

Lesson 22 **GOVERNMENT AND ORDER OF THE CHURCH**

22.1 The **Government** of the Church

According to the Reformed conception of the Church, the attributes of the Church are always present and belong to the essence of the Church. On the other hand, the marks of the Church, which ought always to be present, depend upon the state of the Church at any given time. The Church is always in either a state of deformation or reformation; however, continued reformation must always be its goal. The Church must be continually reformed. The marks of the Church tell us how we can find the true Church, and what it must look like.

In order to maintain these marks, the Church must maintain Scriptural order and government. Throughout the history of the Church, this has been a constant struggle for God's people. Satan tries to undermine the Church in two ways with respect to its order and government: first, that the Church adopts an order of hierarchy; second, that the Church adopts an order of independentism.

1. **Hierarchical** forms of government

a. Papal, or Roman Catholic

This is the most extreme form of a hierarchical structure. Absolute power is vested in the Pope (from *papa*, meaning **father**), and is distributed hierarchically among varying ranks of clergy: cardinals, archbishops, bishops and priests. The pope is called the **vicar** or **representative** of Christ on earth, and has the power to speak infallibly on matters of faith and morals. The Romanists also believe in a literal or personal apostolic succession, and hold that the pope is

the official successor to Peter, who according to them was the head of the Church on earth.

b. Territorial (Lutheran)

Under this system, the civil magistrate is regarded as the most important member of the Church, and as such, he has the right of government and authority in the Church. Here the magistrate also controls all church affairs, and there is little or no separation between church and state. This system has also been called the Erastian system, named after Thomas Erastus, a Lutheran theologian of the 16th Century who first promoted the idea.

2. **Independentistic** forms of government

a. Collegial system

This system has its roots in the philosophy of natural rights and democracy (government by the people). The Church is organized and operated as a society (*collegium*), and depends solely upon the free will of the members. Scriptural office and government is not recognized in the collegial system. Whether the end result is hierarchical or independentistic, the root principle is revolutionary, and denies all proper authority in the Church.

b. Congregational or Independentistic (Baptists)

In this system, every local congregation is absolutely independent. Binding doctrinal standards are rejected, as well as major assemblies and the federative bond between churches. Here, in some cases, offices are not accepted, and every congregation manages its affairs through boards, committees, or leaders. In some cases elders

are accepted, but only by the free and democratic vote of the congregation. They can also be removed by a free vote.

3. The **Reformed** form of government

a. The Reformed teaching starts with the doctrines of the offices as they are taught in the Bible. Each lawfully instituted congregation is a full and complete Church of Christ, and Christ is the only Head in every local congregation.

b. All congregations together are obliged to form a bond or federation, based on binding confessional standards, Colossians 2:2, 2 Corinthians 9:1f. By means of a mutually agreed upon church order, broader **assemblies** may be held, whose decisions are binding upon the Churches.

22.2 **The Church Order**

In order to maintain the order of the Church as the Scriptures teach it, the churches have drawn up and bound themselves to a Church Order by common consent. It represents a body of regulations governing all aspects of church life. The Church Order strives to preserve concord and unity among the churches without binding the conscience of anyone. The Church Order opposes hierarchy in agreement with Article 32, Belgic Confession: "...yet they (the churches) must at all times watch that they do not deviate from what Christ, our only Master, has commanded. Therefore we reject all human inventions and laws introduced into the worship of God which bind and compel the consciences in any way." It also opposes independentism and congregationalism in accordance with the words: "We accept only of what is proper to preserve and promote harmony

and unity, and to keep all in obedience to God.” See 1 Corinthians 14:40, 4:6; 2 Thessalonians 3:11f.

The Church Order currently in use in the Canadian Reformed Churches was drafted during the early synods of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (1571 and following years), and was adopted in its complete form at the Synod of Dort, 1618-1619. It treats the following subjects:

- a. offices
- b. assemblies
- c. sacraments and ceremonies
- d. church discipline

22.3 Offices and Assemblies

1. Offices

An office is a call of the Lord to a specific task or duty for the government and care of the Church. All are called to office, to be God’s image in the world, to confess the name of Christ, and be prophets, priests and kings in His service, Lord’s Day 12, Heidelberg Catechism. This is called the office of all believers. For the growth of this office, the Lord has also instituted the special offices in the Church.

a. foundational offices (temporary):

i. apostles

The word apostle means: one who is sent. This office was not passed on. Twelve apostles were sent out by the Lord, and their testimony forms the foundation of the Church, Acts 1:15f. The only other apostle who may be added to the twelve is Paul, the so-

called “thirteenth” apostle, who had a special commission to preach to the Gentiles, Acts 13:46f; Galatians 2:9.

ii. the seven

These were special helpers to the apostles, who first were involved in diaconal tasks, but later were identified as evangelists, Acts 6:1f, 8:5f, 21:6. The office of deacon finds its roots here.

iii. prophets

These brothers were speakers and teachers of the Word of God, who built up the churches together with the apostles. The special gift given to them was prophetic utterances concerning the future, Acts 11:27f. As the case of Barnabas illustrates, these prophets worked closely with the apostles, Acts 13:1.

iv. evangelists

These were also helpers to the apostles, specifically devoted to proclaiming the good news, Ephesians 4:11, 12; 2 Timothy 4:5.

b. regular offices (permanent):

i. ministers

From the first, there were those who laboured in teaching and preaching, and who devoted themselves to this task in a full time and life long way, 1 Timothy 5:17,18; Galatians 6:6. Timothy and Titus no doubt were among the first of such ministers. Later passages speak of an **angel**, that is, one sent to the churches, and this **angel** is regarded by many commentators to be a minister of the divine word, Revelation 1:20, 2:1, 3:1. He is the one charged specifically with preaching and the administration of the sacraments.

ii. elders

From the very beginning, elders were appointed in the churches, with the specific task of ruling or governing the flock, Acts 11:30, 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1, 2; James 5:14; Titus 1:5. The Scriptural requirements for this and other offices we find in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1:5f. Elders also have the duty to supervise the teaching and conduct of the ministers of the Word.

iii. deacons

According to the meaning of their name, deacons are those who serve at tables. Commentators commonly see the origin of this office in Acts 6:1-6. This passage does show a division of tasks developing in the Church and later we read of deacons as a distinct office, Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3: 8, 5:9f.

2. Assemblies

a. council, consistory

The office bearers together make up the council or consistory of the Church, Matthew 18:17; Acts 15:6. This is the only permanent assembly in the Church. It meets regularly, and keeps minutes. Note that the deacons do not belong to the council of the Church as far as government and supervision is concerned. However, as officers of the church, they do share in decisions on over-all policy, (calling a minister, forming a new congregation, and so on).

b. classis, synod

These are broader assemblies, none of which are permanent. Classes normally meet once every three months, regional synods once per year, and general synods are held every three years. All these

assemblies are empowered to make binding decisions, recorded in acts and distributed to all consistories of the specific region.

Exercise Lesson 22

I. Reference Passages

Study and Review: Belgic Confession, Article 30, 31, 32.
 Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 31.
 Canons of Dort, III/IV. 17; V. 14.

II. Review Questions

1. Who is the only Head of the Church? What does this imply for the order and government of the Church?
2. What offices were there in the Old Testament Church? What offices does God require in the Church today?
3. Why are some of the offices mentioned in the New Testament now obsolete, for example, evangelists, prophets, or apostles?
4. Why is a church order a necessity? Compare the status of our Church Order with that of the confessions. Do all these statements have equal authority?
5. What are the different assemblies in the federation of churches? Which has the most authority?

III. Extra Questions

1. May women enter the offices in the church? May women vote for office according to Scripture? Prove your answer.
2. Do the deacons have a task outside the local congregation?

3. Why do we acknowledge ministers as serving for life, while other office bearers only serve for a limited number of years?
4. What is the Lutheran view of church government? The Baptist view?