Equal or Identical

The Reformed churches that were established after the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century came through that process with a healthy aversion toward hierarchy. The first article in the acts of the first synod of the Dutch Reformed churches, held in 1571, states what we have today as Article 74 in our Church Order: "No church shall in any way lord it over other churches, no office-bearer over other office bearers."

The brothers in Emden were determined to avoid what they had experienced from powerful popes and bishops in the Roman Catholic structure. This caution against hierarchy comes out in different ways, but it shows up in particular in Articles 17 and 25 of the Church Order. What we have in our Church Order in these two articles was originally one (Article 17). As far as I could find in other Church Orders, based on Dordt 1618/19, only the Canadian Reformed churches have decided (in 1983) to split it up in two articles. It's not clear why this was done, but the point is clear that here the churches stipulate that ministers are each other's equals and that the same is true for elders and deacons.

The rule was adopted by Synod Middelburg (1581). This was the same synod that rejected overtures to appoint some ministers as superintendents to supervise the local churches. Synod's judgment that such a move would be "unnecessary and dangerous" shows their awareness that inequality can easily trigger competition for power or even abuse of power.

ALL SERVANTS

This is not just a minor issue. Jesus rebuked his disciples for arguing about the question of who would be the greatest among them (Mk 9:34; Lk 22:24). He also says, "You are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. . . . The greatest among you shall be your servant" (Matt 23:8–11). The same is true for all office bearers. Even the apostle Peter, addressing the elders of the churches, refers to himself as their "fellow elder" (1 Pet 5:1).

This equality is also reflected in our Belgic Confession: "Ministers of the Word, in whatever place they are, have equal power and authority, for they are all servants of Jesus Christ, the only universal Bishop and the only Head of the church" (Article 31). All of this is behind the statements that "among the ministers of the Word (as well as among the elders and deacons) equality shall be maintained with respect to the duties of their office and in other matters."

The Church Order does include the qualifier "as far as possible," which suggests that there might be some flexibility here. However, that judgment is not up to individual office bearers. The consistory is the final judge in this matter. As a federation of churches, we have decided what "the duties of the respective offices" are in Articles 16 (minister), 22 (elder), and 23 (deacon). Up to this point, and on the face of it, the stipulations in Articles 17 and 25 then seem straightforward.

GIFTS DIFFER

Nevertheless, the reality is that we do not all have the same gifts. In the church of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit has distributed a variety of gifts so that we are all able to serve each other (Rom 12:4–8; 1 Cor 12:7–11). The gifts we have can be similar but are not identical and are often meant to be complementary. This is also the case with the men who are called to serve as ministers, elders, or deacons. The question is: How should that impact the work of office bearers as they carry out their specific responsibilities? And what does that mean for applying Articles 17 and 25 of the Church Order? Would such diversity in gifts and opportunities be a challenge for the required equality? To put it differently: is "equal" the same as "identical"?

SERVING ELDERS

In our Reformed churches, we are used to having multiple elders in one congregation. It is common practice that each one of them will be assigned one ward, or section of the congregation, with about the same number of addresses as the other wards. As such, that's a

good way to maintain equality among the elders with respect to the duties of their office.

At the same time, it can be practical and beneficial to bring some level of diversity into the distribution of tasks. Perhaps consistories weigh those things already. For instance, an elder who has retired from his daily job will have more time and opportunity to visit senior members during the daytime. Another elder may be known for the gift of relating well to teenagers. Would it be wrong to utilize these, and other gifts, intentionally in the way the work is being distributed among the elders?

Sometimes elders have other responsibilities added to their duties, like acting as clerk of the consistory, which can take up a fair amount of time. Not every individual elder's work must look exactly the same. That's the built-in flexibility in Article 25 with the words "as far as possible." There will be equality among the shepherds as long as everyone is pulling his weight in faithfully fulfilling whichever part of the duties he is responsible for.

SERVING MINISTERS

The idea of having more than one minister serving a congregation is not new, but it can be organized in different ways. My own experience is with the Dutch model. When a large church is served by two (or sometimes three) ministers, the congregation is divided into two or three wards of roughly the same size. The ministers share the preaching responsibilities, but for the rest of their duties each one does all the work in his own ward. In this way "being equal" comes very close to "being identical."

The North American model is different. It is quite common for a sizeable church to have a pastoral staff with several ministers. There is usually one "lead pastor" or "senior pastor", with an executive pastor under him, and a number of assistant or junior pastors under his supervision. The latter often have specific tasks assigned to them, such as youth pastor, discipleship pastor, outreach or missions pastor, worship pastor, etc.

While the specifics vary by church, two things stand out in this kind of structure. First, in the end there is one man who is responsible for making the decisions. And second, it is striking that in this set-up elders as we know them are usually absent. If there are elders, they may function as a board of administration or management but are not involved as spiritual leaders or fellow shepherds. Such lack of equality is contrary to our provisions in Articles 17 and 25 of the Church Order and, even with the best of intentions,may leave congregations vulnerable to abuse of power.

CO-PASTORS

For a long time, calling a second pastor did not occur in the Canadian Reformed churches. In 1990, Rev. W.W.J. Van Oene could still write: "Fortunately we do not see this too often among us…. And if it happens, it is usually the first step towards division into two autonomous churches." But this is changing. More and more, we see churches with a minister call a second minister, often referred to as co-pastor. This can be triggered by the growing size of a congregation, but there is also increasing interest in what is called the "two pastor model." There is nothing inherently wrong or unequal about this. It can be attractive to have two men share the workload of the task described in Article 16 of the Church Order. And here again it does not mean that there cannot be any diversification between the distribution of tasks between the two. Depending on someone's strong points, special abilities, or interests, slightly different roles for co-pastors with complementary gifts can be beneficial for the church they serve.

However, there are some potential pitfalls here. It's good to avoid terminology that suggests inequality, like "senior" or "lead" pastor versus "assistant" pastor. It is probably unavoidable that one of the pastors will often emerge as the "leader," but it's important to watch out for competing egos that can eventually become a problem, especially if it would turn into a "popularity contest" that involves the congregation.

NO RANKS

It is for good reasons that, throughout the New Testament, the Lord Jesus emphasizes a plurality of leadership in his church. Not all ministers, elders, and deacons have the same gifts, or the same age, health, circumstances, and opportunities. More experience in years or life circumstances might come with more wisdom and insight, but that should not translate into higher and lower ranks with more or less authority in the church.

Throughout the New Testament, elders are referred to and addressed as a group (Acts 13:1; 14:23; 15:2,4; 20:17,28; 21:18; Phil 1:1; Jas 5:14). All ministers and elders are equally shepherds and pastors for the flock (1 Pet 5:1–2). There can be significant variety in how office bearers divide and carry out their work without jeopardizing the anti-hierarchical principle outlined in Articles 17 and 25 of the Church Order.

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