

SIGN HERE...

Really?

How important is church polity? It is often seen as something that may be good for the *well-being* of the church, but not necessary for the *being* of the church. A church order assists by providing some rules for the running of the church and for organizing things, but has very little impact on the essence of the church. To be and remain a faithful church of Jesus Christ requires submission to God's Word; it does not need a church order.

To some extent this is true. It is not difficult to make a list of articles in our Church Order to illustrate this. Think for instance of Article 29 (assemblies), Article 43 (archives), Article 45 (counsellors), Article 48 (deputies of regional synod), and Article 64 (church records). All these things support good government of the church(es), but do not determine how faithful a church is.

However, we should not be too quick to disconnect the Church Order from what it means to be a true church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Perhaps you remember some of the previous articles in this series, about the biblical convictions behind Reformed church polity. The Church Order does play a role in protecting the being of the church. Some articles are clearly intended to make sure that the church stays with the gospel of Jesus Christ, and that she will continue to show the marks of a faithful church, as described in Article 29 of the Belgic Confession.

PROTECTING THE UNITY OF FAITH

A good example of this is Article 26: "All ministers of the Word, elders, deacons and professors of theology shall subscribe to the

confessions of the Canadian Reformed Churches by signing the form(s) adopted for that purpose." The second part of this article outlines the consequences of refusing to do so.

Some have asked: If the council of the church concludes that a brother meets the requirements found in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 2, and this is confirmed (via the election process) by the congregation, what biblical right do we have to insist that an office bearer must sign the Form of Subscription, when such a requirement does not appear in Scripture?

At first sight that sounds reasonable. Are we not elevating a human form above the standards of Scripture? But the point is: what begins good does not come with the guarantee that it will always automatically remain good. This does not imply that we should approach each other with suspicion, but the spiritual unity of faith in the local church and among the churches of the federation is important enough to agree on measures to preserve and protect this unity.

There is a link here with Article 27 of the Church Order. Especially ministers and elders have the task "to ward off false doctrines and errors which could enter the congregation and constitute a danger to the purity of its doctrine or conduct. . . ." It shows how faithfulness to the doctrine of Scripture must actively function in the congregations. This is not just good for the wellbeing of the church. Doing this or failing to do this as office bearers will impact the very being of the church.¹ The congregational flock must be protected.²

¹ See Titus 1:9.

² See the Forms for Ordination/Installation, Book of Praise, 618–627.

REFUTING THREATS TO THE UNITY OF FAITH

The New Testament makes very clear that there is an ongoing need for refuting false doctrine.³ The Bible often uses strong language. In Matthew 7:15 Jesus himself warns against false prophets who come as ravenous wolves in sheep's clothing. In Acts 20:29–30 Paul uses similar terminology when he warns against what he calls fierce wolves who will speak twisted things, while in Philippians 2:3 he calls those people dogs. It stresses the danger that false teachers will accomplish what Satan is after: devouring the believers (1 Peter 5:8).

All of this sounds pretty serious. It is actually so serious that a shepherd of the church (minister or elder) must not hesitate when he detects false teachings creeping in.

At the same time, it is also good to be careful here. This should not turn into witch-hunting for people who think differently than I do. Not every disagreement among brothers is the result of false doctrine. And not every disagreement should be elevated to that level either. When we face differences in opinion, the first thing we need to do is listen to each other patiently and in sincere humility. But as we do so, we must remember 1 John 4:1.⁴ Let there be no misunderstanding: teaching that goes beyond Holy Scripture has no place in the church. Time and again history has shown how necessary this is. Paul's warning against fierce wolves remains relevant today.

BOUNDARIES AND ACCOUNTABILITY

That's precisely why we have the "Form(s) of Subscription." Reformed churches have always been confessional churches. We maintain and hold on to written confessions to express our unity of faith and defend the truth of God's Word. The confessions provide the boundaries, and subscribing to those confessions provides the accountability we owe each other when it comes to respecting those boundaries. It shows that we care about the spiritual health and theological faithfulness of the church, by teaching what is true and refuting what is wrong.

Subscribing to the confessions has been in Reformed church orders since the Synod of Dort 1618/1619. That synod even adopted a form for that purpose. But in the CanRC Church Order there was no reference to a form until 1983, and it was not before Synod

Smithers 2007 that standard forms for subscription were adopted.⁵ The form(s) in use since then have three main parts: a declaration, a series of three promises, and the right of appeal.⁶

STAND FOR WHAT WE BELIEVE AND CONFESS

Some have voiced other objections than the one mentioned earlier, against the stipulation of Article 26 of the Church Order. It looks as if we declare that the confessions are infallible and beyond criticism. They are not. Only the Word of God is. Signing the Form of Subscription does not mean that the confessions can never be changed. Neither is the intent to stifle ongoing exegetical research and theological debate. Based on God's Word one may come to the conclusion that a point of doctrine can be formulated in a different and perhaps better way.

However, the form includes the promise to follow a particular procedure to submit such a new insight to the church with the willingness to have it examined. After all, the confessions are not just anybody's personal documents; they are foundational for our spiritual unity as churches. We are not ashamed of who we are as Reformed churches and there is nothing hidden about it. This is what we believe. Ministers come and go. Elders come and go. But that does not change what we stand for. And if you come to any of our local churches, this is what you can expect and trust us to preach and teach, without ifs or buts.

Let's be alert—there was, there is, and there will always be false doctrine. That makes it important to help each other remember the boundaries established by our creeds and confessions. And let's respect the Form of Subscription as an effective tool to do so. 

Editor's Note: Rev. DeGelder is willing to receive questions from our readers on the topic of church order and church polity. Please send such questions to him at jdegelder@cogeco.ca.



Jan DeGelder

Minister Emeritus

Redemption Canadian Reformed Church

jdegelder@cogeco.ca

³ The warnings against false teaching or false teachers appear in virtually all the apostolic letters, with very few exceptions.

⁴ "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world."

⁵ *Acts of Synod Smithers 2007*, Art. 11.

⁶ *Book of Praise*, 661