

As Iron Sharpens Iron

If you are, or have been, an office bearer in one of our Canadian Reformed churches, you may have seen on the agenda for your meetings an item called *censura morum* or *censura fraternal*. Or, if your clerk doesn't do Latin, it may have been listed as mutual censure, Christian censure, brotherly censure, or censure as per Article 73 of the Church Order. Whatever happens when the meeting gets to that point may have little to do with what we have agreed to in Article 73. It is often more along the lines of Article 34, where it says that "at the close of major assemblies, censure shall be exercised over those who in the meeting have done something worthy of reproof." The chairman may ask at the close of a consistory meeting if anyone has something for Christian censure. This is used as an opportunity to address anything harsh or unbrotherly that was said in a heated debate during the meeting. That can happen. If no one says anything, the chairman will express his thankfulness that the brothers were able to work together in good harmony.

That's great, of course. However, the focus of Article 73 is different. It states that "Ministers, elders and deacons shall mutually exercise Christian censure and shall exhort and kindly admonish one another with regard to the execution of their office." Occasionally a consistory chairman will remember this and encourage elders by pointing out that some aspects of pastoral care might need a bit more attention. That's good, but I think we can do better when it comes to applying Article 73.

WHY? CARING FOR THE SHEEP

The Reformation of the 16th century did away with the hierarchical ecclesiastical structure where the lower ranks (priests) were supervised by the higher clergy (bishops). In Reformed churches, all office bearers have equal authority, confirmed by the fundamental rule we have in Article 74 CO: "No church shall in any way lord it over other churches, no office-bearer over other office-bearers."

At the same time, the churches did acknowledge the significance of regular evaluation, encouragement, and sometimes correction,

as ministers, elders, and deacons took up their offices. This kind of "mutual censure" was practiced already in the early years in Geneva. One by one, the names of office bearers were called, with the question if anyone had to say something concerning this brother's work as office bearer. Imagine you are a young elder in Geneva, and you're asked to evaluate the performance of a man like John Calvin. That's pretty intimidating! But Calvin insisted on it, for the well-being of the church, the flock of the great Shepherd Jesus Christ.

From the beginning, synods included this rule in what would eventually become the Reformed Church Order. Initially it was connected with the celebration of the Lord's Supper, and it was more about the "doctrine and life" of office bearers, but the synod of 1586 formulated the stipulation as we still have it today: disconnected from the celebration of the Lord's Supper, and with the specific focus on improving the way the office bearers do their work.

Why has applying Article 73 CO become such a quick and more or less formal practice at the end of every consistory and council meeting as described above? Why is it so difficult for office bearers to "exhort and kindly [or, as it says in the pre-1983 edition, "in a friendly spirit"] admonish one another with regard to the execution of their office"?

Perhaps words like "censure" and "admonish" are a hindrance here. We usually connect censure with rebuke, criticism, finding fault, and expressing disapproval. It reminds us of what is dealt with in the articles 66–72 as sin that requires discipline. The word "admonish" falls into the same negative category. A minister might explain that, in the New Testament, the Greek verb translated as 'admonish' can also be translated as 'comfort' or 'encourage,' but today that's not how we hear it. Not many like the idea of criticizing a fellow elder for how he does his work as elder, in front of all the others, or being at the receiving end of such a rebuke in that setting.

WHAT? MUTUAL ENCOURAGEMENT

All of this makes it worthwhile to think a bit more about the purpose of the stipulation in Article 73 and how it can function in the churches as it was intended. To begin with, in this article

we have only agreed to *what* should be done, what the goal is of this exercise. All other aspects, like when, where, and how, are completely left open. Nowhere does it say that it must be done at the end of every meeting, or even that it should be done during a meeting. Every local church is free to regulate those things as it sees fit. That gives room for flexibility, for being creative, and for willingness to adjust the process and so learn what works best to appreciate this article.

So, what is the point of Article 73? When we look beyond the negative undertone of the terms used in this article, we should think of office bearers spending time together to evaluate the work they do in caring for the flock of Christ. What does Scripture say? What are the standards agreed upon in the Church Order (see Art. 16, 22, 23 CO)? What are the expectations outlined in the Forms for Ordination? How do we measure up? As a body, consistory or council, but also personally, as individual ministers, elders and deacons?

Yes, these questions can lead to critical reflection and self-reflection. There is nothing wrong with that. Office bearers are sinful men. They fall short, make mistakes, and sometimes make poor choices. They can adopt wrong or poor habits. A young elder will be eager to get to work, but he wonders how to handle certain issues. A minister or seasoned elder may develop blind spots for particular needs. And they all need each other to recognize such things. As the author of Proverbs puts it in Proverbs 27:17, “as iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another” (NIV).

Driven by humility and by love for the congregation of Jesus Christ, office bearers should not be afraid to point out where things can be done better to God’s glory and for the benefit of the church.

Caring for the flock of Christ is a collective responsibility. It is not without reason that, in Acts 20:28, Paul urges the elders in Ephesus: “Pay careful attention to yourselves. . . .” The point of Article 73 CO is that office bearers are not just lone warriors. They have a mutual responsibility to encourage each other to do better, to grow and keep each other alert. There is always room

for improvement. Driven by humility and by love for the congregation of Jesus Christ, office bearers should not be afraid to point out where things can be done better to God’s glory and for the benefit of the church. As a wise elder said to me once, “We should not be afraid to hold each other’s feet to the fire.”

HOW? IN LOVE

It will be clear that a quick question period at the end of a council and/or consistory meeting does not do justice to this intention of Article 73. There should be a better way to reach the goal of this stipulation. As mentioned earlier, in our Church Order the how, when, and where are in the freedom of every church. In many of our churches, consistories are already aware of the need for office bearers to equip themselves continually for their task. Regional conferences are being held for ministers, as well as for elders and deacons. Also, at consistory and/or council meetings often time is set apart to study books or articles about the work of office bearers.¹ That’s a good start.

But Article 73 challenges consistories or councils to do more, to make it an activity that really focusses on how you function as ministers, elders, and deacons as you zero in on your specific local situation and circumstances. What about having a whole evening twice a year, or spending a whole Saturday perhaps once a year with that purpose? Have the format prepared internally, by a few office bearers. Whatever the “how to do this” is going to look like, it is crucial to remember that, as office bearers, your mutual trust is rooted in the fact that together you are accountable to the Chief Shepherd for doing all this in a spirit of Christian love.

Finally, as an office bearer, you might run into a situation that makes it unavoidable to kindly admonish a fellow office bearer for a clear failure in executing his office. It may be preferable to address such an issue in a setting with just him and you. Remember again: Article 73 of the Church Order does not require a consistory or council meeting. **C**



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¹ Classics for this exercise have been John R. Sittima, *With A Shepherd’s Heart* (1996), Michael Brown (ed), *Called to Serve* (2006), and more recently W. Boekestein & S. Swets (eds) *Faithful and Fruitful* (2019). Insightful for the specific offices are Cornelis Van Dam’s books *The Elder*, Philipsburg, 2009, and *The Deacon*, Grand Rapids, 2021. More research will no doubt produce other helpful study material.