

“Good Order in the Church”

An Exposition of Article Thirty of the Belgic Confession

Article 30 - The Government of the Church

We believe that this true church ought to be governed according to the spiritual order that our Lord has taught us in his Word.¹ There should be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God and administer the sacraments.² There should also be elders³ and deacons,⁴ along with the pastors, to make up the council of the church.⁵ By this means true religion is preserved; true doctrine is able to take its course; and evil men are corrected spiritually and held in check, so that also the poor and all the afflicted may be helped and comforted according to their need.⁶ By this means everything will be done well and in good order in the church, when such men are elected who are faithful and are chosen⁷ according to the rule that Paul gave to Timothy.⁸

¹ Acts 20:28; Eph 4:11-12; 1 Tim 3:15; Heb 13:20-21 ²Lk 1:2, 10:16; Jn 20:23; Rom 10:14; 1 Cor 4:1; 2 Cor 5:19-20; 2 Tim 4:2 ³ Acts 14:23; Tit 1:5 ⁴ 1 Tim 3:8-10 ⁵ Php 1:1; 1 Tim 4:14 ⁶ Acts 6:1-4; Tit 1:7-9 ⁷ 1 Cor 4:2 ⁸ 1 Tim 3

If there is one single Bible verse which characterizes the Reformed understanding of the church and the way it should be governed, it is 1 Corinthians 14:40—“*But all things should be done decently and in order.*”

We are in that section of our confession (Articles Twenty-Seven through Thirty-Two) which deals with the doctrine of the church. When working our way through previous articles from this section, we have seen that the church is the visible assembly of the mystical (invisible) body of Jesus Christ. This is why all believers are bound to join a local congregation of like-minded believers. In fact, the New Testament has no category for a professing Christian who is not also a member of a local church.

The reason church membership is so important and why our fathers in the faith (such as Calvin and De Bres) argued that apart from the church there is no salvation, is not because the church dispenses grace as the Roman church argues, but because the local church is that place where the gospel is to be preached, the sacraments are to be administered, and where church discipline is exercised over erring members. It is the presence of these so-called marks of a church which tell us whether or not a denomination or a particular congregation is a true church. The false church, on the other hand, assigns more authority to church tradition or extra-biblical sources than to Holy Scripture and the false church frequently persecutes the true church and its members.

While many Christians act as though how a church is governed is not a big deal and their eyes glaze over when the subject is even mentioned, the New Testament has a great deal to say about how the church is to be organized and governed. As one who was born and raised in independent Bible church fundamentalism, and then ordained in the Reformed Episcopal Church, I now realize how important the subject of church government really is. In fundamentalism, the problem was always a lack of checks and

balances on those in leadership—especially if the pastor was a charismatic individual. Who knew what the pastor did with the church’s money? Who made the important ministry decisions? Why were church leaders all hand-picked by the minister? And why were there so many scandals among church leaders? If you come from a similar background, you know exactly what I am talking about.

One popular tract—which has been very influential among local independent Bible churches—makes the point that a church must be governed according to Scripture, but then virtually ignores what the Bible actually says about the various offices mentioned in the New Testament (minister, elder and deacon). According to this tract, the pastor is directly and personally accountable to Jesus—not to what the author calls “the board.” Deacons and elders are mentioned, but no description is given of their biblical duties.

And then when a question is raised about a situation in which “the board” tells a pastor what to do, advice which doesn’t comport with what the pastor thought Jesus told him to do, the tract gives the following counsel to the pastor. “Fire the board. God has called you to pastor that fellowship; the board didn’t call you to pastor it. Let them go.’ So, we ordained them [the board] one week, and defrocked them the next.”¹ It will come as no surprise that the author of this tract also rails against “dead,” “liturgical” churches because they don’t allow for the leading of the Holy Spirit. Of course it is the Holy Spirit, who supposedly, led this pastor to fire everyone who dared to disagree with him. But we must ask, “why he is free to follow the Spirit’s leading, while everyone else had better do what he says or risk being fired?” “Isn’t at least possible that the Spirit led the board to give advice to the pastor?” This is the kind of scenario which arises when Christians ignore what the New Testament says about church government—that the church is to be ruled by elders.

And then, on the other end of the spectrum, there are bishops—oh yes, bishops. If you ever wondered why Martin Luther once quipped “when the big dog barks all the little dogs are set to yapping,” then you’ve never been part of an episcopally-governed church where what a bishop says goes—or else. In Episcopal church government, the problem is not a lack of checks and balances, but that checks and balances assigned to a single office (the bishop)—and to the individual who holds that office. The great irony is that at the end of the day, our pastor friend who thinks he has the right to “fire his board” has ended up creating a system of church government which is far more tyrannical and hierarchical than any episcopal form of church government. At least bishops are accountable to other bishops.

This is why consideration of the biblical view of church government is so important—and why our confession devotes considerable attention to this subject. At the time our confession was written in 1561, the church situation was in many ways similar to our own. A number of Anabaptists, who rejected all varieties of traditional church government, claimed to be led directly by the Holy Spirit. Who needs elders to rule the church when God speaks directly to the leader? When this is the case, the elders function as “yes men” who do their leader’s bidding. So, on the one hand, DeBres must summarize the Bible’s teaching that local congregations are ruled by elders (not by individuals to whom God speaks directly), while at the same time, he must avoid the problem created by Rome—a huge bureaucratic church, with countless offices and clerical titles, which was utterly unresponsive to the needs of the people, as well as completely indifferent to whether or not the gospel was being preached. If you know the history of the Reformation you know that the Reformation succeeded not only because Luther and others rediscovered the gospel, but it also succeeded because the laity absolutely hated Rome and its

¹ Chuck Smith, “The Philosophy of Ministry of Calvary Chapel,” <http://www.calvarychapel.com/library/smith-chuck/books/tpomoc.htm>

heavy-handed attitude toward the people, along with the corruption, greed and avarice which were found at virtually every level of church life. Woodcut cartoons from the Reformation era frequently lampooned the church and its leaders, much like priests and televangelists are lampooned today.

But God has not left us in the dark about how to order our churches and govern them so that pastors are free to fulfill their calling (preaching and teaching, administering the sacraments and providing pastoral care) elders can rule in the name of Christ (to watch over the church's doctrine and the life as well as the theology and behavior of the church's minister), and deacons, (who are responsible to ensure that no one in Christ's church goes without the essentials of life). Collectively, the men who hold these three distinct offices, administer the day to day business of the church. Not only is this view of church government taught in the New Testament, God has given this form of government to us to protect us from ambitious and entrepreneurial leaders, from false teachers and heresy, and from those who would confuse the church with the corporate board room or the country club which begrudgingly admits minorities, but which really prefers upper-class white republicans. Since the church is the visible manifestation of the invisible body of Christ, it must be governed according to biblical mandate and not according to the whims of sinful men and women.

Article Thirty of our confession lays out a basic description of Presbyterian church government, which is a church government ruled by presbyters or elders. Our confession proceeds by making three main points. First, our confession reminds us of the importance of the basing our doctrine of the church upon Scripture (not on tradition—Rome, nor the whims of a charismatic individual—Anabaptist, nor business models or marketing plans designed to sell a product—church growth types). The biblical teaching in this regard is clearly Presbyterian, not congregational, nor episcopal. Second, our confession briefly describes the three different biblical offices along with the duties of these offices (ministers, elders and deacons), a subject we will unpack in more detail in Article Thirty-One. Third, our confession sets out the reason why this form of church government is so important—so, that as Paul instructs us, everything will be done decently and in good order.² This not only honors Christ, it protects us against heresy, schism and scandal by keeping a biblical system of checks and balances in place, but it enables the church to go about its divinely ordained task of preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments, and extending mercy to its members who are in need.

As we turn to Article Thirty of our confession, De Bres begins by reminding us that we must govern the church according to the biblical mandate.

Our confession simply states: “We believe that this true church ought to be governed according to the spiritual order that our Lord has taught us in his Word.” While there is much to be learned from the business world (in terms of organization and communication), from the marketing world (in terms of how to promote and advertise), the fact of the matter is that the church is not a business, nor a personal entrepreneurial enterprise, and cannot be run like one. Since the church is the public assembly of God's people to hear God's word, receive his sacraments and submit to the yoke of Christ, then the church must be organized and governed according to Scripture—not according to the opinions of those who believe that the purpose of the church (evangelism) must determine the way in which we organize and govern the church. But while well-intentioned, this is completely backwards. As our confession states, it is the nature of the church as the body of Christ, which defines the mission of the church; the preaching the gospel, the proper administration of the sacraments and exercising discipline over those who

² Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, 224.

hypocritically profess faith in Christ but still live like pagans.

A number of biblical texts which speak about this scriptural order of Christ's church come to mind in addition to those listed in our confession. In fact, there are so many texts it is difficult to know where to start. Some of these passages will be covered next week as well. But we begin with Paul's assertion in Ephesians 1:22–23: “*And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.*” Thus Christ is the head of the church, which is his body. Paul makes this same point in 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12:4, when he writes of one body with many members, possessing many spiritual gifts for the building up of the body for the common good.

In Ephesians 2:20, Paul speaks of the church as “*built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.*” Then, in Ephesians 4:11–12, Paul describes how Christ as head of his church, establishes certain offices in the church. “*And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.*”

Since the office of apostle has passed away with the close of the apostolic age, it is pastors—who serve as prophets (preachers), evangelists (through the preaching of the gospel)—who are charged with the full-time task of teaching and preaching so as to equipping the members of the church to do the works of service which makes the church an effective witness to those outside the church.

This point is made by Paul in 1 Timothy 5:17, when he writes, “*let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.*” This is why Reformed Christians believe that ministers hold the rank of elder, while their particular calling entails a full-time paid vocation, and who, together with the rest of the elders (who make up the consistory) are responsible for the spiritual health of the church and the doctrine and life of the church's members, especially that of the church's minister. This particular task is not administrative but spiritual in nature. The elders must ensure that Christ is the chief cornerstone and that everything a church does is done with this Christ-centered focus in mind.

The consistory of the church is also given the so-called keys of kingdom, by none other than Jesus himself, so that the church can exercise the authority of Jesus Christ. In Matthew 16:19, Jesus says to his disciples as representatives of the church: “*I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.*” This task of binding and loosing is a subject we will take up in some detail when we discuss church discipline, as set forth in article thirty-two of the confession. But these keys are given to the church by Christ, to enable the church to determine those things which are forbidden and permissible for both church leaders and church members.³ Through the exercise of these keys, the consistory admits members to the church upon a profession of faith, approves of marriages and baptisms, as well as exercising silent censure (barring from the table) or even excommunication when necessary.

And then we read the remarkable assertion in Acts 20:28, when Paul tells the elders of the Ephesian church, “*pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.*” According to Paul, it is

³ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 593.

the elders who are to oversee the flock, since, being called by the Holy Spirit are to serve as shepherds of the flock. Notice that the flock is not some group of individuals who voluntarily join the church as they feel like it—or who can leave the church without sufficient reason. Rather, Paul is speaking of the church as that group which is composed of all those purchased with the blood of Jesus Christ. This is clearly a reference to the invisible church (the full number of the elect) who are obligated (as our confession put it in article twenty-eight) to join a local congregation of like-minded believers.

Unlike the office of elder—which has roots going back into the days of Moses, as we see in Exodus 18:13-27, the office of deacon was established in those days immediately after Pentecost, largely out of necessity. In Acts 6:1-6, we read of how the office of deacon came about.

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

The office of deacon was originally established to free up the ministers of word and sacrament so that they are not distracted from their primary duty which is to preach the gospel. From the duties mentioned here, and again, from comments made by Paul, it is clear that the duties of a deacon are related to acts of mercy and benevolence within the body of Christ. The deacons are to make sure that no one in the congregation goes without the necessities of life with special care given to widows and orphans.

From this very brief catalogue of passages, it is clear that Christ is the head of his church, is body. Christ rules his church through the office of elder, including pastors—men who are to preach, teach and do the work of an evangelist—along with lay-elders, who are called by the Holy Spirit to serve as shepherds to keep watch over those who have been purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ. Deacons are to serve as agents of Christ’s mercy. These are just a few of the texts which speak of the Scriptural order and address the subject of how the church is to be governed. But from this brief list it should be clear that the new congregations established by Paul and others, as recounted throughout the New Testament, were ruled (or governed) by ministers and elders, and served by deacons.

There is no hint anywhere in these biblical texts of Congregationalism—that system of church government most popular in America, in which autonomous local congregations, who have little or no connection to other churches, and which govern themselves according to the will of the majority of the congregation as determined by popular vote. Nor is there any hint of an episcopal form of church government—typical of Roman Catholicism or the Church of England (Anglicanism) in which the office of bishop is distinct from the office of presbyter (or elder) and possesses the authority of Christ because the office itself, supposedly, draws its authority through an unbroken succession of bishops all the way back to Peter. In the episcopal form of church government, elders and deacons are ordained offices (not lay-offices) and designate levels of the priesthood, not those lay offices we see in the New Testament.

Thus it is important to point out that Acts 14:23 we read that, “when they had appointed elders for them

in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” Paul instructed Titus to do the same thing—“appoint elders in every town as I directed you” (Titus 1:5). Not a hint of Bishops, Popes, Cardinals . . . Wherever a new church was planted, Paul, Barnabas and Titus ordained elders to rule those congregations.

Nor is there any hint in these verses of the kind of church government set out in the tract I mentioned earlier. Paul speaks of ministers, elders and deacons, not vaguely defined “boards” or other uniquely American inventions which have their origin in a revivalist’s tent or in someone’s marketing plan. Nowhere in the New Testament do we see a church—once having been established by an apostle—being ruled by someone to whom God speaks directly, who then surrounds himself with those who do pastor’s bidding. The New Testament church is governed by a group of elders and ministers (a consistory), and administered in its day to day business by the council, composed of the pastors, elders and deacons.

Our confession now moves on to list the specific officers who are to serve in the church as defined in Scripture—something we have already done.

Our confession states, “There should be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God and administer the sacraments. There should also be elders and deacons, along with the pastors, to make up the council of the church.” Since we will turn our attention next week to more specific information regarding these officers when we work our way through article thirty-one, and since we have already identified the three offices and their origins, we will briefly turn our attention to one of the more important passages which deals with these offices, 1 Timothy 3:1-13.

The offices of elder and deacon are defined by Paul accordingly:

The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil. Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

The proving ground for serving for church office is not someone’s success in business (the usual criterion), but their faithfulness to the gospel and the way in which they manage their families. Joe six-pack—who may work in a menial job, who is a good father and husband, who knows God’s word and has a long record of honorable conduct (without scandal in his home life or his job) is much more qualified for office than someone who may be a successful businessman, out-going, popular and ambitious—but who doesn’t know God’s word, has a record of shady business dealings and who is an absentee husband and father. This is why a church’s choice of officer-bearers is one of the most important things a church

can do. In a Reformed or Presbyterian church, you can almost guarantee a healthy and vital church if the elders are doing what God calls them to do, and a church with elders who fail to fulfill their duty to oversee a church's doctrine and life will almost always suffer accordingly.

Finally, our confession addresses the reasons why it is so important for the church to be governed according to Scripture and not according to the whims of men.

Our confession concludes by reminding us of what should by now be obvious. "By this means true religion is preserved; true doctrine is able to take its course; and evil men are corrected spiritually and held in check, so that also the poor and all the afflicted may be helped and comforted according to their need.⁶ By this means everything will be done well and in good order in the church, when such men are elected who are faithful and are chosen⁷ according to the rule that Paul gave to Timothy." God gives to us a clearly defined means of governing and organizing the church for four very specific reasons.

The first reason is to ensure that "true religion" may be preserved. This means that all things in the church are done in accordance with Scripture and for the glory of Christ. Not only does organizing our churches in this way protect us from those who seek absolute control over the members of the church and their wallets, but this reminds us that the local church is the visible manifestation of the invisible body of Jesus Christ and must be governed as the head of the church sees fit. Everything we do must be done in light of the fact that Jesus Christ is the head of the church, that he has bought us with his own blood, and that he has called each of us to be members of a local congregation. The good shepherd watches over his flock by ensuring that its members are nurtured and cared for, not exploited or abused.

Second, the ministers and elders of the church are to see to it that true (correct) doctrine is both proclaimed and taught in all the churches. If the church loses the gospel—either through heresy and error, or through a failure of the will to actually preach the gospel—the church becomes more of a menace than a benefit. A church which preaches not Christ, is not a church. Therefore, nothing that it does brings Christ glory, or is of a benefit to his people. Such a church simply provides cover for people who think that they are righteous apart from the doing and dying of Christ, and who mistakenly think that God will accept them in their sins.

Third, the officers of the church are to ensure that evil men (and women) are disciplined and restrained. Given the scandals throughout the American church and given the current problem faced by the Roman Church and the pedophiles among its priesthood, we must be ever vigilant to discipline those who would bring scandal to the cause of Christ and of his church. While the church is to be a haven and hospital for all kinds of sinners (even pedophiles and televangelists), those who are called to lead Christ's church must be held to a higher standard. It is Paul who tells us to avoid every kind of evil (1 Thessalonians 5:22). And nothing creates a greater obstacle to the preaching of the gospel than self-righteous moralizers, whose secret sins inevitably come to light. While we are all sinners in need of a savior, there is no excuse for scandal, especially among church leaders.

Finally, we are reminded of the importance of showing mercy to all those in our midst. We are to help the poor and afflicted and comfort those in grief and in need. This mission of mercy underlies the preaching of the gospel and not only is a blessing to those in need, but shows the world that our Lord's highest priestly prayer is being answered—that the world might know we are Christ's because of our love for one another. And such love is not superficial but manifests itself in action.

This is why the Reformed and Presbyterian creed about church government—all things done decently and

in good order—is not only Paul’s instruction to the churches, but doing all things decently and in good order ensures that the gospel is truly preached, the sacraments are properly administered, and that human sin does not get in the way of the cause of Christ and the glory due his name. Christ is the Lord of his church, and this is how he has determined it should be ruled so that everything is done decently, and in good order.