Authority or Jurisdiction? Or both?

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The third section of the Church Order regulates what the churches have agreed on with regard to "The Assemblies" (Articles 29–51). This sets the parameters for how the structure of our federation as Canadian Reformed Churches should function. In this section we find an article that might puzzle the unsuspecting reader, Article 37: "The classis has the same jurisdiction over the consistory as the regional synod has over the classis and the general synod over the regional synod." Our reader may raise his eyebrows, wondering what this means. But then he will probably shrug his shoulders and move on. And that's unfortunate, for Article 37 is one of those articles that reflect a fundamental aspect of how we work together as autonomous local churches. As such, it is right up there with Article 74.

The intention is to make clear that a classis is not a "higher" assembly, with more authority or power than a consistory, and that the same is the case with a regional synod and a general synod. Yes, our major assemblies have the right to decide matters by which the churches are bound, but it is important to qualify that. That's why it is too bad, in my view, that Article 37 is formulated in a way that's not very clear. And thus, since the 17th century already, debate has been going on.

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM WITH AUTHORITY?

Having the right to make decisions to which others must submit sounds very much like having authority to do so. The Latin text of the Church Order has *auctoritas*, which translates as "authority." However, some authors preferred a different word. They took the Dutch word for authority, which is *gezag*, or *zeggenschap*. The English equivalent is "having a say." This led to the expression "having the right to say or decide things." It is hard to explain how this is different from having authority to do so and the disadvantage of those other expressions is that they don't clarify what major assemblies can and cannot legitimately decide, and why that is so. So, what is the reason to avoid the word "authority" when it comes to the right of major assemblies to make binding decisions?

As is so often the case, it is a matter of definition. What do we mean when we use the word authority? If one uses it with a hierarchical mindset, the term can indeed lead to the idea that major assemblies have more power than minor assemblies, or that major assemblies have God-given authority to enforce their decisions and demand that minor assemblies must submit.

But Reformed thinking about the church and about the role of the federation has a healthy fear of hierarchy and rejects that kind of authority. The word "authority" is meant to be used in a much more limited sense for major assemblies. It shows again that the Reformed Church Order only works for Reformed people. Avoiding the word "authority" is not going to change that. After all, those who prefer another term still recognize that major assemblies do have the right to make decisions and that the churches are expected to accept those decisions. How is that different from having at least some authority?

WHAT ABOUT JURISDICTION?

Our Church Order also uses the word "jurisdiction" without explaining what it means. The term comes from the Latin *jurisdictio*, which means literally "saying the law" and refers to the legal right to judge or make decisions. Apart from the observation that the Latin version does not have the word *jurisdictio* but *auctoritas*, I am not convinced that "jurisdiction" provides more clarity than the word "authority."

There is another aspect that comes into play when we consider the words "authority" and "jurisdiction" as options to qualify the

right of major assemblies to make decisions. In contemporary legal lingo, authority and jurisdiction are related concepts, but there is an important distinction. Authority refers to the right to make decisions. Jurisdiction refers to the limitations of this authority. It defines the boundaries or scope within which such authority can legally operate. Those boundaries restrict authority to a certain area or subject matter. A body (like a court) has the authority to make legal decisions, but only within its jurisdiction. All of this may sound a bit dry and rather technical. But when we apply these concepts to the role and place of our major assemblies, it may help us better understand and appreciate how our Reformed church federation works.

ASSEMBLIES WITH AUTHORITY

To begin with, note that Article 37 of the Church Order speaks about the authority of classes, regional synods, and general synods, but not about the authority of the consistory. That's because the authority of a consistory is very different. The consistory is the only body whose authority comes directly from Christ, the King of the church. He calls and authorizes office bearers to govern his church.[1] Their authority is restricted to their own local congregation, but within that jurisdiction their authority is general and permanent. This includes responsibility to proclaim the gospel, administer the sacraments, ordain office bearers, provide pastoral care, and apply church discipline. These things are beyond the jurisdiction of major assemblies.

Major assemblies are not governing councils, but temporary meetings of federated churches in a particular area. Although the Bible does not prescribe such meetings, we do find them in our Church Order. That's because it is clear throughout the New Testament that unity of faith leads to cooperation, consultation, and mutual support among the churches.[2] It is for this reason that Reformed churches have agreed to maintain ecclesiastical assemblies. It provides the framework for holding each other accountable as churches and so maintains and protects our unity of faith in Jesus Christ. This implies two things: (1) the churches have given these assemblies the authority to make legally valid decisions, and (2) the churches have promised to accept these decisions as settled and binding.

RESPECT JURISDICTION

The authority to make decisions and the promise to abide by those decisions are not unlimited and unconditional. Only God's Word has unconditional authority. But there are many aspects of how we run the church that are not directly prescribed in Scripture, and it is good to consult each other as churches and so maintain good order in and among the churches of Jesus Christ.[3] This is why the churches have determined the jurisdiction of the major assemblies, the limited scope of what these meetings can or cannot do or decide, and the churches have agreed to this as outlined in various articles of the adopted Church Order.

Think of the general restrictions mentioned in Articles 30 and 31. But we have also adopted more specific rules for classes, regional synods, and general synods. Certain matters are the responsibility of a classis, but are outside the jurisdiction of a general synod, and the other way around. Again, the authority of any major assembly never goes any further than what the churches have agreed to. Every major assembly's authority is bound and restricted by this jurisdiction. This is serious business. Any assembly that does not respect this will destroy the mutual trust among the churches, which may eventually break up the federation.

For the churches, the promise to abide by the decisions of the major assemblies is not unconditional either. The provision of Article 31 is crucial here. It outlines the right to appeal a decision of one assembly to the next if churches are convinced that this decision is in conflict with God's Word and/or with the Church Order. However, this should never be a matter of simply ignoring the promise to accept the decisions of major assemblies as settled and binding. Churches that refuse to keep their word to accept the legitimate decisions of the major assemblies, just because they don't agree with it, and then carry on and do their own thing, will also destroy the mutual trust among the churches of the federation. And, if they persist, they may eventually find themselves outside of the federation.

At the same time, it is important to remember that joining the agreement among the churches to give major assemblies the authority to make certain decisions and to accept those decisions as valid is voluntary. No church is forced to be part of the federation. This means also that no major assembly ultimately has the authority or power to enforce its decisions on the churches.

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[1] Acts 14:23; Acts 20:28, Titus 1:5, 1 Peter 5:1–3

[2] Consider the meeting in Jerusalem we read about in Acts 15. It was not a major assembly in our church political sense of the word, but it does demonstrate how the churches benefitted from mutual support and encouragement to maintain the unity of faith.

[3] See Belgic Confession Article 32 and Article 1 C.O.