

Outline

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The Minister of the Word

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THE MINISTER OF THE WORD

Introduction

Article 2 of the Church Order reads: "The offices are those of the minister of the Word, of the elder and of the deacon." In this chapter we will deal with the office of the Minister of the Word.

1. Office

Before dealing with the task of the minister of the Word it will be helpful to review the character of the office in the church. An office is a task received from the Lord with the view of building up the congregation. See Belgic Confession, art. 30 and 31. An office has three components: a calling from the Lord, authority from the Lord, and a specific task for building up the congregation. We believe that the Lord Jesus is the Head of the church. He bought His Church with His blood. He has entrusted the care of His congregation in the hands of the overseers. The overseers are therefore in the first place servants of the Lord. At the same time they have to be servants of the Lord in the congregation. We reject a democratic model, as if the office bearers are elected representatives. We also reject the dictatorial model, as if the office bearers can do what ever they want. Christ rules the church through the office bearers.

2. Minister of the Word

In an earlier chapter we have considered the Ministry of the Word (see 1 - 6). This ministry had been given by the Lord Jesus to the apostles. We read in the N.T. that the apostles appointed elders in every town. According to 1 Tim.3:17 there were elders who ruled the congregation. Some of them were also called to labour in preaching and teaching. The latter are now called ministers of the Word. They have received the ministry of reconciliation. (See 2 Cor.5:18-20) The ministers are elders. They have the same authority as the other elders, yet their task is different. Ministers are called to preach and to administer the sacraments. The task of a minister also includes teaching.

3. Confessions, Church Order

3.1. Belgic Confession

The Confession makes clear that the ministers have authority, but also stress that ministers are not higher or more powerful than the other elders.

Article 30 The Government Of The Church

We believe that this true Church must be governed according to the Spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in His Word. There should be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments; there should also be elders and deacons who, together with the pastors, form the council of the Church.

Article 31 The Officers Of The Church

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. In order that this holy ordinance of God may not be violated or rejected, we declare that everyone must hold the ministers of the Word and the elders of the Church in special esteem because of their work, and as much as possible be at peace with them without grumbling or arguing.

3.2. Heidelberg Catechism

The Catechism mentions that God in the Fourth Commandment requires that the ministry of the gospel and the schools be maintained. This means the churches have to make sure there are ministers and that those who want to become a minister receive a proper training

Q/A 103.

What does God require in the fourth commandment?

First, That the ministry of the gospel and the schools be maintained

3.3. Canons of Dort

The Canons do not address the office of ministers as such, but speak highly about their task.

Chapter 1, Article 3 The Preaching Of The Gospel

So that men may be brought to faith, God mercifully sends heralds of this most joyful message to whom He will and when He wills. By their ministry men are called to repentance and to faith in Christ crucified. For how are they to believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent?

Chapter 3/4, Article 17 The Use Of Means

For this reason the apostles and the teachers who succeeded them, in the fear of the Lord instructed the people concerning this grace of God, to His glory and to the abasement of all pride. In the meantime, however, they did not neglect to keep them, by the holy admonitions of the gospel, under the administration of the Word, the sacraments, and discipline. So today those who give or receive instruction in the Church should not dare to tempt God by separating what He in His good pleasure has willed to be kept very close together.

4. Duties of the Minister

The Form for Ordination and the Church Order give a clear outline of the task of the minister.

4.1. Form for Ordination

The Form lists the following elements:

- declare the whole counsel of God to the congregation
- in public and from house to house:
 - expose all heresies as unfruitful
 - exhort the members to walk as children of light
- teach the Word of God to the youth; and others whom God calls
- visit the members in the congregation; comfort the sick and sorrowing
- call the whole congregation to the redemption which is in Christ Jesus
- administer the sacraments
- to call upon the Name of the Lord in public worship
- together with the elders see to it that in the congregation all things are done decently and in good order.
- Together supervise the doctrine and life of the membership
 - shut and open the kingdom of God by Christian discipline

Charge to the Minister lists the following:

- feed the Lambs and tend the sheep, not by constraint but willingly
- take heed to yourself set the believers an example in speech conduct in love in faith in purity
- preach the pure doctrine
- Share in suffering as a good soldier
- Do not neglect the gift you, with which the Lord has endowed you for this ministry
- Devote yourself to your duties with all your strength

4.2. Church Order

According to the Church Order the ministers are

- thoroughly and sincerely to proclaim to the congregation the Word of God
- to administer the sacraments
- to publicly call upon the name of God in behalf of the whole congregation
- to instruct the children of the church in the doctrine of salvation
- to visit the members of the congregation in their homes
- to comfort the sick with the Word of God
- with the elders
 - to keep the church in good order
 - exercise discipline
 - govern the congregation in such a manner as the Lord has ordained

4.2. Church Order about the Minister

The following articles of the Church Order mention the minister:

Art. 3	Calling
Art. 4	Eligibility
Art. 5	Ordination and Installation
Art. 6	Bound to one church
Art. 9	From one Church to another
Art. 10	Proper support
Art. 11	Dismissal
Art. 12	Bound for life
Art. 13	Retirement
Art. 14	Temporary Release
Art. 15	Preaching in other places
Art. 16	The duties of the Minister
Art. 17	Equality among Ministers
Art. 26	Subscription to the Confessions
Art. 27	Ward off false doctrine.
Art. 38	Consistory
Art. 42	Ministers shall acquaint themselves with the work of the ministry of mercy
Art. 45	Counsellors for vacant congregations
Art. 46	Church Visitors
Art. 56	Administration of the sacraments
Art. 63	Marriage
Art. 71	Suspension and Deposition of Office-bearers
Art. 73	Christian Censure

5. Calling

5.1. Extending a call

"No one shall take any office upon himself without having been lawfully called thereto." (C.O. art. 3) This lawful calling involves the congregation. Prior to calling a minister it will be helpful to formulate Guidelines.

These Guidelines would deal with

- the mandate for a calling committee
- make up of the committee
- involvement of congregation in nominating
- criteria for investigating a minister or candidate

These investigations could include the following points:

preaching; catechism instruction; rapport with the congregation; rapport with young people; personal data; visiting; length of service in current congregation; attitude toward schools and organization; stand point in matters under discussion within the churches

- how to inform the congregation
- voting procedure and required majority

After the election by the congregation the council will issue a letter of call to the minister/candidate. This letter has to be signed by all elders and deacons as well as the counsellor. An example is added to this chapter. The council must also present the minister/candidate with detailed information about stipend, allowances, housing, holidays, moving etc. This is usually written down in an Appendix to the Letter of Call and also signed by council and counsellor. The minister as a rule receives three weeks to come to a decision. In the case of a candidate six weeks is the usually time. During this time the minister/candidate will be asked to meet with the congregation.

If the minister accepts the call, the council has to come to an agreement with the council where he was serving for a proper change over, the date and time that the minister becomes the responsibility of the

new congregation. The date of ordination has to be announced to the congregation. Classis has to be asked for its approbation as well. See art. 5 B and D of the Church Order. To grant approbation Classis needs to see the letter of call, the letter of acceptance, the certificate(s) of release, the agreement between the two councils and a statement by the calling church that the name has been announced and no objections have been brought forward.

5.2. Receiving a call

"A minister, once lawfully called, shall not leave the Church to which he is bound to take up the ministry elsewhere without the consent of the consistory with the deacons and the approval of classis." When the minister who serves in this congregation receives a call, he shall inform council of this. The congregation shall be informed as well. Before he makes a decision on the call the minister has to discuss the matter with council. It can happen that council would like to see the minister stay, but as such has no objection if he would decide to leave. It could also happen that council is of the opinion that the minister cannot leave. Council will have to give proper reasons for this. Sometimes a calling church will come back after some time to ask permission to issue a second call. If the minister agrees to this he can only decline if there weighty reasons. Also in this situation advice from council is very important.

Vacant churches that are asking for information concerning a minister have the freedom to approach whomever they want. If they ask individual members of the congregation, these members answer as individuals. If they approach members of council it would be advisable that these members bring the matter to council, so that if need be council as a whole can give an answer. If need be the minister can be absent from this part of the meeting. All in all it will be helpful to have a good understanding of the procedure in case a call is extended.

6. Workload of the Minister

It is not always easy to outline the work load of a minister. His schedule can vary from week to week. Yet there are several elements that form a regular part of his schedule. It will be helpful to list them, in order to be able to evaluate this, since the elders are charged with the supervision over the minister.

6.1. Preaching

As a rule the minister preaches twice on the Lord's Day in his "own" congregation. The time needed to prepare these two sermons varies. It depends on the text, the person of the minister, the events that took place in that week. It is fair to assume that preparing sermons takes a considerable part of the week. Most churches allow their minister regular exchanges in addition to the holidays. Not only does this help the minister, it is also good for the congregation to hear other ministers.

6.2. Teaching

The minister's task is also to teach the youth of the church, as well as those who have expressed the desire to join the church. Some times a consistory can decide to ask others to help out with teaching. This is not wrong, but is at all possible the minister should teach most of the classes. It will strengthen the bond between the minister and the youth of the church.

6.3. Visiting

As a rule the minister visits those who are ill, in hospital, or are bound to home due to age and others who are in need. In some congregation he also visits parents who have received a baby and. It is possible that the minister becomes involved in discipline visits and home visits. There is something to be said for this. He gets to know the congregation in this way. At the same time, it can also be healthy that the minister focusses more on preaching and teaching. By being not directly involved in situations of discipline, the minister it is less likely that elements of these situations find their way into the preaching. Whatever the case, it should be clear what is expected of him. The minister visits also when there are problems in a family, or a person's life. At times this is called counselling. See chapter 3 - 4 of the Handbook.

6.4. Supervision

Together with the elders the minister must supervise the congregation. This mainly takes place at the consistory meetings. It can also involve disciplinary visits, but is not limited to it. When it comes to the work of the minister supervision also takes place via the preaching.

6.5. Council/Consistory/Deacons

The minister is chairman of the council and consistory. Some churches are changing this. At this point our Church Order still stipulate that as a rule that the minister is the chairman. The minister also visits the meeting of deacons if necessary.

6.6. Federation

Most ministers are involved in ecclesiastical work within the federation in one way or another. It could be as delegate to a major assembly, member of a synodical committee, as counsellor of a vacant congregation or as church visitor. The council should be aware of the work he does.

6.7. Study and other activities

It is important that a minister continues to study. This will benefit the sermons. This study can be done in different ways. To mention some examples: it can be by following a program at a University, by personal study or by preparing speeches. The elders should stimulate the minister in this, if at all possible.

6.8. Family

Usually the minister is also a husband and a (grand)father. There has to be time to fulfil the tasks connected to these callings as well. The elders must make sure of this.

7. Theological College

The churches maintain a institution in which men are prepared for the ministry. This College is under the supervision of the Churches via its General Synods and Deputies. This is not the place to evaluate this institution and its set-up. What is more important in this context is the support for the College. This support is evident in prayer, financial contributions. It also involves making sure that there are students of theology. If there is a shortage of ministers we need to ask ourselves the question what we can do to promote young men entering the College.

8. Evaluation

1. The discussion can deal with the Scriptural and confessional basis for this sacrament, as well as the goal of it. Do we all agree on this? Are there points that have been overlooked?
2. Does the minister have enough time to do his work? Does the minister have enough time for his family? Are there health concerns that need to be taken into account?
3. How does the minister function within the council/consistory?
4. Do we have Regulations for calling a minister? If necessary they may need to be reviewed. If there are no Regulations, would it be helpful to formulate them?
5. Are there points in this chapter that need our further attention? Why? How shall we do this?
6. Are there any concerns that need to be addressed as a result of this evaluation?
What are these concerns?
Why are they a concern?
What plan of action could be taken to address this?

Letter of Call

Dear brother in the Lord,

The Council of the Canadian Reformed Church at, wishing to have the vacancy in the ministry filled in order that this church be provided with a minister of the Divine Word, has assembled for this purpose on, and after having called upon the name of the Lord that it mighty please Him in His grace to a give a minister to this church, and having received the consent of the congregation, has decided to extend a call to you

Hereby informing you of this call, we wish to inform you that we accept and maintain the Three Forms of Unity as the agreement of ecclesiastical communion, and that we abide by the Church Order of the Canadian Reformed Churches. Because we know that this confession is also yours and that you are willing to abide by this Church Order and maintain the ecclesiastical communion, we urge you to seriously consider this call and, if the Lord guides you this way, to accept it in order that in due time you may come over to be publicly installed in this church.

It is our sincere wish and prayer that you as a man filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom, with grace and power may become an instrument in the hand of the Lord to build up with Him this church upon the only foundation, laid by God, and that the Holy Spirit may equip you with His gifts so that your service in the congregation may be to the honour of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, we expect you to expound and apply the Word of God to the congregation, to administer the sacraments, and to lead in public prayers. You will be charged to faithfully administer the keys of the kingdom of heaven from the pulpit, in the catechism classes, in the meetings of the consistory and the council, and in the homes of the church members, in order that those who lack knowledge may be instructed and the disobedient may be admonished, the afflicted may be comforted and the sick may be visited, and that as a faithful shepherd who carries the souls of the congregation in his heart you may proclaim to everyone that the ungodly will be rejected and that only he who is justified in the blood of Christ has peace everlasting.

On our part, we pray that we may receive grace to assist you in brotherly love and faithfulness and in unity of the spirit, in order that we with you may feed the flock of the Lord Jesus Christ at this place.

Further, in obedience to the Word of God we pledge to provide for the proper support of you, who labour in the Word in His church, to enable you to work without undue worries. You will find the particulars in an appendix attached to this letter of call.

Entrusting you to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we will be grateful to receive your favourable reply indicating your willingness to become our pastor and teacher. If at all possible, we would like to have your decision within three weeks from receipt of this letter,

With brotherly greetings,
The council

(All the members of council sign, as well as the counsellor.)

