtains its authority **from the consistories**; and the synod obtains its authority from the classis. It is not so that the classis is below the synod and the consistory below the classis; rather, the synod is below the classis and the classis is below the consistories. Authority does not flow from synod to classis and from classis to consistories: that would be episcopal. Authority flows in the other direction: from Christ to consistories, from consistories to classis, and from classis to synod. This and only this is the Reformed system.”⁴¹

“All authority comes from above; from above, also in the church. But how, and in whom? The answer to this question is: authority and might in the church, with regard to its administration, descends from the King exclusively and only to the overseers in the congregation, whether those who teach or those who only govern, always in relation to the diaconate. What follows from this, if it be strictly maintained according to what God's Word says? That the direct descent of authority from our King to His church occurs only in the meeting of these overseers, that is, the consistory. Now classis may have some authority, and there may also be authority derived from King Jesus in a synod, but

⁴⁰ *De Heraut*, June 4, 1882; June 10, 1883

⁴¹ *De Heraut*, June 24, 1883

this will always flow from the consistories to the classis, and from the classis to the synod. All authority, therefore, is from Above; however, only in the consistories is there direct descent, while in classes and synods it is channelled exclusively through the consistories. It is not so, therefore, as the Synodicals say, that God has granted the synod some higher authority, which descends from synod to the classical boards, the consistories and the preachers..."⁴²

Dr. Kuyper's view of the character of major assemblies becomes particularly clear in his comments on the manner in which these assemblies are constituted. This occurs as follows: minor assemblies appoint **delegates**, who, when they have come together, form and constitute the major assemblies. In doing so, they must show their credentials at the meeting, their **letter of mandate or instruction** from the assembly which has sent them. This having and coming with a mandate is a typical, indeed, an essential mark of major assemblies as they come together according to Reformed church polity. This one thing, being or not being mandated, displays "the chasm that there is between Reformed church government and hierarchy".

Speaking of the Synodical Convention which came together in 1887 - and what he writes about this applies to all major assemblies in the Reformed churches - Kuyper argues: "When you take your seat at a Synodical Convention, whence do you derive your right to be there, your competence to give advice there, your authority to join in making decisions? Think about it. You will have to agree, it does not lie in yourself personally. If that were so, anyone could attend. Nor does it lie in your confession; for then every confessor would be admitted. Nor does it lie in your office; for then every officebearer would have the same rights as you. No, it is **not** even by virtue of your office that you

⁴² *De Heraut*, December 6, 1885

are there at the Synodical Convention. You do, by virtue of your office, have a place in the **consistory**. Anyone who has been installed in the office knocks at the consistory's door and must be admitted to receive a place there. This flows from your office.

However, this is not so at a synod or at a Synodical Convention. There you are admitted by another authority. Which authority? The answer must be, by a **church**. The Convention or synod is a meeting, not of **persons**, but of **churches**. For this reason, the Synod would truly be Synod only if all the **churches** themselves could be brought together. Since this is impossible, and since even bringing all the consistories in a certain area together in their entirety is impossible, our fathers judged that each church should send delegates.

A synod, therefore, is a gathering of men who individually or in pairs represent their local church or churches: and whoever appears there is what he is only through his being delegated and sent by his church or churches. He does not come as **director** of the church, but as **messenger** or **envoy** of a church, and the original power and competence to make decisions lies **not in him** personally, but **in his church**. He does not have that authority, but his church does, and therefore he can exercise no authority at all at the Synodical Convention unless his church first confers this upon him. If his church releases him, he is once again without authority; only as long as his church grants him and leaves him with that authority does he possess it. Whether he is minister or elder or deacon is immaterial. No one, whether great or small, is anything at all at the Conference or the Synod except by the church which sends him, authorizes him, and instructs him. This is why it is so very necessary that each person who is sent by a church prove this by handing over his credentials."

As an example of the manner in which the Reformed churches of the sixteenth century composed their letters of credential, Kuyper cites

the letter sent along with the delegates of the classis *Voorne, Putten en Overflakkee* to the Synod of Dordrecht held in 1574: “‘Grace and Peace from God the Father through Jesus Christ, Amen! We cannot, very dear brothers and assistants in the Lord, sufficiently praise God our Father for His inexpressible benefits, shown to us in His beloved Son, through whose blood He has delivered His church, which He now again purifies and releases from the unbearable yoke and tyranny of the Antichrist.

‘This is also evident at the present day, on which He grants His servants that they might come together, in order that He might allow them, by the power of His Spirit, to deal with what will serve the advancement of His Kingdom. Having now come together several times, in accordance with the desire of the brothers and in the name of the Lord, and having not only considered what must be proposed at such an assembly, but also who would be the most suitable people to act on our behalf and in name of all, we therefore send our very worthy and dear brother and fellow servant **Gerardus Gallinaceus**, and with him an elder, namely **Jan Commers**. To these our dear brothers we grant power and authority to act and conclude, in all ecclesiastical matters, both in regard to what they have been charged with by us in their instruction, as also in regard to what the other deputies will propose. And since we know that these brothers, with the whole assembly, will take God’s Word as their rule in matters of faith, and the example of the most Reformed churches in the ordering of the church, we do not hesitate to give our delegates such authority that it will be as if our entire Classis of Voorne, Putten and Overflakkee were present, and each church of that classis in particular.’

‘Meanwhile, we pray that the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ may succour you by His Holy Spirit, dear brothers, and govern your minds, that His kingdom may increase, the Antichrist may be destroyed, and His oppressed people may be comforted. God be with you!

Given in den Briel, at the charge and under the seal of the entire

Classis, Anno 1574, the 13th June.”

Kuyper appends these considerations to this letter of credential: “This shows how seriously our fathers took this matter. They did not only write: We send you such and such a person. No, they expressly mentioned that they gave him **power** and **authority**. Furthermore, this authority was thus described and explained: that **all churches** were to be considered as present. Finally, and most significantly, they did not declare that they would automatically be bound to the decisions, but **promised** to consider them binding under the express proviso: insofar as they would conform to God’s Word.

Four points may thus be noted: 1. the naming of the person who is sent; 2. the declaration that he is authorized; 3. the promise to consider the decisions as binding; and 4. the setting of a boundary - that any decision not conforming to God’s Word would be set aside. Thus the authorization was not in the absurd sense that every consistory first deliberated about each point and made a decision, in accordance with which the delegate would be instructed to vote. If this were so, all Synodical assembly would be superfluous, since each matter could be just as well be dealt with by letter, with a central bureau compiling the results of each vote. No, **not** that. Our fathers understood that a decision must ripen during the course of deliberation and investigation, and that such deliberation cannot take place within each separate church; rather it must be of all the churches together. There was no other way than to grant the chosen delegate authorization to take part in the deliberations and decisions, promising to consider the result binding; and this only proper course was that taken by our fathers.”⁴³

Dr. Kuyper assures his readers that careful reading of this letter of credential will demonstrate that “each and every one of the principles

⁴³ *De Heraut*, June 12, 1887

of Reformed Church Polity, as espoused for years by *De Heraut*, are to be found there.”

It shows, namely: “1. That to our fathers, a Synod was a gathering, not of persons, but of churches; for it says ‘as if our churches were present, each in particular’. 2. That the Synod had no authority of itself, any more than its members had, since all authority was granted them. 3. That the members of Synod, and the Synod itself, received this power and authority from the churches, since it says ‘We give them such authority’. 4. That the members of Synod received instruction from the churches which sent them, and that they were bound to this instruction, since they say ‘on our behalf and in our name.’ 5. That the members of Synod were granted general authority to make decisions without consulting with their consistory, only on the ground of the knowledge that they would follow God’s Word, and the pure principles of Reformed church polity. Only on that basis did they receive authority to take action and to draw conclusions. 6. That they could not refuse to submit to Synod’s decisions arbitrarily in an independentistic manner, but that God’s Word motivated them to submit, and convinced them to live by it, not because of any higher Synodical authority, but because Synod too had received the same ordinance to act accordingly.”⁴⁴

What Kuyper taught concerning major assemblies was the general consensus in the Reformed churches during the first decades after the Doleantie. To demonstrate this, we offer some quotes from other leading figures of the time. Prof. Rutgers, for instance, wrote: “the evaluation of the character and competence of major assemblies was not a peripheral matter which could be neglected lightly, but a deep-rooted conviction which revealed itself in many ways; after all, it was grounded in the threefold foundation of the **Reformation** itself, the **confession**, and the

⁴⁴ *De Heraut* June 19, 1887

history of the churches."

Out of that conviction concerning the character and competence of the major assemblies, in his opinion, stems "the refusal to add 'as the consistory has over the congregation' to the foundational principle of church organization which says that 'the General Synod has the same authority over the Particular Synod as the Particular Synod has over the Classis, and as the classis has over the consistory', for the authority of consistory over congregation is of a completely different nature."⁴⁵

What Rutgers means with this "completely different nature" becomes quite clear when he describes the relations of the authority of consistories and major assemblies: the consistories "are the basis of the organization. The classes and synods have only a limited, serving, derived, 'lesser' authority".⁴⁶ His thoughts about the competence of major assemblies in the Reformed Churches are summarized in this comment: "An administrative body, and certainly a higher administration or governing authority has no place in this organization. Each church is, as such, principally independent of all other churches."⁴⁷

Prof. H.H. Kuyper gives the same evaluation. Among others, he writes, "Above the consistory there is no higher authority in the church other than Christ alone. The Classis and Synod are, as Voetius pointedly remarks, not **above** the consistory, but **below** it. There is no ascending order of authority, in which the consistory has the least power, the Classis and Particular Synod higher power, and the General Synod the

⁴⁵ F.L. Rutgers, *De geldigheid van de oude Kerkenordening der Nederlandse Gereformeerde Kerken*, (Amsterdam: J.A. Wormser, 1889), 20. See Article 37 of the Church Order of Dort.

⁴⁶ A.F. De Savornin Lohman and F.L. Rutgers, *De Rechtsbevoegdheid onzer plaatselijke Kerken* (2nd. ed., Amsterdam: J.A. Wormser, 1887), 90

⁴⁷ De Savornin Lohman and Rutgers, 178

highest. On the contrary, there is a descending order: the highest authority is vested in the consistory, and this authority descends from the consistory upon Classis, Provincial, and General Synod.

It follows that the relation, in a legal sense, between these free and independent churches, rests only on the freely entered mutual accord. Just as the sovereign provinces came together in Utrecht in 1579, and formed a Union in order to promote one another's interests, thus the churches formed such a Union or Bond of churches at the Synod of Emden in 1571, in which the unity of confession formed the foundation, and the rules for that federation were laid down in the church order.

Through this union, the churches did not at all dissolve to form one large national church; both before and after the union they remained wholly independent and self-governing churches. Belonging to this Union or Bond of churches is a matter of their own free will. Legally, they have every right to break their connection with this bond of churches if they consider this to be necessary. Just as every believer is member of the local church by voluntary engagement, and no consistory can force him to be member against his will, so the other churches cannot force any church which wishes to break with the bond of churches to remain against its will.”⁴⁸

More than twenty years later, Prof. H.H. Kuyper speaks in a similar vein: “As such, a major assembly, whether Classis or Synod, whether particular or general, has not the least authority. All ecclesiastical authority which Christ has granted His church is invested in the local church exclusively and alone.”⁴⁹ “An independent, or separate ecclesiastical authority does not belong to our major assemblies. There is no authority in the church other than that which Christ has

⁴⁸ *De Heraut*, December 1, 1901

⁴⁹ *De Heraut*, March 18, 1923

granted..." and this "ecclesiastical authority rests with the local church alone."⁵⁰

Also with respect to the delegation to major assemblies Prof. H.H. Kuyper, until 1926, follows the line of his father and of Prof. Rutgers completely. "At major assemblies, it is not as officebearers that the participants come together, but as **churches**; and the churches are the ones who have to decide whom they will send as delegates. They may delegate officebearers for this; indeed, as a rule, this will be desirable, but those delegates derive their capacity not from their office, but from their being delegated by consistories. No one can therefore prevent a consistory sending as representative someone who is not an officebearer but simply a member of the congregation." If one **denies** that an ordinary member could be a delegate to a major assembly, "one confuses capacity as **officebearer** and capacity as **delegate** of consistory; and, though not intending to do so, one introduces a kind of hierarchy."⁵¹

The proper ecclesiastical functions, and therefore also the installing in or removing from office, can never be exercised by a major assembly. "Only the consistory can appoint officebearers, have them installed, suspended, or deposed. It alone can have the word and sacraments administered and exercise discipline. The essential church functions can only be exercised by a consistory or at its commission." It should be noted "that a classis or Synod certainly does not have the right to remove a consistory or a number of consistory members from their office without further ado. Such an episcopal or hierarchical authority does not belong to a major assembly...For a classis to take action upon its own authority, and to remove a number of consistory members from their office without charges against them from the

⁵⁰ *De Heraut*, March 25, 1923

⁵¹ *De Heraut*, May 26, 1907

congregation, and without consulting the consistory, would be against Reformed church polity. It would belong to the powers granted the Board of Directors in a hierarchically organized corporation, but is not one of the powers of a major assembly in a Reformed church.”⁵²

The well known *Kerkelijke Handboekje* published by P. Biesterveld and Dr. H.H. Kuyper, says this about the character of the major assembly: “The local church is governed by the consistory. This is the only administrative authority in the church. Classical, provincial, or synodical church administration is unknown to the Reformed churches. The competence of major assemblies is always less than that of the consistory, for they are only able to deal with matters which could not be finished in the minor assemblies; many things which only the consistories may do, such as censure of members, calling ministers of the word, and so on, they cannot do.”⁵³

In 1920, the Rev. Joh. Jansen, always a faithful interpreter of the consensus on church polity, described the competence of major assemblies in the line of Voetius: The authority of major assemblies is:

1. **Not a continuing possession** (unlike that of the consistory, which forms a permanent body, and which, as representative of the congregation, has a fixed power to rule), **but a temporary exercise** (only as long as the meetings continue, and only by way of lawful decisions made by the assembly).

2. **Not of absolute character** (unlike that of the consistory, which is most extensive, covering all the affairs of the congregation), **but limited and defined** (by the stipulation of the Church Order, Article 30, that the major assemblies shall deal with those matters only which could

⁵² *De Heraut*, May 6, 1923

⁵³ P. Biesterveld and H.H. Kuyper, *Kerkelijke Handboekje*, (Kampen: J.A. Bos, 1905) xvi.

not be finished in the minor assembly or which belongs to its churches in common).

3. **Not a ruling authority** (unlike that of Rome, where the higher clergy rules over the lower; and unlike that of the collegialist system, where the local church, as a chapter of the great whole, is fully bound to the decision of Synod), **but a ministering authority** (which helps and supports the local church at its time of need).

4. **Not the highest authority** (for if it were possible that all churches, or their leaders, could come together in a synod and could vote, such an assembly would stand above the general synod), **but a lesser authority** (for a delegation has less authority than the body which has delegated it).

5. **Not original** (unlike that of a consistory, which has received its authority directly from Christ, the King of the church, and which, therefore, possesses its authority inherently), **but derived** (for the major assemblies receive their authority as derived and conferred, by delegation from the consistories).

6. Not because of **higher authority to govern** (as that of fathers over their children, masters over their servants, and governments over their subjects), **but much rather by mutual respect and helpfulness** (as that of brothers and friends, colleagues and fellow-citizens, who are mutually dependent and supportive equals).

Emphatically, Rev. Jansen points out - again in line with Voetius - that the authority of major assemblies is principally different from that of consistories, as is evident in five aspects:

1. **In origin:** "Since the synods have no authority other than one which is derived and conferred upon them by local churches".

2. **In necessity:** "Since what is more necessary is, of course, of higher worthiness and might. Thus it is with the local churches. These are quite necessary and cannot be missed; without them Synods cannot

exist. Synods, on the other hand, are not strictly necessary for the existence of local churches: without them they can exist, if only they are properly governed”.

3. **In essence:** “Since in Matthew 18, authority is granted essentially to local churches, by only accidentally to synods. The ‘where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them’ applies primarily and essentially to the local church, and only secondarily and accidentally to major assemblies, since it applies to the latter only insofar as the former come together there”.

4. **In permanence:** “Since, if the local churches are removed, the authority of synods also disappears; but ecclesiastical authority continues even if there are no synods, as long as there are local churches.”

5. **In purpose:** “Since the local churches were not instituted for the sake of the synods, but the synods for the sake of the local churches”. The major assemblies exist in order to assist local churches with counsel and in deed. “The authority of major assemblies may therefore not have a ruling, but only a serving character.”⁵⁴

We will conclude these studies of quotations from the heyday of the Reformed churches with words from Prof. Dr. H. Bouwman. There is, he argued, “an essential difference between the authority of the consistory and that of major assemblies: 1. in **origin**, since the synods and classes have no authority other than that granted them, according to the established order, by the local churches; 2. in **essence**, since the local church has inherent, essential authority, and the classes and synods derived and accidental authority; 3. in **duration**, since the consistory is

⁵⁴ J. Jansen, *De Bevoegdheid der Meerdere Vergaderingen*, (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1924), 15ff.

permanent and continues to exist during and after the meetings of the major assemblies, while the classes and synods meet only temporarily, and cease to exist after that; 4. in **purpose**, since the consistories have as task the continuous leadership of the local church, and therefore do not merely exist, as do the synods and classes, for the wellbeing of the churches, by serving them with counsel and leadership.”

“Closely related to this is the limitation of the authority of the major assemblies. The authority of a classis or of a synod is not more or broader than that of a local church, but less and more restricted, with respect not only to its nature, but also to its extent. The authority of a local church, given it by Christ, can never be conferred in its full extent, upon a classis or a synod. It is true that major assemblies are assemblies of churches, but these are represented by their delegates, who have received the task not to do whatever pertains to the area of the local churches, but only what, according to the church order, they have been instructed to do: namely, to deal with those matters only which could not be finished in the minor assembly or which belong to its churches in common. Only a minor part of ecclesiastical authority can be conferred upon the major assemblies.”⁵⁵

We have purposely included a number of statements concerning the important question of the **nature** and **extent** of the authority of major assemblies. The correct view on this authority has been lost by many; perhaps it was never present there. After all this, it will be clear that whatever ecclesiastical authority may exist outside of the consistory, the consistory always has the highest and the fullest authority; never is it permitted, nor is it ever able to surrender to another ecclesiastical assembly any of the authority which Christ Himself has granted it.

⁵⁵ H. Bouwman, *Gereformeerd Kerkrecht* II, (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1934) 22