

The Spirit of the **CHURCH ORDER**

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You may remember that in the first article of this series I mentioned an observation that usually the students entering seminary don't have church polity very high on their list of interests. However, eventually most of these men will become ministers. And soon after they receive a surprise. After they have been ordained and begin to attend council and consistory meetings, they find out how much time they spend discussing . . . guess what? Church polity! Suddenly, how to interpret and apply the Church Order becomes a very real issue.

The same is true for new elders and deacons. There is a problem or question or proposal on the table. How do we deal with it? What does the Church Order say about this? Sometimes you find out that the Church Order doesn't say anything about it. Then what? Or the Church Order speaks to a matter that is somewhat similar to the issue on the table, but it's not the same. What do we do now? After all, the Church Order is not a detailed lawbook that covers every possible scenario. It's not a fat volume, but only a few pages with basic rules.

There are, of course, other church polity resources available such as church order commentaries. That can be helpful, but these don't answer every question either. On top of that, commentators don't always agree, and not everyone will always agree with the interpretation of a particular commentator.

WHEN THE CO ISN'T HELPFUL

This means that at times you are left questioning the proper way to read, interpret, and apply the articles of the Church Order. In that context someone might say: we should decide and act in "the *spirit* of the Church Order." You may have heard the expression, but what does it mean? It sounds a bit vague and fuzzy, does it not? Does it not undermine what we saw earlier about the Church Order as an agreement between federating churches that helps us express our unity of faith?

With that in the back of your mind, you can understand it when some say: "No, we should not go there. Let's just stick to the strict

A note from the author In upcoming columns, we want to look more closely at various articles in particular. As readers you will also be able to contribute by sending me your church polity questions. I will do my best to integrate those in this series, except for one category: "My consistory made this decision, but I disagree with it. What do you think?" I hope it's obvious that in *Clarion* I cannot and will not comment on local situations.

wording of the articles that we have in the Church Order.” That seems to have the benefit of a simple and straightforward application of the rules. But in practice, that only goes so far. Running the church is sometimes more challenging and complicated than we bargain for. Some articles tell us *what* to do, but not *how* to do it.

There is also the opposite approach. That’s the idea that one can appeal to the “spirit” of the Church Order to claim the freedom to decide whatever you see as beneficial in your situation as local church, especially when the Church Order does not say exactly what you’re looking for.

You may even hear this reasoning: “We know that in this case the Church Order has this rule. However, in our circumstances we should be free to do it differently and act more in line with the spirit of the Church Order.” Then the “spirit” of the Church Order becomes an argument to ignore what the Church Order is actually saying. That doesn’t sound good, does it? So, perhaps we should just avoid this whole idea of the spirit of the Church Order. But then—what if you run into an issue the Church Order says nothing about, but you do have to deal with it?

WHEN THE CO SAYS NOTHING

Here is an illustration. Article 61 says: “The consistory shall admit to the Lord’s Supper only those who have made public profession of the Reformed faith and lead a godly life. Members of sister-churches shall be admitted on the ground of a good attestation concerning their doctrine and conduct.” As such, that’s fairly straightforward. But it does not say anything about admitting guests who might come from other denominations, or perhaps from no church at all.

So, what should the consistory do in the case of someone who is not a member of this church, and does not present a good attestation from a sister-church either, asking to participate in the Lord’s Supper? Some will say: “Since there is nothing in the Church Order about this, there is nothing we can do. We cannot receive anyone at the Lord’s Supper other than those explicitly listed in Article 61.” Others will say: “Since there is nothing in the Church Order about this, we can do as we see fit. We can basically receive anyone at the Lord’s Supper.”

In this article my goal is not to find an answer to the question. I might come back to it later. But my point is: What does it mean to refer to the “spirit of the Church Order” in such a discussion about a matter that is not explicitly mentioned in the Church Order? In those scenarios we will face a variety of opinions. Would it then be helpful to bring in the “spirit” of the Church Order? It depends on what we mean by that.

A SPIRITUAL ORDER

The expression “the spirit of the church order” is not as vague and fuzzy as it may sound. It connects with what I mentioned in a previous article about the Church Order as a “spiritual order.” As the Belgic Confession puts it in Article 30, “the spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in his Word.” This means that with “the spirit of the church order” we refer to what I have identified in the previous article as the biblical convictions, the biblical principles that form the underpinnings of the rules we have adopted in our Church Order.

When consistories, councils, or major assemblies see the need to make a ruling in a situation that is not addressed by a particular Church Order article, or that requires an interpretation of an article, they can do so by referring to the “spirit” of the Church Order.

This requires that questions must be asked. Do the biblical principles that underly the Church Order and are summarized in the Reformed confessions give anything that is relevant for coming to a proper decision or ruling? Does the proposed ruling reflect that Christ is the only Head of the church? Does it reflect God’s justice and God’s grace?

This also ties in with the two main goals of the Church Order: (1) safeguarding faithful teaching (true doctrine), while warding off false doctrine, and (2) protecting the churches against both hierarchy and independentism.

MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY

In other words, a council, consistory, or major assembly must be able to say: “We declare that, to the best of our ability, our interpretation and use of the Church Order in this case faithfully safeguards the true doctrine of God’s Word, summarized in the confessions, and reflects our loyal desire to maintain the fine line between hierarchy and independentism.”

That’s the accountability we owe each other as sister churches in the federation. My own professor of church polity put it this way: we can work fruitfully with the “spirit” of the Church Order as long as we remember that Reformed church polity only works for Reformed people. 



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