

Governing the Church

The Church Order—a Voluntary Agreement

JAN DEGELDER

Editors' introduction: Every church and every federation (or affiliation) of churches has rules and a governing structure, including Reformed churches like ours. But how is our church governed? What are the rules and where did they come from? And how do our rules compare with how the Lord Jesus wants his church to be governed? To help answer these questions and more, *Clarion* has invited Rev. Jan DeGelder to undertake a series of articles explaining the basics of Reformed church government as we have it in our Canadian Reformed Church Order, an order that is based carefully on the historic Church Order of Dort (1619). Rev. DeGelder is well-qualified to help us in this as church polity (government) has been a long-time interest of his and he has often lectured on this subject at the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary.

For most students who enter the Theological Seminary, church polity is not at the top of the list of topics they look forward to learning about. Perhaps they think of exegesis as where they'll learn the art of explaining the Bible. Or maybe they are keen on dogmatics where they'll delve deep into the content of what we believe. Great stuff! But church polity? Studying the way the church is governed? Sure, it's part of the program, but what is so exciting about all the regulations in the church?

Some people may go a step further even. Perhaps in a conversation you've heard someone ask: "Do we need a church order?" Some even buy into the myth that once upon a time a general synod put together this book with rules and restrictions to impose on us how to run our churches. They feel it isn't right that some synod is telling our local church what to do.

Spiritual or formal?

Others may go further with their objections. They say that the church is spiritual. It's the body of Christ. It's the work of the Holy Spirit. Church polity on the other hand has to do with structures and the use of adopted forms. To them that seems like such a

contrast. Are those actually compatible—the work of God's Holy Spirit and our rules and regulations? Are we not putting out the fire of the Holy Spirit by having a book of rules and procedures?

To begin with, it is of course true that the church is spiritual in nature. With our rules we will never be able to box in the work of God the Holy Spirit. But that's not the point of church polity and that's not the end of the story either. By his Spirit and Word, Jesus Christ gathers people in his church (HC, Q/A 54). Certainly they are an assembly of believers (BC, Art. 27), but they are just people. And wherever people get together to do things, they need to make proper arrangements to make it work. What that implies for the church is carefully worded in Article 32 of the Belgic Confession: "We believe that, although it is useful and good for those who govern the church to establish a certain order to maintain the body of the church, they must at all times watch that they do not deviate from what Christ, our only Master, has commanded."

So, yes: an assembly of believers is still an assembly of sinners. And therefore: "Those who govern the church must at all times watch that they do not deviate from what Christ has commanded." Christ is the Head of the church, which means that

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his Word, his authority, has the final say at all times. But on that strict spiritual condition, we also confess in Article 32 that “it is useful and good for those who govern the church to establish a certain order to maintain the body of the church” and that “we accept what is proper to preserve and promote harmony and unity and to keep all in obedience to God.”

The question is, of course: what is the best way to make that work both locally and as a federation? What does that look like and what does that mean for how we look at our church order and how we practice church polity?¹

Playing soccer

It is actually pretty simple. Practicing church polity is a bit like playing soccer.² What you need first is a ball, a field, a bunch of players, and multiple teams. Those things are indispensable. But then, in order to play games where all players know what to expect, games that don’t become chaotic and are fun to play and watch, everyone needs to agree on some rules. Things like: how wide should the goal be? What to do when the ball goes over the sideline, or crosses the goal-line? Can you use your hand, or your elbow? You get the point.

Are those rules important? Of course they are. To quote the Belgic Confession, they “preserve and promote harmony and unity” on the field (Art 32). Without such rules the game would turn into a mess pretty quickly. But can those rules be changed? Yes, they can. They were initially adopted by agreement of all the participants. In the same way, when all parties agree, many of those rules can be changed. As a matter of fact, over the last century or so several soccer rules have been adjusted. It was generally accepted that those were improvements.

However, two things are not possible: An individual player cannot change the rules on his own. And one single team cannot change the rules either. To play soccer all players and all teams need to be able to trust that everyone plays by the same rules. Now, what if you really dislike some rules and you have tried to get those changed, but that was not successful—then what? Remember: You don’t have to play in this league. No one forces

you to play according to these rules. If you would rather do it differently, you’re free to leave and go play somewhere else.

The “rules of the game”

The character of our Church Order is like the basic rule book for soccer: these are the regulations voluntarily agreed upon by all participants. These are “the rules of the game,” so to speak. All the churches willingly and knowingly adopted this document when they voluntarily joined the federation. This means that “abiding by the Church Order” is not a matter of obeying the rules just because of some distant synodical authority. Rather, keeping the Church Order is simply a matter of keeping your word, of being a reliable partner to your sister churches.

And just as with soccer, some things are indispensable, like our unity of faith, based on our submission to God’s Word and expressed in our creeds and confessions. At the same time, many of the things we have agreed upon in the Church Order can be changed. However, the character of this voluntary agreement means that you make such changes together in careful consultation with the other churches and with mutual agreement (see CO, Art 76).

But one thing is not possible: individual churches cannot change the rules on their own. Nor can any church declare that some rules do not apply to them, or simply act as if that’s the case. Promises are promises. There is much at stake here: can we trust each other as churches to loyally honour our word?

The next question we want to consider is: why is our Church Order put together the way it is? How do these arrangements reflect the purpose, the goal of this document? 



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¹ For a broader introduction see Jan DeGelder, “Church Polity . . . Does It Matter?” *Clarion* (Vol. 68, No. 09 & 10).

² The picture is from Dr. H. J. Selderhuis, professor of ecclesiology at the Theological University of the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in Apeldoorn, the Netherlands