

# Governing the Church

## Checks and Balances

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**T**he previous article ended with the questions: why is our Church Order put together the way it is? How do these arrangements reflect the purpose of this document? It is important to think about this a bit more. The emphasis was on the Church Order as a voluntary agreement of a group of local churches, with the understanding that the rules can be changed when all (or the majority) of participants agree. This could leave the reader with the impression that our Church Order is not much more than a pragmatic document with some arbitrary regulations, put together more or less haphazardly. But nothing could be further from the truth.

### **Biblical principles**

There is much more to it. The introduction to the Church Order on page 647 of the *Book of Praise* gives a very brief history of

this document. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, over a period of about fifty years, with input from many local churches, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands carefully discerned how God wants his church to be governed, based on his Word. With this in mind, they crafted the rules and regulations we have in our Church Order, a process that was finalized at the well-known Synod of Dort in 1618/1619.

It means that the essential content comes from the Bible, but it does not imply that each one of those seventy-six articles is backed up by one or more particular texts. The Church Order also includes instructions that can be drawn from Scripture by good and lawful deduction. This qualifies the Church Order as a “spiritual order” (BC, Art. 30) with the purpose “to maintain the body of the church” and “to preserve and promote harmony and unity and to keep all in obedience to God” (BC, Art. 32)

# What could possibly lead to the need for change?

As they were formulating this spiritual order, the churches were driven by the following biblical convictions:

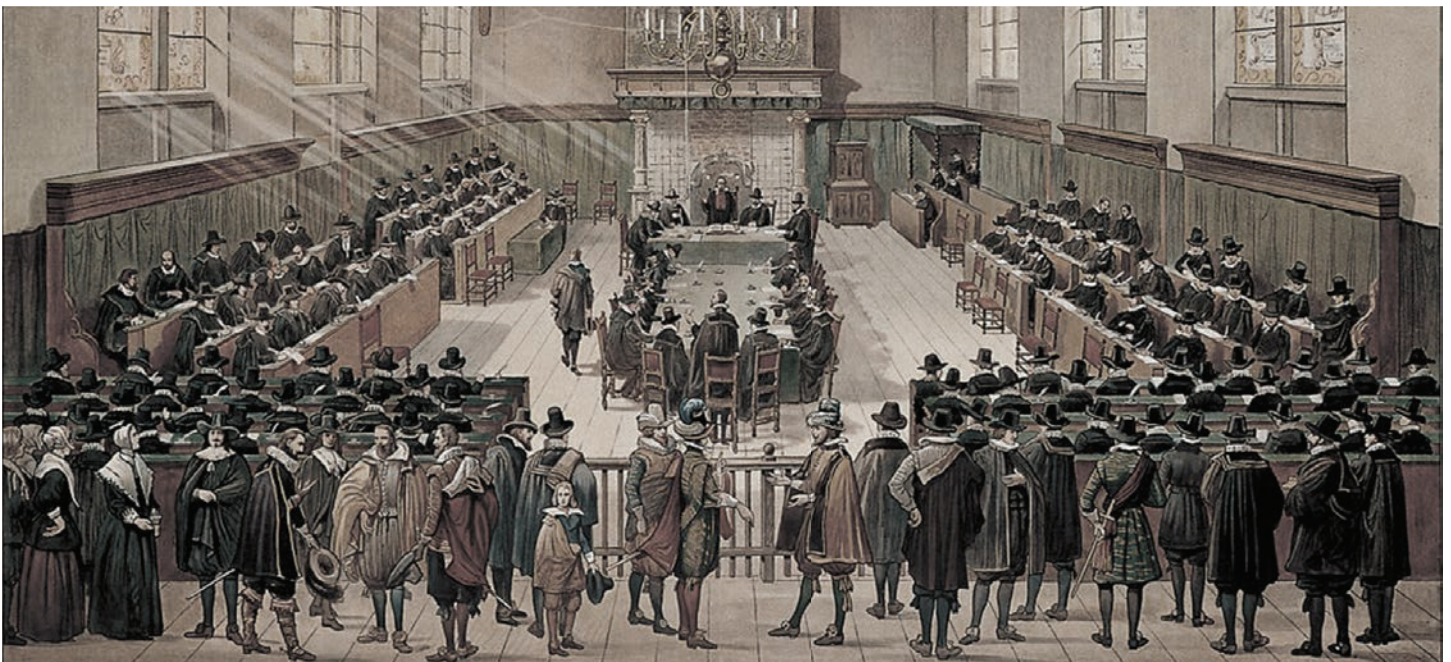
1. God is not a God of disorder, but of peace (1 Cor 14:33) and therefore all things should be done decently and in order (1 Cor 14:40).
2. All the rules and regulations we agree on must acknowledge and reflect that Jesus Christ is the only Head of the church (Eph 1:22; Col 1:18).
3. All the local churches are autonomous bodies of Christ, governed by local office bearers with local authority. There is no central (human) head or head-office. The apostle Paul wrote most of his letters to local churches. And in Revelation 2 and 3 the focus is on the angels of seven local churches.
4. At the same time, these autonomous local churches are *given* to each other, based on the unity of faith, under the Lord Jesus Christ as the same Head of all the churches. The apostle Paul wrote a letter to a group of churches in Galatia. He also instructed the church in Colosse to pass on their letter to the church in Laodicea. Other authors addressed multiple churches in their writings. And the famous church council

we read about in Acts 15 illustrates how beneficial it is to cooperate and mutually support one another as churches.

## Goals

The Reformed churches that were working on this “church order project,” so to speak, were faced with the challenge to formulate the rules and regulations in such a way that justice would be done to all four of those principles. And as they did so, they also kept in mind the two main goals that flow from these principles:

1. As churches we share the mutual responsibility to help one another safeguard the faithful teaching, the true doctrine as it comes to us in Scripture and as the churches have summarized it in the Reformed confessions. After all, on almost all the pages of the New Testament we are warned against false doctrine and against those who introduce and promote wrong teachings.
2. As churches we also share the mutual responsibility to protect the churches against the pitfalls of “hierarchy,” as well as the pitfalls of “independentism.”



Synod of Dort in Dordrecht, 1618-1619

## Hierarchy vs. independentism

It might be helpful to look a bit closer at those words. “Hierarchy” is governing from the top down. When it comes to churches, the classic example is, of course, the Roman Catholic Church (RCC). The Pope is the (human) head of the worldwide RCC, with archbishops and bishops at lower levels. In the Reformed system, a form of hierarchy which could develop may be when members regard the general synod as the highest (human) authority over the church(es). This would violate the third biblical principle mentioned above. “Independentism” is the opposite. Here, classic examples are local churches that operate entirely on their own, sometimes break-aways from a particular denomination, but often the result of one man’s ministry. When Reformed churches embrace independentism, they declare: regardless of what we have agreed upon in the Church Order, regardless of the matter of mutual accountability, when we don’t like certain things, or we think that some of those rules don’t work for us, we can just ignore them and do our own thing. This would be a violation of the fourth biblical principle.

Interestingly, when we hear “hierarchy,” we usually think of an authority that lords it over a denomination or a group of churches. But independentism is not as far removed from hierarchy as it sounds. Strict independentism can lead to “local hierarchy.” In an entirely independent church, especially if this church is the result of one man’s ministry and mission, the charismatic leader or pastor can become the sole authority who will not tolerate any dissent and will singlehandedly silence people who criticize him.<sup>1</sup>

## Change—why & how

The Canadian Reformed Churches are a voluntary federation of autonomous Reformed churches. Within that framework, our Church Order sets the parameters for the way in which these churches are governed. In this way, it provides checks and balances to maintain, locally and as federation, the fine line between hierarchy and independentism.

All of the above does not undo the fact that the rules can be changed when all (or the majority) of the churches agree. However—it does trigger the question: what could possibly lead to the need for change?

Dr. Jack DeJong, who taught Church Polity at the Theological College between 1990 and 2003, worked with the following definition: *Church Polity is the study of the order, the polity, and the government of the church as it is required by Scripture and as it has developed in the church’s history.*

In other words, the articles of the Church Order, which were written on the basis of the biblical principles and with the biblical goals outlined in this article, were also formulated in a particular historical context. They often do reflect the circumstances of that time in the history of the church. And while biblical principles are timeless, historical circumstances are not.

So, yes—different times and different circumstances may indeed call for changes, adjustments that reflect new times and situations. That’s why since 1618/1619 the Reformed Church Order has gone through several revisions. The last one in the Canadian Reformed Churches was completed in 1983.

The previous article emphasized that such revisions can only be adopted *with common accord*, as Article 76 of the Church Order puts it. This article adds that such revisions should only be adopted under two other conditions:

1. As long as they do not weaken the commitment to the same biblical principles that from the very beginning characterized the Reformed Church Order as a spiritual order (BC, Art. 30)
2. As long as they maintain the checks and balances to strive for the two goals mentioned earlier. 



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<sup>1</sup> Just Google “abusive churches” or “abusive church leaders.”