

Why are Ecclesiastical Feast Days in our Church Order?

Rev. Dr. R. D. Anderson (17 December 2018)

Our church order has a separate article on ecclesiastical feast days which stands in a long tradition on this subject, going right back to the beginnings of Reformed churches in the Netherlands. In the following I wish to investigate the purpose and intent of this article. In the FRCA it reads as follows:

ARTICLE 65 - Ecclesiastical feast days

On Christmas Day, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Ascension Day, and at Pentecost the consistory shall call the congregation together for church services. The sacred events which the congregation commemorates in particular on these days shall therein be proclaimed.

A church order is a list of agreements which the churches make in common so that they can better give each other mutual support and discipline. But if this is the case, why do we have an article on church services at feast days, days which are not specifically commanded in Scripture, but on which there is a long standing tradition of celebration? Do we need to bind each other to such days and was that really the intention of this church order article in the first place?

Well, let's see how the discussion on these extra days got kicked off. We need to bear in mind that the Reformed Churches organised themselves in a united federation which expressed itself nationally in the national synod. The churches in each province of the Netherlands also came together in provincial synods. The region of the largest province, that of Holland, was divided into two 'particular' synodical regions of North and South.



Already in 1573 we see the topic coming to the floor of the Particular Synod of North Holland, that year held in Enkhuizen.

1573 Particular Synod of North Holland¹

Also decided in respect of feast days, that in common no feast days are to be held other than Easter (Sunday) and the day thereafter, Pentecost (Sunday) and the day thereafter, Christmas, and similarly New Year's day and Ascension day.

The churches in South Holland were somewhat stricter. A year later their Synod gathered in Dordrecht making the following pronouncement:

1574 Particular Synod of South Holland²

Respecting the feast days which are in addition to the Sunday: it has been decided to rest content only with the Sunday. Nevertheless, the normal material relating to the birth of Christ shall be

¹ *Acta der Provinciale en Particuliere Synoden, gehouden in de noordelijke Nederlanden gedurende de jaren 1572-1620*, 8 vols, verzameld en uitgegeven door Dr. J. Reitsma en Dr. S.D. van Veen (Groningen: J.B. Wolters, 1892-1899) vol.1, p.17 (art. 9).
² *Acta van de Nederlandsche Synoden der zestiende eeuw*, edited by F. L. Rutgers (Dordrecht: J. P. Van den Tol, 1889, reprinted 1980) p.142 (art. 53). All translations into English are my own.

handled on the Sunday before Christmas day together with an admonition to the people not to observe Christmas day. If Christmas day falls on a Sunday, the same material shall be preached on that day. It is also permitted to preach on the resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Easter Sunday and Pentecost Sunday, the which is left to the freedom of the ministers.

That seems clear enough. Behind the scenes, however, there was a political battle going on between the Roman Catholic forces and the Protestants. The celebration of these extra days came right in the middle of all that. It was the sort of thing that got people fired up. The Reformed churches needed to be careful to steer a righteous course between all manner of Roman Catholic superstitions which had become associated with these days and an over zealous extremism which could easily lead to political riots. We see that reflected in the decision of the Particular Synod of South Holland held in Rotterdam a year later:

1575 Particular Synod of South Holland³

As much as concerns feast days: The government shall be petitioned that they allow everyone to open his shop and to work 6 days in accordance with the 4th commandment of our Lord. And if the government desires to ordain any others besides the Sunday, the delegated ministers will petition parliament that they inform them in such a way that they may consider how much and how far one can permit in this matter, so that on the one hand people don't fall into superstition as warned by Paul in Gal. 4, and on the other hand that people will not be led to fight too fiercely against the aforesaid government because of certain feast days.

Three years later a national synod was finally able to be held in Dordrecht. By this time it was slowly becoming clear that the political will to be rid of these extra feast days was weak. On the 12th of July 1578 the government made a "declaration of religious freedom" in which the various Roman Catholic feast days were made compulsory for protestants. The synod in its response attempted to minimise the damage by steering the churches away from any special ways of celebrating these feast days, and keeping them as "normal" days.

1578 National Synod of Dort⁴

It was indeed to be desired that the freedom from God to work 6 days be permitted in the church, and that only the Sunday be celebrated. Nevertheless since certain other feast days are maintained by authority of the government, namely, Christmas day and the day thereafter, likewise the day after Easter and the day after Pentecost and in some places new years day and ascension day; the ministers shall do their best to teach the congregation to transform unproductive and harmful idleness into a holy and profitable exercise by sermons especially dealing with the birth and resurrection of Christ, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and suchlike articles of the faith. The ministers of churches in those cities where yet more feast days are observed by authority of the government shall do likewise. In the meantime all the churches shall work to make the use of all feast days except Christmas day (since Easter and Pentecost fall on Sunday) as normal as possible, and as soon as is fitting to abolish them.

By 1581 the goals of the churches had been reduced. It did not any longer seem possible to be rid of *all* the extra feast days. They were now reduced to working for a minimal list.⁵ The churches in Zeeland formulated this list at their Provincial Synod meeting in Vlissingen, February 1581 as follows:

1581 Provincial Synod of Zeeland⁶

Concerning the feast days it is decided that in all of Zeeland there shall be a united custom to preach on Christmas day, Easter day, Pentecost day together with the day following, and not on any other feast day anymore.

Later that year the National Synod met and decided ...

3 *Acta*, Reitsma and van Veen, vol.2, p.169 (art. 12).

4 *Acta*, Rutgers p.252-53 (art. 75, cap.4,23).

5 It should be noted, however, that the Acts of this synod had still not reached the rural regions of Gelderland by 1581 as noted in the Acts of the Provincial Synod of Gelderland held in Arnhem, 1581. See *Acta*, Reitsma and van Veen, vol.4, p.17 (art. 8).

6 *Acta*, Reitsma and van Veen, vol.5, p.7 (art. 10).

1581 National Synod of Middelburg⁷

The congregations shall remonstrate their governments that the feast days, except the Sunday, Christmas day and ascension day be abolished. But in the places where more feast days are held by order of the government, the ministers shall work by means of sermons to transform the unproductive and harmful idleness into a holy and profitable exercise.

We see evidence of the outworking of this in 1583, both in the Provincial Synod of South Holland held in s'Gravenhage, where the churches were again directed to remonstrate the government, as well as the Provincial Synod of Gelderland which admonished those churches, where "the feast days of the papists" were still held, to cease and conform to the National Synod of 1581.⁸ In 1593 the Provincial Synod meeting in Briel had to admit that no progress had been made, but nevertheless directed the deputies to continue as there was occasion.⁹ Such remonstrations, however, seemed to have had decidedly little effect and by 1586 this direction was tacitly dropped ...

1586 National Synod of s'Gravenhage¹⁰

The congregations shall observe in addition to the Sunday, Christmas day, Easter [Sunday] and Pentecost [Sunday]: but in the places where more feast days are held by order of the government in memory of the benefits of Christ (such as the circumcision of Christ and ascension day), the ministers shall work so that by means of sermons the idleness of the people may be transformed into a holy and profitable exercise.

This, however, did not stop the Provincial Synods of South Holland held in Delft 1587, 's Gravenhage 1591, Delft 1596, Schoonhoven 1597, Dordrecht 1598, and Delft 1616 from remonstrating the government again and again on this point.¹¹ In North Holland, the churches were able to be satisfied that their goal had been reached.¹² In both Zeeland and Friesland this reduced list was also promulgated and appears to have been heeded without much problem.¹³ In Gelderland the Provincial Synod was still struggling with the issue in 1599 and directed that the publication or celebration of "Papist feast days" was to be punished.¹⁴ In Drente the Provincial Synod of 1603 (held in Beilen) ordered the churches to stick to the church order on this matter adding that those who contravene the rule be seriously admonished.¹⁵ In Groningen the Provincial Synod of 1614 (held in Appingedam) was also becoming more serious in its attempt to induce conformity. The synod ordered that there be uniformity in the celebration of feast days and that those churches which did not conform (that is, those churches which observed *more* feast days than listed by the national synod) were to be severely censured by the classis and non-conformance was to be reported to the next Provincial Synod.¹⁶

It wasn't only days for celebrating Christ's circumcision or ascension which caused some degree of turmoil. The celebration of Good Friday became a contentious issue too. The first we read of Good Friday is in 1589 when it was reported to the provincial synod of South Holland meeting in Gouda that several churches were holding evening services on Good Friday. The synod reacted as follows:

7 *Acta*, Rutgers p.394 (art. 50).

8 *Acta*, Reitsma and van Veen, vol.2, p.246 (sitting 18th June) and vol.4, p.29 (art. 18).

9 *Acta*, Reitsma and van Veen, vol.3, p.10 (art. 22).

10 *Acta*, Rutgers p.501 (art. 60).

11 *Acta*, Reitsma and van Veen, vol.2, p.308 (art. 60), p.399 (art.25) and vol.3, p.68 (art. 16), p.88 (art. 20), p.108 (art. 13) and p.323 (gravamina art.31).

12 *Acta*, Reitsma and van Veen, vol.1, p.223 (art. 37).

13 Both the Provincial Synod of Zeeland 1591 meeting in Middelburg and that of Friesland meeting in Sneek 1593 simply stated this reduced list or referred to the National Synod without seeing the need for any reprimand or encouragement to remonstrate local government. In Friesland, however, the Provincial Synod meeting in Bolsward 1608 directed the churches to be unified in preaching on Ascension day. *Acta*, Reitsma and van Veen, vol.5, p.26 (art. 56) and vol.6, p.75 (art. 6) and p.177 (art. 3).

14 *Acta*, Reitsma and van Veen, vol.4, p.77 (art. 22).

15 *Acta*, Reitsma and van Veen, vol.8, p.57 (art. 16).

16 *Acta*, Reitsma and van Veen, vol.7, p.242-43 (art. 12).

1589 Provincial Synod of South Holland¹⁷

With respect to the second clause concerning the feast days, placards have been posted.¹⁸ In this way the ministers together have taken in hand to act diligently in conformity to the regulation. In that we are given to understand that there are still places where evening services are held on Good Friday, the synod has declared that this is unedifying and therefore the classes wherein this occurs shall take action to oppose these.

The classis of Nijmegen in 1611 forbade Good Friday services and even attached a financial penalty for those daring to observe it. The only group in the Netherlands to sanction the observance of Good Friday were the Remonstrants (Arminians) who incorporated it in their church order of 1612. Finally the churches of various provinces remonstrated the National synod of Dordrecht 1618/19 to bring about uniformity in the observance of feast days.¹⁹ This synod gave the following ruling:

1619 National Synod of Dort²⁰

The committees have all handed in their advice concerning the last tabled objections, and concerning each has been decided as follows:

1. The churches shall observe in addition to the Lord's day, also Christmas day, Easter [Sunday] and Pentecost [Sunday] together with the following day. And since in most cities and provinces of the Netherlands the day of circumcision and the ascension day are also observed, the ministers everywhere shall remonstrate the government so that in those regions where it is not the case, a uniform practice may be maintained.

And so we see that the last national synod of the age continued the attempt to reduce the feast days to a bare minimum. Another national synod would not be held until 1816 under very different circumstances.

During the 17th century, however, questions began to arise as to the nature of this article of the church order. Did it make this minimal list of feast days compulsory? Or was the list to be treated as an absolute maximum? The questions arose from various different (sometimes non-Reformed) quarters. Addressing these matters, we find the single most important church political theologian of the century, Gijsbert Voet, generally known by his Latin name 'Voetius'. Voetius had the honour of being the youngest delegate to the great national synod of Dort in 1618/19 while still in his twenties. His church political commentaries and tracts have been used over and over again through the centuries to shed light on the church order. In the following quotation we hear him dealing with objections to the church order "partly from those who do not support presbyterian polity, and partly from those who eagerly support it." Objection # 4 concerns our topic:

Objection: Annual feast days, as they are commonly so called, are established by the articles of the church order. *Response:* Those articles are purely tolerating and limiting, not positive and prescriptive, as I have abundantly demonstrated in my *Disputation Concerning Feasts*: I will not repeat matters here. Therefore such articles ought not to be compelled upon churches or ministers, which are able in an orderly fashion and with edification to procure their abolition or at least diminution before the magistrates and their people.²¹

Some years later he returned to the topic adding:

Concerning the observance of the day of Christ's birth, ascension, etc.. We do not interpret, as indeed here scandalisers are accustomed to do, that this observance is commanded and imposed, but that its custom and tolerance are to be limited; a fact that we have shown elsewhere (in the disputation *De Sabbatho ...*) to harmonise with the intent of the legislators (although the parenthesis subjoined by the Synod of Dordrecht 1578 was omitted by the Synod of s'Gravenhage 1586).²²

17 *Acta*, Reitsma and van Veen, vol.2, p.345 (art. 30).

18 The reference seems to be to the second part of the article of the general synod on feast days where it is said that where the magistrates ordain extra feast days the ministers must do their best by the preaching to transform the idleness of the people into a holy and profitable exercise. "Placards" were formal posters, usually with a seal, informing the people of the town of important items. The implication seems to be that these placards warned the people against idleness on these extra free days.

19 For example, the Provincial Synod of Groningen (held in Groningen) 1618. *Acta*, Reitsma and van Veen, vol.7, p.343.

20 *Acta of Handelingen der Nationale Synode te Dordrecht in de jaren 1618 en 1619* (Houten: Den Hertog, 1987), p.938 (Post Acta 162nd sitting. art.1).

21 *Politica Ecclesiastica*, pars I, liber I, tractatus II (Amsterdam: Waesberge, 1663), p.294.

22 *Politica Ecclesiastica*, pars III, liber I, tractatus III, cap. V (Amsterdam: Waesberge, 1676), p.173.

The disputation here referred to, *De Sabbatho et Festis*, was held in 1638 and published in a collection of Voetius' disputations some years later. Towards the end of the second (lengthy) appendix he discusses the varied nature of the articles contained in the church order.²³ In this discussion he distinguishes between those articles which are prescriptive commands to the churches, and those which are "partly permissive, or concessive, or tolerating; partly limiting, so that if it must be, at least it will be this and nothing more." He continues:

Such articles are not characteristic or intrinsic or voluntary impulses having proceeded from the heart of the church; but occasional, extrinsic (just as an eclipse is a characteristic phenomenon of the moon), ἐπίσρακτος, i.e. imposed from the outside, burdensome to the churches, in and of itself in an absolute sense unwelcome; to which Synods were summoned, compelled, and coerced to receive, bring in, and admit, as in the manner of a transaction, in order to prevent worse disagreeable and bad situations.

Among the articles cited in this category are that concerning the right of patronage in the election of ministers, that concerning the presence of the civil magistrate at synods, and that concerning the observance of feast days. The first two articles are thankfully no longer required and you will not find them in our Australian version of the church order of Dort. The third article in this category of articles, which are really only there because of the pressures of the civil magistrate and the stubbornness of the people, is of course our article 65! Voetius continues:

Of the like kind is the article concerning the observance of those days, which our synods did not willingly furnish or institute because they saw in them or expected from them a better way or greater edification, but because of the necessity imposed by the magistrate and the people they allowed observance in 1578, when, after all attempts – both the observance having at this point been discontinued and in addition the synodical decree established in 1574, at that point of time they were not able to abrogate it; and they restricted it as far as they were able; none the less they at that same time declared their desire and attitude concerning a better and safer way in non-observance. They did not repeat this declaration at the national synod of Middelburg in 1581: because they saw that they would gain nothing, and that its abrogation was more a desire than something to be hoped for. From this historical report taken from the acts and articles of the three synods just quoted, I judge it to be sufficiently established that the churches of the Lowlands with their theologians minimally doubted and fluctuated, or contradicted themselves, or changed their thinking – whether by necessity or by utility – concerning that observance (for those exceptional theologians of the Lowlands were not so unlearned and unstable, of whom the more excellent ones have come from the school at Geneva)

What Voetius wrote was not just theoretical. He had stated that the article on feast days was limiting in character, giving an absolute maximum permissible number of extra days of observance. However, there was nothing to stop churches and ministers in an orderly way reducing this number. In fact quite a number of churches and ministers of the later 17th century ended up not observing any feast days!

Let us jump ahead in time to the 19th century. Due to political influence it was to be several hundred years before the next national synod took place. That was in 1816, after the Netherlands had been freed from Napoleon. This Synod was, however, completely in the hands of the new Dutch king who changed the whole character of the church federation, taking away discipline in matters of doctrine and giving himself enormous influence in the church. It was not long before the faithful felt compelled to secede from what had become extreme liberalism. The secession was led by Rev. Hendrick de Cock. The first synod of the seceded Reformed Churches was held in Amsterdam in 1836. Once again, feast days were also a topic that needed to be dealt with:

²³ The ensuing quotations from this disputation can be found on pages 1344-45 of G. Voetius, *Selectarum Disputationum Theologicarum pars tertia* (Utrecht: Waesberge, 1659).

1836 Amsterdam²⁴

Given that the Holy Scripture just as much admonishes the believers *to stand in the freedom with which Christ has made us free*, as to comply with the divine commandments, so ought one in the congregation of Christ to carefully watch out that, besides the precise sanctification of the Lord's Day, people are not compelled to observe the so-called feast days which the Lord has *not* commanded in His Word. The Lord's Day has been set apart by God Himself, and we cannot and may not add to it any feast by human decree. The six work days are given by God in order to work; people may indeed gather together on those days to be edified from and according to God's Word, provided that the conscience of men is not bound to the observance of annually returning feast days appointed by men; the conscience must be left completely free in this matter.

At the next synod a year later, similar sentiments were declared:

1837 Utrecht²⁵

Given that the maintenance of feast days is not commanded in God's Word, no necessity ought ever to be laid on someone; much less must these days be equated to the day of rest. However, given that no work is done on these days, one ought to use them as much as possible in an edifying manner.

Let us then return to our own article 65. The church order of the FRCA is an adapted version of the church order of Dort 1618/19. It is therefore rather interesting that while most of the articles which were non-prescriptive and 'limiting' in nature have been left out of the church order of the FRCA, that on feast days has been maintained. This probably has to do with the fact that in the meantime the observance of several feast days had become a well-known and accepted phenomenon among the people. Of particular interest is the fact that the Australian church order actually *increases* the number of feast days by adding Good Friday. The celebration of Good Friday has indeed a longer history in English speaking countries than in the Netherlands, and it may be that this was added because of the Australian context. The fact remains, however, that the purpose of this article of the church order was *always* to limit the observance of feast days. This means that no church in the federation has the right to add the observance of feast days *in addition* to those listed in article 65. The history also suggests that it should be possible for regions to agree to limit the list even further, although it is doubtful that the church order had in mind that individual churches should take such action without respect for the churches around them. Time and again we see the synods emphasising the desire for a uniformity in practice. It is of course true, that this desire for uniformity was a desire to get all the churches *down* and *limited* in the number of feast days observed, never to stimulate churches to *increase* the number of feast days observed. It should go without saying that the historical background to this article shows without a doubt that no-one's conscience ought to be bound to this article or to feast day observance. In other words, church discipline may never be applied merely for the sake of non-attendance of such feast day services. The article is *not* prescriptive, that is, it is not a command. It is an agreement to limit the number of days observed as feast days in addition to the Christian sabbath or rest day in honour of our Lord. While the consistory does call to worship on these days, such a call to worship cannot be compared to those which are extended on the Lord's Day, which we are specifically *commanded* by God Himself to observe as a day of worship and rest. A consistory may duly admonish members who out of laziness or lack of zeal do not attend worship on feast days, but due caution should be used with members who by conviction of conscience with respect to purity of worship believe that they ought not to gather together on days not specifically commanded by our Lord.

As a final note, those brothers and sisters hailing from Canada will be well aware that our Canadian sister churches have gone further than the Synod of Dort in limiting the influence of feast days, although at the same time they have diminished the degree of uniformity which we have here in Australia. I do believe that our Canadian sister churches may have better captured the limiting spirit of this article of the church order. It allows consistories the freedom to decide for themselves whether or not to hold worship services on these days. Their article 53 reads:

²⁴ *Handelingen en Verslagen van de Algemene Synoden van de Christelijk Afgescheidene Gereformeerde Kerk* (1836-1869) (Houten/Utrecht: Den Hertog, 1984), p.53 (art. 63).

²⁵ *Handelingen*, p.137 (art. 110).

Each year the Churches shall, in the manner decided upon by the consistory, commemorate the birth, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ, as well as His outpouring of the Holy Spirit.