

“Chosen to Their Offices”

An Exposition of Article Thirty-One of the Belgic Confession

Article 31 - The Officers of the Church

We believe that ministers of the Word of God, elders, and deacons ought to be chosen to their offices by a legitimate election of the church, with prayer in the name of the Lord, and in good order, as the Word of God teaches.¹ So everyone must be careful not to push himself forward improperly, but he must wait for God’s call, so that he may be assured of his calling and be certain and sure that he is chosen by the Lord.² As for the ministers of the Word, they all have the same power and authority, no matter where they may be, since they are all servants of Jesus Christ,³ the only universal bishop, and the only head of the church.⁴ Moreover, to keep God’s holy order from being violated or despised, we say that everyone ought, as much as possible, to hold the ministers of the Word and elders of the church in special esteem, because of the work they do,⁵ and be at peace with them, without grumbling, quarreling, or fighting.

¹ Acts 1:23-24, 6:2-3 ² Acts 13:2; 1 Cor 12:28; 1 Tim 4:14, 5:22; Heb 5:4 ³ 2 Cor 5:20; 1 Pt 5:1-4 ⁴ Mt 23:8, 10; Eph 1:22, 5:23 ⁵ 1 Thes 5:12-13; 1 Tim 5:17; Heb 13:17

It is the apostle Paul who tells us in 1 Thessalonians 5:12 that we are to “*we ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you.*” But this is certainly *not* how ministers are viewed in modern America. If you look at recent public opinion polls which ask people about what professions they regard the highest, ministers finish near the bottom, just above politicians and telemarketers and about on par with lawyers and car salesmen.

While this is a sad situation, there is a reason why people feel the way they do about the church and its leaders. Because American Christians often ignore what the Bible says about how the church should govern itself, the door is opened wide to all kinds of scandal and abuse, the very things which have brought the ministry into such disrepute.

In Article Thirty-One, The Belgic Confession deals with the three offices of Reformed/Presbyterian church government: ministers, elders, and deacons. In this article, the confession takes up the subject of how men are to be chosen for office and how they are to view each other and those they serve, as well as how they are to be viewed by members of the congregation. In this sense, Article Thirty-One continues the same line of thinking found in the prior article, which gives us a definition and defense of Reformed or Presbyterian church government such as that found in the New Testament, in which the church is to be governed by ministers and elders (a consistory) and served by deacons, who collectively administer the day to day business of the church.

The local church is the visible manifestation of Christ’s invisible body. Since the church is the body of Christ, God has given to the members of his church numerous spiritual gifts for the building up of the

body for works of service and for the edification of its members. This is why all Christians are bound to join a congregation of like-minded believers. This helps to explain why we should not be content to be on our own (as our confession puts it), apart from the church.

The true church is a church characterized by the three specific things (or marks); the preaching of gospel, the proper administration of the sacraments, and the proper exercise of church discipline. But the false church is characterized by the fact that it assigns more authority to itself and human tradition than it does to the Word of God.

Because the length and detail of the articles in our confession dealing with the doctrine of the church may come as a surprise, we need to once again consider the theological climate in which our confession was written. In fact, this article will only make full sense once we set it in its context.

At the time our confession was written in 1561, there was a large Anabaptist movement in the Low Countries (Belgium and the Netherlands). Many of these folk believed that the Holy Spirit speaks directly to certain individuals, which, in practice, meant that any form of church government only served to stifle the Spirit's freedom. Many Anabaptist groups centered around a charismatic leader, who, in turn, sought out people who regarded their every word as gospel.

Lying in the background to all of this was the disaster which occurred in the German city of Münster in 1534-1535, which, as we have mentioned in several articles, shocked and outraged all of Europe. It was a Dutch tailor, John of Leyden, who claimed that the Holy Spirit led both him and his followers to take over the city of Münster and preside over what they declared to be the manifestation of the kingdom of God. When any of John's followers eventually became disenchanted and dared to oppose his rule, they were publically put to death as examples of what might happen to others. Since the kingdom of God had dawned under John's direction, all forms of civil government which had existed beforehand were now declared to be illegitimate. This meant that all existing marriages were immediately dissolved—John and his elders, of course, got their pick of the newly available women, sixteen of the most desirable now found themselves married to John the prophet.

Since the coming of the kingdom brought about something akin to the apostolic age, daily life was structured along the lines of Acts 2:45—*“and they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need”*—which John took to mean that there should be no acknowledgment of private property. The “Spirit” led John to decree that no one could lock their doors nor sell any goods for profit. You simply wandered around town, entered anyone's home or business whenever you wanted and took whatever you needed. While the people starved, John and his elders and their wives had all that they needed and then some.

What John's followers could not see, or else were afraid to admit, was that they were completely at his mercy. When the city of Münster eventually fell to the prince Franz von Waldeck's army, John of Leyden and a good many of his followers were brutally put to death as anarchists. All of this was because John claimed to be a prophet, filled with the Spirit, and therefore was to be followed blindly by any true Christian. Amazingly, thousands followed him, just as they followed Jim Jones to his Kool-Aid party in Guiana, and David Koresh to his compound in Waco. We can all think of horrible things done by those who claim to have an inside track to divine revelation and who see themselves as God's chosen man of the hour. There is nothing so dangerous as a charismatic leader with a Messiah complex.

But not only are the Anabaptists certainly in De Bres' mind as he is composing these articles on the

church, our confession was also written against the backdrop of the medieval Roman church. At the time of the Reformation, the average Christian absolutely hated the Roman church. This explains much of Rome's attraction to Anabaptism as well as to Reformed and Lutheran varieties of Protestantism, for strictly non-theological reasons. Efficient as the DMV, as friendly as the Post Office, and as gracious as the IRS, the Roman church was a giant bureaucracy which intruded into virtually every area of medieval life. The church and its influence was everywhere. There was no escape.

Not only was the Roman church a bureaucratic monster, but the people had no say in virtually all aspects of church life. Bishops sent priests to local parishes with little regard given to the needs of a particular congregation. Many times these appointments were personal favors or a *quid pro quo* because of a gift from a wealthy family. Many churches didn't have priests at all. There was a tremendous shortage of men willing to serve the church. Many priests were poorly trained and indifferent to the plight of their people.

Both Luther and Calvin decried the laziness of the clergy of their day—cloistered men who got three square meals a day and free housing but who often did nothing in return, except that they claimed to pray. Even Rome was forced to acknowledge how bad things were and the counter-Reformation (the official Catholic response to Protestantism) focused largely upon cleaning up the church, even as it opposed Protestant theology.

It will come as no surprise that Rome thought that cleaning up the church would remove popular support for the Reformation, but alas, since the Reformation was a work of God based upon the recovery of the gospel, there was nothing Rome could do to put the gospel genie back into the Roman bottle. Since the gospel is the power of God unto salvation, once people heard it and embraced it, there was no going back.

Even though the doctrine of the church is something we often take for granted—most of us have never been involved in a cult and suffered under abusive church leaders (although some have), nor have many of us ever encountered anything like the indifference of the medieval Roman church since we now live in an age when the church is no longer regarded as an important or virtuous institution.

Much of this is due, no doubt, to the secularism which now dominates most aspects of American life. Many of our contemporaries think Christians are rubes and morons who self-righteously seek to impose their narrow-minded views upon everyone else. But we must also face the fact that we live in an age where church leaders have done all kinds of terrible things which have brought shame upon the cause of Christ and his church. From greedy televangelists to pedophile priests, Christian leaders have done unspeakable damage to the church and its reputation. This makes Article Thirty-One as relevant today as it was when it was written.

One of the reasons why things have gotten so bad in our own day is that Christians and churches have not followed the biblical mandate about how it is that we are to organize and govern our churches. While the church is to be a haven and hospital for sinners, God has instructed us to how to govern Christ's church so as to protect the flock from the likes of a John of Leyden or the bureaucratic indifference of something like the medieval Roman church.

God has provided us with the means to ensure that ministers preach the gospel, administer the sacraments, and exercise pastoral care. Ministers, together with lay-elders, rule the flock of Jesus Christ as a consistory. Deacons are to ensure that no one in the congregation goes without the essentials of life.

Therefore, even though the doctrine of the church is not a topic about which we may not have given much thought, this is one area where our Christian lives are directly impacted. How the church organizes and governs itself really does matter. The reason why God has instituted a Presbyterian form of church government (centered in the rule of elders) is to protect us from many of the things we have witnessed happening in the church throughout its history. While not perfect, a church ruled by elders (both lay-elders and ministers of the word) is an important way to keep human sin in check, while yet providing a reasonably efficient way for the church to conduct its day to day business.

In order to flesh out the practical “nuts and bolts” issues related to the three offices mentioned in article thirty, there are four points made in this article.¹ First, the confession describes how office bearers are to be chosen. Second, our confession takes up the subject the call of an individual to office. Third, the confession addresses the fact that all church office-bearers are under the authority of the head of the church, who is Jesus Christ, and therefore cannot “lord it over fellow officers and church members.” Fourth, our confession takes up the subject of how those who have been duly called and elected to office are to be viewed by those whom they serve.

First, how are church officers (ministers, elders and deacons) to be chosen?

Our confession states that “We believe that ministers of the Word of God, elders, and deacons ought to be chosen to their offices by a legitimate election of the church, with prayer in the name of the Lord, and in good order, as the Word of God teaches.” To support this point, the confession appeals to passages like Acts 1:23-24, when the apostles chose Matthias to be the successor to Judas, as well as from Acts 6:3, when seven deacons were chosen so as to free up ministers of word and sacrament so as to concentrate on preaching. While these verses don’t speak directly of the congregation electing officers, it is certainly implied. Given the mandate from Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:40 that everything is to be done decently and in good order, the election of officers by the congregation to represent them does indeed seem to be the best way for a congregation to select those who will rule and serve.

Then we read in Acts 14:23, that after Paul and Barnabas appointed elders, the congregation was instructed to pray for them, which is why (following the instructions of 1 Timothy 4:14), when new officers are installed after being elected, the congregation prays for them and the elders lay hands on them, symbolic of the blessing of the Holy Spirit.² This ancient ritual has been practiced by the church from the very beginning. When a church ordains and install new officers, we are standing in direct continuity with the apostolic church.

When we ordain faithful men to these offices, we are witnessing the on-going fulfillment of our Lord’s words in Matthew 16:18, “*I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*” The head of the church, rules and preserves the church through those whom he calls to serve the church, through these three offices.

But we should not forget that this congregational election of officers also has its roots in those days shortly after the Reformation began, when Reformed Christians were getting their first breath of the fresh air of freedom from Rome. Since Rome was in the habit of sending priests to the congregations often

¹ Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, 229.

² Osterhaven, Our Confession of Faith, 164-165.

without giving any regard to the needs of a particular congregation, a confession's call for church officers to be elected from among the membership of the congregation was a radical one in that day and age, although democratic Americans often take such a thing completely for granted. To give a congregation a say in its own governance was not only a further sign of the democratic impulse which was beginning to arise at the time of the Reformation, it was the surest way to protect a congregation from the tyranny of a bureaucratic and indifferent church, like Rome.

The second subject which is addressed in Article Thirty-One, is the question, "how do men know whether or not they've been called to serve in office?"

Our confession puts the matter as follows: "So everyone must be careful not to push himself forward improperly, but he must wait for God's call, so that he may be assured of his calling and be certain and sure that he is chosen by the Lord." In 1 Timothy 3, Paul reminds the church that *"the saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task."*

One of the ways someone knows that they have been called to serve in office is that they desire to do so. Paul tells us that this is a noble task. But a personal desire to serve in the church is not the end of the story. The Belgic Confession reminds us of how easily the ambition to serve can become a matter of sinful pride. Hence the warning to be careful not to intrude into the church to serve through improper means, such as buying an office, lobbying to be elected, and so on.

You may know the story of Simon the Sorcerer in Acts 8:9-25, who thought that he could buy the power of the Holy Spirit, which he had witnessed in the apostolic church. Peter's response to Simon's desire to buy miracle-working ability speaks to this very topic.

But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity."

Based on this event, the term "simony" was given to the rather wide-spread practice of buying church offices in the medieval Roman church.³

A similar practice exists in a different form today, as when a celebrity converts to Christianity and within days of their conversion, the evangelical media ensures that they have two Christian books, three new albums, a podcast, and they speak at all the big Christian conferences. The Christian celebrity may be sincere, but there is money to be made from their celebrity.

This is what happens when parachurch ministries—many of which are non-profit businesses—dominate the evangelical landscape and which frequently have no connection to a local church or biblically mandated church government.

The biblical evidence certainly points us in the direction of ordaining people in a careful and orderly way. In Acts 13:2, Luke describes how the Holy Spirit called Paul and Barnabas to serve and that they

³ Beets, The Reformed Confession Explained, 231.

were then ordained through the laying on of hands. In 1 Corinthians 12:28, Paul speaks of certain spiritual gifts (*charismata*) being given to specific members of the church to equip them to minister to and serve others. In 1 Timothy 4:14, Paul speaks of Timothy being given certain gifts when the elders laid hands upon him during his ordination. In Hebrews 5:4, we are told that “*and no one takes this honor for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was.*” While someone may desire to serve, they must also be called by God to serve.

This is why a person’s inward desire to serve (the “inward call”) must be confirmed by the church (the so-called “external call”). Reformed Christians believe that the Holy Spirit equips certain men to serve the church by giving them both the gifts needed and the desire to become ministers, elders and deacons. But given human sinfulness—especially the sin of pride—the Reformed believe the internal call also must be matched by an external call. That is, other members of the church, especially the members of the consistory, must recognize the presence of these spiritual gifts in others and then “calls them” (not “asks them”) to serve in office. Someone who has an internal call, and who’s gifts are then recognized by the church, is a fit candidate to stand for election to the office to which they have been called. The question as to whether not it is God’s will for that person to serve at a given time, is then made manifest through the outcome of a congregational election.

The third point made by our confession is that all office bearers must submit to the headship of Christ, who is the Lord of his church.

Again, human sin, being what it is, frequently manifests itself in the behavior of church officers toward one another or those they serve, through what has been called “lording it over someone else.” This is why our confession reminds us that “As for the ministers of the Word, they all have the same power and authority, no matter where they may be, since they are all servants of Jesus Christ, the only universal bishop, and the only head of the church.” There is no difference in spiritual status between ministers, elders, deacons, and laypersons. It is a matter of certain men having specific spiritual gifts which make them more fit for one office than another. This also means that all ministers hold the equivalent rank of elder (although the minister’s calling is different), and that there are to be no higher or lower ranks among ministers. This statement is clearly aimed at the Roman church with its deacons and sub-deacons, priests, bishops, archbishops, cardinals, canons and the Pope, who is not in any sense the vicar of Christ on earth as Rome maintains, and who must likewise submit to the authority and teaching of Christ, who alone is head of his church.

But this article is also aimed at charismatic individuals who think that their gifts and abilities make them superior to others, and therefore, need not submit to the will and the consent of the consistory. This was a major problem with the Anabaptists at the time of the Reformation, who believed that certain individuals possessed a prophetic office given them by the Holy Spirit, and who were accountable to no one.

In Ezekiel 34, our Lord takes a very dim view of such false shepherds who don’t care for the lost and who plunder the flock, who rule them brutally and harshly so that the flock ends up being scattered and picked off by predators. The Lord himself warns the false shepherds to repent, lest he come to them in judgment. The Lord will protect his flock, even if his shepherds don’t. This is why in John 10, Jesus comes to Israel as the Good Shepherd, something Israel’s religious leaders clearly were not. This is also why the Apostle Peter exhorts all Christian ministers and elders in, 1 Peter 5:1-4,

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as

well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

Serving the church is a great responsibility given to us by the chief shepherd himself, and the reward for such service is great. *“And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.”* To serve the church is to become an under-shepherd of Jesus Christ. We are not to use the office for gain, nor are we to lord it over others. We are called to be examples. And we are to be willing to serve when called.

Finally, our confession addresses the subject of the esteem due those who hold office.

Because it was so common to distrust the monks, priests and bishops at the time our confession was written, it was very important for De Bres to remind the new Reformed church, that those who serve in office, are to be held in high esteem, not because the men who serve are better or “holier” than others, but because of the respect for the office they hold and for the work in which they have been called to engage. De Bres writes, “Moreover, to keep God’s holy order from being violated or despised, we say that everyone ought, as much as possible, to hold the ministers of the Word and elders of the church in special esteem, because of the work they do, and be at peace with them, without grumbling, quarreling, or fighting.”

This high esteem for the offices of minister, elder and deacon too is clearly taught in the New Testament. In 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13, Paul writes *“we ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.”*

This is why there is nothing so tragic as ministers and elders who bring scandal to the church. The sad fact is that the actions of some do indeed color the way we view others, which explains the low standing of ministers in public opinion polls. In 1 Timothy 5:17, Paul states, *“let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.”* The honor primarily comes with the office not so much with the man who holds it. And, then, in Hebrews 13:17, the author declares, *“obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.”*

This is not a command to obey ministers the way the foolish Anabaptists obeyed John of Leyden. This is not an exhortation to do whatever the minister or elder says. We are not Islamic clerics who issue *fatwas* against our enemies! Rather it is a command to have respect for these offices, because those who hold these offices will give an account to the chief shepherd of how they serve while in office.

The author of Hebrews is making the point that this makes the work of shepherding a joy, not a burden, for there is nothing gained when ministers and elders feel as though their job is a burden. When burned out, they no longer have the emotional wherewithal to serve others. The point is that God appoints shepherds to lead, and he calls the flock to follow. In doing this, everyone benefits.

The primary application that we should draw from this article is that it is a good and noble thing to desire

to serve in Christ's church (either in one of these three offices, or in some other way). We should all desire to serve Christ's church in some way, shape, or form, according to our gifts, abilities and personal circumstances. Hopefully, everyone may feel the Spirit's call to serve Christ's church as you can. Young men may feel called the ministry or the mission field. More mature men may feel called to serve as deacons and elders. But since these three offices are limited to men, we ought to point out that there many important ways for women to serve as well.

And when your church recognizes your gifts and asks men to serve in one of these three offices, it is something you are to seriously consider. Remember, you are not being asked to serve, you are being called by God to serve.

If your first thought when called to stand for office is "I am not worthy to serve," well, then, you have just proven your qualification for the office. There is no one who is truly worthy to serve in these offices. But the same God who calls you, is also faithful to his church. He freely distributes gifts of the Spirit to enable us to serve as we are called. This was the case for Paul and Barnabas, who, as we have read in Acts 14:23, receive additional gifts of the Spirit when ordained, and it is the case when men are ordained to office today. God calls. God equips us to fulfill our calling.

While there is always the temptation to read the Book of Acts and then say, well that was for "Bible times," let us not forget that we stand in direct continuity to the church we see in the apostolic age. While there are no longer apostles, there are ministers, elders and deacons, whose call comes from the Lord, and who serve as under-shepherds of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. And those of us who serve will give an account. So will those who follow. But even we have all been called to serve, we serve as justified sinners, whose weak and feeble efforts to fulfill our callings, are nevertheless pleasing to the Lord—for as we serve, our sins have been forgiven, and we are clothed in the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ, who is the Lord of his church and to whom, we all must submit.