

— WHEN — NEIGHBOURING CHURCHES GATHER

Last time we talked about the general synod—the major assembly where all the churches of the federation come together, represented by their delegates. It’s the place where matters are discussed and decided that will impact all the churches. Another one of our major assemblies is the classis. It is “minor” compared to a general synod, for the simple reason that it is a gathering of a limited number of neighbouring churches from a much smaller area. It may look and sound less impressive than a general synod, but don’t be mistaken. The classis is the “backbone” in the structure of our federation. Like all major assemblies, it is a temporary meeting of churches with limited jurisdiction. But in this case, it is the gathering close to the heartbeat of our church life, which is in the local churches. Through delegation, churches meet that are familiar with each other, with office bearers who often know each other. All of this gives a classis unique opportunity for local sister churches to support and encourage each other, to share challenges and joyful experiences.

Very early after the Reformation the first churches that were established felt the need to come together locally, based on their unity of faith, and with the purpose of helping each other build up Reformed church life. The structure developed during the second half of the sixteenth century. This led to what we had in the old Canadian Reformed Church Order in Articles 41 and 42, which was basically the same as in the Church Order of Dort 1618/19. In 1983, the birth year of our current Church Order, these were put together in one article (44), with a few changes.

EQUALITY

From the very beginning it was emphasized that there should be two delegates from each church: a minister and an elder, regardless of the size of the congregation. This is a matter of principle. Every local church, no matter how large or how small, is a full

manifestation of the body of Christ. From that principle flows the fundamental rule we have in Article 74, that *no church shall in any way lord it over other churches*. Therefore, a church with 600 members has the same number of votes at a classis as a church with seventy-five members. This illustrates also why proper credentials, as a valid proof of delegation, are important. Only these brothers have the right to vote, regardless of how many others may be present.

In the early years there were often more ministers than elders available, and in the beginning of the Reformation the advice and input of “extra” ministers at classis was needed. This led to the rule we still have in the last paragraph of Article 44 today. Non-delegated ministers from churches that have more than one minister obviously do not have a vote, but *they shall have the right to attend classis in an advisory capacity*. In recent years we have seen an increasing number of those in our churches, which raises the question: does an “advisory capacity” give me the right to offer unsolicited advice at any time in any discussion on any topic? The consensus seems to be “yes, of course.” But I wonder about that. Article 44 is silent about it, but the danger is not imaginary that the discussion is going to be dominated by those who are not voting. I see much wisdom in the decision of Synod Middelburg 1581 that those who have not been delegated can only give advice when asked. It is good to avoid even the impression of “clerical hierarchy.”

LOGISTICS

How large should a classis be? There is no specific rule, and during the first decades after Synod Emden 1571 there was great variety in size, depending on the density of churches in an area. F. L. Rutgers suggests that there should be no less than five or six churches in a classis and not more than twenty-five. In the CanRC the average is about nine.

In some areas the boundaries of a classical region make geographical sense, but in other cases “relative proximity” is just that: relative. Nevertheless, it is good to read the word “neighbouring” in Article 44 as “geographical neighbours” and not as “likeminded neighbours.” The latter criterion would be most unhealthy for the unity we have in Christ.

For various reasons churches may want to change classical boundaries. How should that be handled? There are, of course, always two or more classes involved, and it’s important that all of them fully agree with the reasons for the suggested change. If those classes cannot agree, the matter should be brought to the next regional synod for arbitration.

The classis is the “backbone” in the structure of our federation

How often should a classis be held? Again—as we have seen with other things—in the first decades of the Reformation there was a variety of practices. In a time of persecution, perhaps only two times per year was possible. But when more freedom came sometimes classes would be held every month. Since the Synod of Dort, the consistent rule in Reformed church orders has been *at least once every three months*. In the Church Order revision of 1983, the CanRC added in Article 44 the provision that a classis can be cancelled if no matters have been sent in by the churches. This cannot be done twice in a row, though, for it is important to stay in touch as churches in a classical region.

It is explicitly stated in Article 44 that the chairman of classis shall always be one of the ministers. From the very beginning elders have been excluded. This was not because a minister has a higher office, but in the early years ministers would usually be better equipped for this job. This has changed, and I don’t think that today there is any reason to restrict the presidency of major assemblies to ministers only. After all, it is also in the freedom of every classis to determine who can serve as vice-chairman or clerk.

AGENDA

The matters that are typically on the agenda of a classis demonstrate what I mentioned earlier about the classis being the “backbone” of our federational structure. Apart from being the first court-of-appeal (Art. 31) and receiving overtures or proposals (in the framework of Art. 30), in the Church Order we have agreed on some significant responsibilities for the classis. Classis has the task to examine men before they will be able to enter the ministry (Arts. 4, 5, and 8) and has to approve their exit from the ministry as well (Arts. 11, 12, 13, and 71). Classis also plays a

decisive role at a crucial moment in the discipline process in the local churches (Art. 68).

Furthermore, although the Reformation did away with bishops who singlehandedly supervised local clergy and parishes, the churches did acknowledge the need for some form of mutual “supervision.” Classis became the platform for exercising this mutual accountability among the sister churches in a region. This shows in different ways.

In the beginning one of the first items on the agenda was the preaching of a sermon by one of the ministers. This was not meant as opening devotions; the sermon would be discussed and criticized by others. The purpose was to improve the preaching. In those days a good number of ministers were former priests and monks who had joined the Reformed churches but were poorly educated. Eventually, with better theological training, this custom disappeared.

From early on a prominent place on the agenda of classis was also given to mutual accountability and encouragement. The chairman would ask each church separately about its circumstances and spiritual well-being, and whether help or advice was needed. Initially the chairman had some freedom to formulate questions as he saw fit. And even when synods listed particular questions, the Church Order always maintained some flexibility by adding expressions like “and other like matters” (1578), or: “among other things” (1618/19). When in 1568 church visitors were introduced, this way of inquiring at classis became less relevant.

The wording we find today in Article 44 lists only three questions. In practice it is usually a minor item on the agenda. The delegates respond on behalf of their church, and most of the time the standard answer is “yes—yes—no.” Then the whole exercise will last two minutes. Sometimes the answer will be “yes—yes—yes.” The third “yes” means that a church needs help for some issue. That can be anything. Rev. Van Oene argues correctly that the first two questions are a leftover from the past and should be asked at church visitations, and that only the third one makes sense (*With Common Consent*, 1990, p. 209-10).

And if you want to see for yourself how it all works, feel free to visit the next classis in your area. Usually those meetings are open for all church members. Only if classis is asked to judge an appeal on a personal matter will there be a closed session, because no one except the delegates needs to know about such confidential and frequently difficult matters. 📺



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