

## Outline

## Chapter 3 - 5

## Council / Consistory

## Introduction

1. Scripture
2. Confessions - Church Order - Forms
3. Goal
4. Place of the Deacons
5. What belongs to Consistory and what to Council
6. Meetings
  - 6.1. Ecclesiastical Matters
  - 6.2. Proceedings
    - 6.2.1. Opening / Closing
    - 6.2.2. Agenda
    - 6.2.3. President
    - 6.2.4. Recording
    - 6.2.5. Proposals
    - 6.2.6. Moderamen
7. Archives and Records
8. Nominations
9. Tasks within Council / Consistory
10. Christian Censure - Art. 73 C.O.
11. Evaluation

## COUNCIL AND CONSISTORY

### Introduction

In his commentary on 1 Tim.3:15 Calvin writes "pastors may be regarded as stewards, to whom God has committed the charge of governing his house." He then adds the following: "If any person has the superintendence of a large house, he labours night and day with earnest solicitude, that nothing may go wrong through his neglect, or ignorance, or carelessness. If only for men this is done, how much more should it be done for God?" It is important that the minister, elders and deacons do their work well. This serves the honour of the Lord, and will benefit the congregation. In this chapter we will focus on the work that is done within the council and/or consistory.

The term "council" refers to the elders (including the minister) and the deacons. The term "consistory" refers to the elders (including the minister).

### 1. Scripture

The scriptural basis for the office in general, and the specific offices, is part of other chapters.

See:	The Office of the Minister of the Word	1-8
	The Office of the Elder	2-8
	The Office of the Deacon	3-8
	Congregation and Council	3-3

In this chapter we want to consider how the teachings of God's Word determine the internal activities of the council/consistory.

Christ is the Head of the Church.

Mat. 28:1

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Eph. 1 : 22-23

And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be the head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

Col. 1:18

And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the first born from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.

He gives to each office its own mandate.

Acts 6:2-4

It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.

Rom. 12:6-8

We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him encourage;

1 Cor. 12: 28

And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues.

Phil.1:1

To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi together with the overseers and deacons.

1 Tim. 3

The tasks of elders and deacons

1 Tim.5:17

The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those who work in preaching and teaching.

He forbids lording it over each other.

Mat.18:4

Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Mat.23:8

But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers.

- John 13:14  
Now that I, your Lord and Teacher have washed your feet, you should also wash one another's feet.
- 1 Cor.4:1  
So then, men ought to regard us a servants of Christ,
- 1 Pet.5:1  
To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder,...
- 1 Pet. 5:4  
And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

## 2. Confession/Church Order/Forms

### 2.1. Belgic Confession

The Belgic Confession maintains that church is to be ruled by the Word of God. In this way it shows that Christ is the Head.

Art. 29 - The Marks Of The True And The False Church

In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and regarding Jesus Christ as the only Head. Hereby the true Church can certainly be known and no one has the right to separate from it.

Art. 31 - The Officers Of The Church

We believe that ministers of God's Word, elders, and deacons ought to be chosen to their offices by lawful election of the Church, with prayer and in good order, as stipulated by the Word of God. Therefore everyone shall take care not to intrude by improper means. He shall wait for the time that he is called by God so that he may have sure testimony and thus be certain that his call comes from the Lord. 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.

### 2.2. Church Order

The Church Order contains several stipulations which address the relationships within council and consistory. Each office-bearer is responsible to the council and has to be willing to cooperate with the others. Equality has to be maintained with regard to their authority and their duties. The Church Order stipulates which way to deal with difficulties in this regard.

Art. 2

The offices are those of the minister of the Word, of the elder, and of the deacon.

Art. 6

No one shall serve in the ministry unless he is bound to a certain church ....

Art. 17

Among the ministers of the Word equality shall be maintained with respect to the duties of their office and in other matters as far as possible, according to the judgement of the consistory and, if necessary, of classis.

Art. 22

Finally, it is the duty of elders to assist the minister of the Word with good counsel and advice and to supervise their doctrine and conduct.

Art. 25

Among the elders as well as among the deacons equality shall be maintained with respect to the duties of their office, and also, as far as possible, in other matters, of which the consistory shall judge.

Art. 73

The 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.

Art. 74

No church shall in any way lord it over other churches, no office-bearers over other office-bearers.

### 2.4. Forms

The Form for Ordination mentions the cooperation between office bearers as well.

Form For the Ordination of Elders and Deacons

Mandate of the Elders

Third, it is their duty to assist the ministers of the Word with good counsel and advice. They are also charged with the supervision over the doctrine and conduct of these fellow servants.

Charge

Be all with one accord faithful in your offices.

### 3. Goal

As office bearers we have to be all with one accord faithful in our offices, work together in good harmony and so serve the glory of our Master as well as the upbuilding of the congregation.

### 4. Place of the Deacons

The terms “council” and “consistory” have been explained in the introduction of this chapter. This distinction is rather new. For many decades it distinction was between “consistory” and “consistory with deacons.” This is in line with the Church Order. In Art. 38 we read: “in all churches there shall be a consistory composed of the ministers of the Word and the elders who, as a rule, shall meet at least once a month.” The term “council” is not used in the Church Order. It is used in the Belgic Confession. In Art. 30 of the Belgic Confession we read: “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.” Whereas the Belgic Confession includes the deacons in the council of the church, the Church Order does not. This difference has been a matter of much debate. Some are adamant that deacons belong to the council, others are equally adamant in the opposite position.

The question can be asked whether the difference is a significant one so that a choice has to be made. Can the difference not be explained from the situation in which each document was composed? The Belgic Confession is defending the truth of the gospel against the Romanist Church. In the Romanist church the deacon had become nothing more than a helper for the bishop. The Reformation restored the office of deacon, and thus focusses on the nature of the office. The deacon is no less an office-bearer than the elder. This would explain the formulation of the Belgic Confession. The Church Order was made later in time, to regulate the life within the churches and is more specific about the place of the deacon. The Church Order’s focus is thus more on the tasks of the respective offices.

Whatever the case, it is remarkable that when the churches adopted the Church Order they saw no need to change the Belgic Confession. During all the centuries these documents have functioned next to each other, and neither one of them was changed in this matter. In addition, it is noteworthy that the churches have only one Form for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons. The beginning of his Form, which speaks about the character of the office, applies to both elders and deacons. Both offices have much in common. It is the same Lord who calls elders and deacons to office. Elders and deacons have the same goal, namely to build up the congregation. This also shows in that when the number of elders is small the deacon may be added to the consistory, Art. 39 C.O. Within this common framework elders and deacons have their own tasks, the elders in the supervision of the church, the deacons within the ministry of mercy. We conclude that on the one hand we must guard against a separation of the two offices, and on the other guard against a mixing together of the offices. In working this out we note with thankfulness that the Church Order indicates which matters pertain to elders or deacons, and what belongs to deacons and elders together.

### 5. What belongs to Consistory or Council?

According to the Church Order the council (elders and deacons) deal with the following matters:

- Art. 3 - nomination/appointment to office
- Art. 9 - leaving of minister
- Art. 10 - support of minister
- Art. 11 - dismissal of minister
- Art. 12 - a minister is bound to the service of the Church for life
- Art. 13 - retirement of minister
- Art. 14 - term of office
- Art. 26 - signing of Form for Subscription

- Art. 28 - civil authorities
- Art. 71 - supervision
- Art. 73 - censure

According to the Church Order the consistory (elders) deal with:

- Art. 15 - preaching in other churches
- Art. 17 - equality between ministers
- Art. 22 - supervise the doctrine and conduct of the minister
- Art. 25 - equality among office bearers
- Art. 27 - warning against false doctrine
- Art. 52 - worship
- Art. 53 - special services
- Art. 56 - sacraments
- Art. 57 - baptism
- Art. 58 - schools
- Art. 61 - admission to Lord's Supper
- Art. 63 - marriage
- Art. 64 - records
- Art. 67 - discipline
- Art. 76 - change in C.O.

According to the Church order the deacons deal with

- Art. 23 - the service of charity (see also Art. 42)

We may conclude that the consistory deals with matters of oversight and discipline. This includes reports on home visits, catechism instruction, visits to study societies, admission to sacraments, marriage, public profession of faith, attestations, discipline, preaching, financial contributions by the members. The deacons deal with matters related to the ministry of mercy. This includes helping those in need, visits to handicapped, elderly and those ill for a long time, and reports on the diaconal visits. Most other matters are dealt with by council. This includes, the nomination, election, appointment and ordination to office, the calling of a minister, finances of the church, liturgy, matters involving the federation, classis and synods, division of task in council, ward division, institution of new church.

Though each office has its own mandate, elders and deacons work with the same members. It will be helpful that there is ongoing consultation between elders and deacons. This can be done in different ways. The elder(s) and deacon(s) of a ward can exchange information which may be helpful to the other. It can also be done as an item on the Agenda for the Council meeting. This allows the deacons to bring matters to the attention of the elders and vice versa.

## **6. Meetings**

The council meets, as a rule, once per month, and more if necessary. The consistory meets once a month as well. The meetings of council and consistory are announced to the congregation. A member of council or consistory may request a special meeting. He has to bring this request to the attention of the chair and vice-chairman. All members are expected to be present at each meeting. If there are lawful reasons for being absent this must be made known to the meeting and will be recorded in the Minutes. The Press Release will indicate who were absent.

### **6.1. Ecclesiastical matters**

Art. 30 of the Church Order requires that the ecclesiastical assemblies shall deal with no other than ecclesiastical matters and that in an ecclesiastical manner. Ecclesiastical matters are matters pertaining

to the government and administration of the church. The council/consistory is not called to make political or social statements, but must govern the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. The matters that legitimately come on the agenda must be dealt with in accordance with Scripture and Confession and in a way consistent with the Church Order. Council/consistory judges what is ecclesiastical or not. This is not up to the chairman, clerk or the moderamen.

## **6.2. Proceedings**

### **6.2.1. Opening/Closing**

Art. 34 C.O. states that the proceedings of all assemblies shall begin and end with calling upon the Name of the Lord. The chairman calls the meeting to order. If the chairman is absent the vice-chairman shall take his place. After the opening the attendance is reviewed, special situations in the congregation are mentioned and the agenda is established. At the end of the meeting one of the elders or deacons leads in prayer and the meeting is closed by the chair.

### **6.2.2. Agenda**

The Agenda of a regular Council meeting contains the following items:

1. Opening and Welcome
2. Agenda
3. Minutes
4. Matter from the Minutes
5. Matters for Mutual Concern
6. Reports
7. Unfinished Business
8. Mail Incoming/ Outgoing
9. New Business
10. Question Period
11. Christian Censure
12. Press Release
13. Next Meeting
14. Closing

The Agenda of a regular Consistory meeting contains the following items:

1. Opening and Welcome
2. Agenda
3. Minutes
4. Matter from the Minutes
5. Reports
  - home visits
  - special visits
  - minister's
6. Pastoral Care
7. Unfinished Business
8. Mail Incoming / Outgoing
9. New Business
10. Question Period
11. Christian Censure
12. Press Release
13. Next Meeting
14. Closing

The Agenda is agreed upon by the meeting. If a member of consistory/council would like to see an item on the agenda he may mention this when the agenda is adopted. He can also request at the end of the meeting that it be placed on the agenda for the following meeting. This second possibility would give the other office-bearers time to prepare. The first possibility may be necessary because the matter is urgent or cannot be postponed.

### **6.2.3. President**

The task of the president or chairman is

- to present and clearly explain the matters to be dealt with;
- to ensure that every one observes due order in speaking;
- to deny the floor to those who argue about minor things or who let themselves be carried away and cannot control their strong emotions. (Art. 35 C.O.)

Although we do not follow a set order in the council/consistory meetings as e.g. in the major assemblies, the members can only speak when given the floor by the chairman. The more tense a discussion, the more important it is to speak through the chair. If any member feels that the chair makes a wrong judgement he is allowed to challenge the chair. This is then judged by the meeting.

### **6.2.4. Recording**

Art. 36 C.O. stipulates that a clerk be appointed whose task it shall be to keep an accurate record of all things worthy to be recorded. There is a recording clerk, who takes care of the Minutes. There is also a corresponding clerk, who takes care of the outgoing mail. In recording the minutes the clerk has to make sure to record what has been decided by the meeting. The Minutes are read the next meeting and after opportunity is given to amend them, adopted by the meeting. To indicate that they have been adopted they are signed by the chairman and the clerk. In the past Minutes were hand written in a Minute Book which has numbered pages. This was to prevent that pages would be taken out of the Minutes. Now a days the minutes are typed into a computer. This means that files can get lost, or others can open files. It is important to maintain confidentiality.

### **6.2.5. Proposals**

Matters once decided upon may not be proposed again unless they are substantiated by new grounds. Once a matter is properly before the meeting, it must be discussed in an orderly manner. It is best to come to a consensus in a matter. If it is difficult to reach a consensus it may be necessary to vote. Whatever is agreed upon by a majority vote shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved to be in conflict with the Word of God or with the Church Order. In public a member of council/consistory has to as much as possible defend the decision which was reached. It is improper to air a dissenting voice within the congregation. Each office bearer has the right to appeal a decision to the major assembly, but he must make this first known to the council/consistory.

### **6.2.6. Moderamen**

The chairman, vice chairman and two clerks form the moderamen. This moderamen only has a function with regard to preparing and facilitating the meeting. It does not have a separate function besides the consistory/council. These functions are chosen by secret ballot, except for the minister who is chairman according to Art. 38 C.O..

## **7. Archives and Records**

The consistory shall ensure that proper care is taken of the archives. (Art. 43 C.O.) The Corresponding clerk is responsible for filing the material. All incoming mail that become part of the Agenda will be filed, as well a copies of outgoing letters. Due to the change over of clerks the archives are not always up to date. Appointing a member to take care of the archives could eliminate this. If this person is not a member of council he will have to promise to keep confidentiality. It would be helpful if council would audit the archives on a regular basis.

The consistory shall also maintain church records in which the names of the members and the dates of their birth, baptism, public profession of faith, marriage, and departure or death are properly recorded. (C.O. Art. 64) There is a double set of records. The recording clerk has one set and the archivist a second.

## **8. Nominations**

Each year a proportionate number of elders and deacons retire from office. The Council gives the congregation the opportunity to nominate brothers deemed fit for these offices (see Regulations for Election). The nomination process within the council begins with Scripture reading, either 1 Timothy 3:1-13 or Titus 1 : 5 - 9. Then the letters received from the congregation are read and those nominated placed on a list. Following this the chairman reads the list of all male communicant members and the office-bearers may indicate which brother they would like to see on the list for either elder or deacon. Once the list has been established it is discussed. The elders and deacons may endorse the nomination or voice concerns. The nomination meeting is a confidential meeting. Office-bearers should be able to speak freely, at the same time they must do their utmost to maintain and promote the reputation of others. The goal is to be able to present to the congregation a list of brothers of whom council can say in full confidence that they can serve well. If more names are left on the list that need to be presented to the congregation, the council will vote by secret ballot. If there are not enough then Council must re-open the discussion regarding the nomination or come to the conclusion that it can not present twice as many names as there are vacancies. The latter should only happen for weighty reasons. The brothers who are nominated should be notified by their ward elders prior to the worship service in which their names will be announced.

## **9. Tasks within Council / Consistory**

Article 25 of the Church Order says that among the elders as well as among the deacons equality shall be maintained with respect to the duties of their office. It should not be that some do all the work whereas others take it easy. You can have people who too easily volunteer, you can also have people who refuse to volunteer. It is the task of the assembly to make sure there is equality. This applies to the number of addresses in a ward, but also to extra work within council, such as being clerk or liaison to committees.

## **10. Christian Censure - Art. 73 C.O.**

Article 73 allows the office-bearers to exercise Christian censure, so that, if necessary, they may exhort and kindly admonish one another with regard to the execution of their office. This article is to be distinguished from Christian Discipline (art. 66 and 71). If an office-bearer is aware of a sin in the life of a fellow office-bearer, he must follow the rule of Matthew 18. If the sin falls under Art. 72, Council has to deal with it according to Art. 71. Article 73 deals with censure with regard to the execution of the offices. Are the minister, elders and deacon obeying the charge given to them? If not, or if there is lack of faithfulness then they ought to be exhorted and admonished by the others. In a hierarchical system a bishop or super-intendant is usually charged with this task. The Reformed Churches want nothing to do with hierarchy, yet realize that an office-bearer can be negligent in his task. It allows for fraternal censure. Certainly article 73 includes helping and giving advice, but can also include admonishing. Our aim is that the work given to the office-bearers by the Lord is done as faithfully as possible. These matters must be discussed in an open and brotherly manner in the presence of the person involved. In removing this obstacle the council or consistory can work in good harmony.

It can happen that things are said during a meeting which are out of place. In Art. 34 of the Church Order we read that censure shall be exercised over those who in the meeting have done something worthy of reproof. This article speaks about the major assemblies. But if this applies to the major assemblies, it would also apply to the council and consistory. If a member in the meeting has done something worthy of reproof this should be dealt with in an open and brotherly manner before the close of that meeting.



Grievances over past words or actions can easily spoil the harmony. Open and brotherly discussion can make that the harmony among the brothers will flourish.

## 11. Evaluation

1. Do we agree on the Scriptural basis and goal?
2. Characterize the atmosphere of our meetings.
3. About the meetings:
  - Do we have enough? Too many? Not enough?
  - Is sufficient information given before the meeting?
  - Do we prepare sufficiently for the meeting?
  - Are we consistent in dealing only with ecclesiastical matters?
  - Do we finish off the agenda?
  - Are we satisfied with the set-up of the agenda?
  - Is the intermission sufficient?
  - Do we give enough time to matters that need attention?
  - Do we give too much time to insignificant matters?
4. About the chairman or vice-chairman:
  - Does he clearly present the matters to be dealt with?
  - Does he ensure that everyone observes due order?
  - Do all feel that they can speak?
5. About the work of the clerks:
  - Are we satisfied with the manner of recording?
  - Is the work load evenly divided between the two clerks?
6. How does the moderamen function?
7. Make a list of all the duties within the Council. Is there equality? Are all who have extra duties clear on their mandate? Do they report regularly?
8. How does Art. 73 function?
9. What is the state of the archives?
10. Are there items that need our attention? Why? How should we deal with them?

